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# Emotional management of situations which may arise in relation to the PhD student

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Recommended minimum time required: 0.5 hours





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## **Introduction**



## 1. Emotions. How they work

An **emotion** is a response to something (reactive), which is intense and not permanent. The product of an emotion then occurs, which is a **feeling** that lasts for longer.

Emotions are neither positive or negative. We have an emotional repertoire and all of them play a role.

Izard (1991) defines the following roles of emotions:

- a) Biological: to escape, immobilise, attack.
- b) Motivational: compels you into action and thought.
- c) Social: social communication.

It could be said that an emotion:

- Is a sign that indicates something.
- Motivates you.
- Evaluates how things are going for you.
- Speaks to you about the state of your relationships.

Within your emotional repertoire, all those emotions that you feel can be grouped into the following **basic emotions**:

- Surprise
- Disgust
- Happiness
- Anger
- Sadness
- Fear
- Happiness or pleasure

You also have **substitute emotions** which are learnt because the family system has forbidden the expression of basic emotions (so they have been repressed, as their expression is considered to be “incorrect”):

- False happiness
- False anger
- False sympathy
- False fear
- Anxiety

- Shame: This is usually accompanied by fear and guilt, and is used as a mechanism for perfectionism and control. (Pubill, 2016)
- Melancholy
- Resentment
- Confusion
- Envy
- Guilt
- Jealousy
- Rivalry

If you don't express an emotion, like anger or sadness for example, this catches up with you and is expressed in another way.

Imagine you have a rubbish bin in the middle of your chest. If you don't complain, you don't express what you are feeling, so the bin keeps on filling up until there comes a moment where it bursts out in the worst way possible, in the worst situation and may even be in front of someone with whom it shouldn't happen.

As such, one of the challenges of emotional intelligence is to identify your emotion in a situation. Greenberg (2000) suggests the following steps to develop awareness:

Step 1: What emotion are you feeling or how do you tend to act?

Step 2: In what situation do you react?

Step 3: What thoughts accompany this emotion?

Step 4: What interest, need or goal is satisfied or otherwise in the situation?

**Reflection**

Consider the steps suggested by Greenberg (2000) when faced with the supervision of a project.



## 2. Positive intent with regard to work and situations

Prior to any situation occurring, any behaviour that takes place always has a positive intention that must be revealed.

Often we stick with what we have observed on a behavioural level and usually judge it without paying attention to the underlying reason for such a behaviour. For example, behind aggressive behaviour there has usually been an intention to protect; behind fear, a need for security; behind anger, a need to establish some limits; or with a resistance to change something, there may be a desire for recognition.

This understanding of positive intent can help you to understand and respond in a more effective and balanced way when dealing with the behaviours displayed by a PhD student where you find it hard to understand them.

On the contrary, if you want to change your behaviour when faced with a supervision task or a habit, or something that “resonates” with a PhD student, you can develop in terms of how you are behaving, by searching for the positive intent of any new behaviour (e.g. what is the positive intent of not delegating?):

- How does this attitude help me?
- How do I feel if I behave like this?
- Does it protect me from something?
- Is it warning me about something?

Based on both your own knowledge and other people’s positive intent, strategies can be developed to “get out of” this deadlock or to change what motivates you.

For example, if you think about a thesis project, a PhD student may experience mental blocks, exasperation, or be resistant to change when making a decision. In view of that, by examining their positive intent, you may be able to reflect about it on the basis of:

- If they are responsible for how they make a decision, it won’t achieve results.
- To learn, decision making has to be analysed.
- It is toxic to judge past decisions based on current information.

- If you set ambitious goals, you can obtain results that have an impact.
- If you make a wrong decision, recognise the mistake and rectify it.



Source: akifrases.com

### 3. Resources for emotional management to progress during the process of supervision

Behind either a disabling emotion or one that doesn't allow you to progress (anger, sadness, astonishment), there is usually a distorted thought. You have look for that thought in order to "deconstruct" it, as we've examined in the previous module.

Often, emotions are usually a front for **anxiety**. We'll learn about that in the following module.

A PhD student can cover a lot of ground during their work, so at times, it can make them feel very isolated. This can involve feeling **controlled rage** which may be displayed by them having an attitude, such as an aggressive attitude. In such cases, this can be handled by helping them to express this rage, while realising that it is not going to be directed at the supervisor. One of the suggestions for being able to "express" all their anger, would be to place some paper cups on the floor and get them to crush them one by one, while focusing on something that is making them feel angry as they crush each one.

In the event that an "**argument**" arises where your voices may become raised, you could indicate a "time out" which consists of stopping, suspending the subject of the argument and resuming the topic when both parties feel calmer.

**Frustration** could also be caused due to a lack of progress, because you see that deadlines are not being met and the PhD student is not submitting material to be supervised or because what they are producing is of low quality. In this case, it would be helpful to recall their successes and reaffirm the steps that have enabled them to reach this point, and how they can be applied in similar cases.

By giving them permission to worry about something later (you have to look after yourself, not worry yourself): This is a way of "stopping" what is happening in the mind and it is felt in such a way that the emotion is lower in intensity. The watch technique works really well: "I'm only allowing myself to worry for 10 minutes every day". So by setting an alarm at the same time every day, when the alarm goes off, you are allowed to worry for 10 minutes, until the alarm goes off again. For the rest of the day, worrying is not allowed.

In order to **remain calm**, the following question works very well: what is the worst that could happen? From there, the belief and the limiting emotion can be deconstructed.

**When faced with a fear** of not progressing, limiting thoughts are also usually experienced which can be deconstructed. Fear is irrational and the majority of the time it is caused by the person themselves.

To reduce stress, it can help to use your sense of humour, and defuse and play down a situation.

Not only can you change what you think, but you can also change how you feel. In order to do that, by way of example, we suggest that you visualise what you will do in the event that an emotion causes you any uneasiness:

1) Sit or lie down, close your eyes and relax your whole body. Breathe slowly and deeply at your own pace. Start to relax the area around your feet and check that your toes are not tensed up. If they aren't tense, carry on moving up the body and check if there is any tension in your legs, hips, abdomen or chest. Stop there a moment to check if there is any tension and if there is, release that tension with every breath. Keep going and do the same with your fingers, arms, neck, face and head. After breathing, pay attention to any places where there may be any tension felt in any part of your body and continue until you feel relaxed.

2) Recall a memory where you felt a certain level of unease or discomfort. Immerse yourself in this memory so you feel it in a part of your body. Imagine this memory in front of you as if it were on a cinema screen.

3) Now, count from 1 to 10 and then shrink this memory until it's really small. When you count to 10, it will have disappeared.

4) Now you're going to recall a place that you like in your mind, a place where you find peace and balance, where you feel like you, on the screen in front of you. Listen to the sounds that this place offers you, and feel if there is any sun or any chill, if there is air and if it smells of anything. Breathe deeply 5 times while feeling that pleasure and security that your place provides you. You are going to remain there experiencing that feeling for a while, until you decide to return.

5) When you decide, little by little, move your feet, hands, legs, arms, neck, face and lastly, open your eyes.

6) How do you feel?

Victor Küppers. *Attitude problem?* TEDxTalks. Andorra la Vella