

Emotional self-regulation and CHARGE syndrome

Emotions are the strong feelings we have dependent upon our situation, our mood and our relationships with other people. Emotions are usually briefer than moods and tend to be directed towards something more specific.

Emotional self-regulation is a term used to describe the ways in which we influence and manage our own feelings and emotional responses according to the situation we are in. It is linked with physiological, behavioural and cognitive self-regulation, which are all important in supporting a child or young person's growing independence.

Being able to regulate our own emotional (and mood) state is important, since it then enables us to:

- Manage our own emotions in a range of situations (e.g. cheering yourself up by doing something enjoyable; calming yourself down when something has made you angry)
- Become more skilled in developing our relationships and social interactions with others

To be successful in regulating our own emotions we need to learn how to influence our own emotional state and how to respond to different situations. To do this successfully we need to:

- Recognise our own emotional state and analyse why we are feeling that way
- Analyse the situation we are in- what is making us feel that way
- Control our emotional/mood state (knowing how to calm ourselves down, cheer ourselves up, etc.)
- Alter our emotional expression and responses so that our emotional responses are socially appropriate
- Understand what emotional response might be expected, and how we should interact with different groups of people (we respond very differently with our family and close friends, than with people we are meeting for the first time)
- Be flexible enough to be able to adapt to the situation we are in

There are many different strategies we use to influence how we are feeling and manage our emotions. These can include:

- Avoiding people, situations or environments that we think might have a negative emotional impact on us. To be able to do this, we need to be able to anticipate what emotional responses each of these are likely to generate within us
- Trying to alter a situation to change the impact it has on us (e.g. take a person along for support; sitting in a quiet corner of a busy room)
- Distracting ourselves by turning our attention to something else (this might be a different activity, talking to a different person, or engaging in self-occupying behaviours)
- Changing the way we think about a situation; for example, 'This is only for a short while and will soon be over'; 'I did this before and know I can do it again' (this requires strong cognitive self-regulation skills)

It is important to recognise that although we might use emotional self-regulation to change our negative emotional state (often seeking to reduce or change the situation we are in), we also use emotional self-regulation to intensify or prolong a positive emotional feeling.

Why do learners with CHARGE syndrome struggle with emotional self-regulation?

There are a number of reasons why an individual with CHARGE may struggle with poor emotional self-regulation including:

- Multi-sensory impairment
- Difficulty and delay in language development
- Communication difficulties
- Executive function difficulties
- Developmental delay
- Poor health

Some helpful strategies

- Teaching the child/young person what it means when they are feeling an emotion
- Teaching an emotions vocabulary
- Using concrete visual supports such as a colour chart (e.g. red/green), or a face chart to describe a feeling, or a scale chart to describe the strength of feeling (e.g. 1 = very calm, 10 = very angry)
- Labelling their emotions for them as they occur during the day (e.g. 'I think you are a bit excited/fed up/sad etc.)
- Drawing their attention to how their peers are feeling (e.g. 'He's very sad/upset because he fell over')
- Drawing their attention to how you are feeling (e.g. 'I am so happy/proud because you did that all by yourself')
- Mirroring feeling through use of exaggerated facial expressions and body language
- Modelling and discussing how to respond in different situations. This might include the use of role play to explore specific situations
- The use of clear routine and structure and clear preparation when changes are to be made

In addition, it is vital to also equip the child or young person with strategies to manage or reduce strong, negative emotions when they experience them (as we all do from time to time!):

- Learning to recognise those situations that might cause them to have a strong feeling, and then how to engage in, or avoid those situations
- Once the child/young person is calm after experiencing a strong, negative emotion, walk them through what happened (through the use of drawings or

role play with puppets) to practice how to best respond in that situation should it happen again

- The use of puppets to replay a difficult situation can be helpful in providing a degree of 'distance' between the young person and the situation, thereby enabling them to discuss it more easily
- Provide a 'way out' so that the child/young person has an alternative option
- Teach calming techniques (e.g. breathing exercises, yoga, Tai Chi)
- Provide a safe space that can be accessed if a break is needed and time to calm

Reference: Kennert B, Ramirez M, Hartshorne TS, Deuce G and Nicholas J (2015)
Self-Regulation of Emotion in CHARGE Syndrome. DBI Review (Jan) pp.27-30

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December 2016

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