
Managing Your Emotional Reactions

It's Friday afternoon, last period. The weekend trip you planned with a friend starts in exactly 4 hours. You've been catching up on studying and chores all week so you can enjoy the time away. And now the teacher announces a test on Monday.

You probably **feel** annoyed — or maybe downright angry. You might feel disappointed. You might also feel pressured or stressed about all the studying you'll have to do.

But how do you **react**? What do you do and say?

You may want to jump up and yell at the teacher, "That's not fair! Some of us have weekend plans." But you know you need to keep your cool until class is over — then share your feelings with your friend.

But what if you're not the calm, collected type? Don't worry. Everyone can develop the skill of responding well when emotions run high. It just takes a bit more practice for some people

Learning to React Well

Managing emotional reactions means **choosing how and when to express the emotions we feel**.

People who do a good job of managing emotions know that it's healthy to express their feelings — but that it matters how (and when) they express them. Because of this, they're able to react to situations in productive ways:

- They know they can choose the way they react instead of letting emotions influence them to do or say things they later regret.
- They have a sense of when it's best to speak out — and when it's better to wait before acting on, or reacting to, what they feel.
- They know that their reaction influences what happens next — including how other people respond to them and the way they feel about themselves.

You've probably been in a situation where someone reacted in a way that was too emotional, making you cringe or feel embarrassed for the person. You also might have been in a situation where your own emotions felt so strong that it took all your self-control not to go down that path yourself.

Maybe you can think of a time when you *didn't* manage your reaction. Perhaps anxiety, anger, or frustration got the better of you. It happens. When it does, forgive yourself and focus on what you could have done better. Think about what you might do next time.

Emotions 101

The skills we use to manage our emotions and react well are part of a bigger group of emotional skills called emotional intelligence (EQ). Developing all the skills that make up emotional intelligence takes time and

practice.

People who react well are already good at some basic EQ skills. But these are skills anyone can practice:

- **Emotional awareness.** This skill is all about being able to notice and identify the emotions we feel at any given moment. It is the most basic of the EQ skills. Sometimes, just naming the emotion we feel can help us feel more in charge of our emotions.
- **Understanding and accepting emotions.** Understanding emotions means knowing **why** we feel the way we do. For example, we might say to ourselves, "I feel left out and a little insecure because I didn't get invited to the prom yet, and two of my friends already did."

It helps to view our emotions as understandable, given the situation. We might think to ourselves: "No wonder I feel left out — it's natural to feel that way in this situation." It's like giving ourselves a little kindness and understanding for the way we feel. This helps us **accept** our emotions. We know they're reasonable, and that **it's OK to feel whatever way we feel**.

Accepting emotions means noticing, identifying, and understanding our emotions **without blaming others or judging ourselves** for how we feel. It's not helpful to tell ourselves that how we feel is someone else's fault. It is also not good to judge our emotions and think, "I shouldn't feel this way" or "It's awful that I feel this way!" The goal is to acknowledge your feelings without letting them run away with you.

Once these basic skills feel natural, you're more able to manage what you actually **do** when you feel strong emotions. Practicing the basic skills also will help you get past difficult emotions faster.

What Would You Do?

Imagine this situation: Your friends have received promposals (or college acceptances, team places, etc.). But you haven't. Once you identify, understand, and accept how you feel, how might you react?

1. Look unhappy when you're around your friends, hoping they'll ask you what's wrong.
2. Gossip about people who already have dates, and say you don't even want to go to the stupid dance.
3. Confide in a friend, "I feel bad about not getting asked yet. But I can still go with friends."
4. Remind yourself that it's not the end of the world. Decide to give it time and not let it ruin your day.

Consider each choice and think about what might happen next for each one. Which reaction would lead to the best outcome?

We always have a choice about how to react to situations. Once we realize that, it's easier to make choices that work out well.

Learning to react well takes practice. But we all can get better at taking emotional situations in stride and expressing emotions in healthy ways. And that's something to feel good about!

Medically reviewed by: KidsHealth Medical Experts

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