

Measuring the Intensity of Your Emotion Against the Level of Threat

Objective

To measure the intensity of your emotions against the actual level of the threat to react appropriately to distressing situations.

You Should Know

When there are threats of danger or harm, emotions like anger or anxiety can warn you that something is wrong, and you need to take action. There are times, however, that your emotional reactions to situations surpass the actual level of the threat. This can make it more difficult to manage your emotions and respond to the situation in healthier ways.

Because emotions are not facts, sometimes there might be little correlation between the intensity of your emotions and the actual threat level. Assessing whether your emotions accurately reflect your level of risk or danger can help you determine the healthiest course of action/reaction.

What You Should Do

First, think of a recent distressing or overwhelming situation. Describe what happened here.

How did you respond to the situation? Describe.

Rank the intensity of the emotions you experienced during the situation, from 1 to 10, with 1 = low distress, to 10 = high distress).

Intensity level: _____

Why did you rate it that number?

Next, rank the situation's *actual* level of threat or harm to your safety, health, or well-being, with 1 = low level of danger or harm, to 10 = high level of danger, harm, or damage.

Intensity level: _____

Why did you rate it that number?

Now, compare the two rankings. Which number is higher: the intensity of your emotions or the actual threat?

If the emotion ranks higher than the threat level, identify a skill you could have used to help you avoid acting on your impulses or urges. This can include distracting yourself through pleasurable activities, self-soothing through meditation, or asking for help from someone you trust.

What actions could you have taken to manage your emotions in healthier ways?

If your emotion is equal to, or lower than, the level of threat, identify an action you could have used to improve or change that situation, including problem solving or negotiating.

What activities could you have chosen to improve or change the situation?

Next time you encounter a situation where you experience overwhelming or distressing emotions, answer the following questions.

Describe the situation. What happened? Who were you with? How did you feel?

Rank the intensity of the emotions you experienced during the situation, from 1 to 10, with 1 = low distress, to 10 = high distress.

Intensity level: _____

Why did you rate it that number?

Next, rank the situation's actual level of threat or harm to your safety, health, or well-being, with 1 = low danger or harm, to 10 = danger, harm, or damage.

Intensity level: _____

Why did you rate it that number?

Now, compare the two rankings. Which number is higher: your emotions or the threat?

If the emotion ranks higher than the threat level, identify a skill to help you avoid acting on your impulses or urges. This can include distracting yourself through pleasurable activities, self-soothing through meditation, or asking for help from someone you trust.

What actions will you take to manage your emotions in healthier ways?

Who can support you with these healthy actions?

If your emotion is equal to, or lower than, the level of threat, take action to improve or change that situation, including problem solving or negotiating.

What activities will you choose to improve or change the situation?

Who can help you with these changes or improvements, or brainstorm ideas for solutions?

Reflections on This Exercise

Does ranking emotions against actual threat change the way you react to a situation? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
