


Exploring Action Tendencies

Emotion regulation

 Exercise

 15 min.

 Client

 No

Many current models of emotions state that emotions are associated with urges to act in particular ways, urges that have been referred to as specific action tendencies (Frijda, 1986; Frijda, Kuipers, & Schure, 1989; Keltner, & Gross, 1999). For example, anger can create the urge to attack, fear the urge to avoid or escape, disgust the urge to expel, etc. It is important to note that action tendencies are dependent on the situation one is in (Barrett, 2006). Fear, for instance, may create the urge to flee, but also the urge to take the car and race to the hospital after hearing that a friend had an accident. Likewise, anger may result in a strong urge to shout, but may also create the desire to silently turn away. Although people do not necessarily act upon these urges, ideas about possible courses of action narrow in when these specific urges are present. When people do follow these urges, before consciously having decided to do so, we speak of impulsive behaviour. In these cases, behaviour is the immediate result of the emotion, not that of the deliberate choice of the individual (Strack & Deutsch, 2004). Impulsive behaviour can be regarded as opposite to autonomous, self-regulated behaviour in which the individual consciously makes choices and takes responsibility for his or her actions.

According to Fredrickson (1998), positive emotions differ from negative emotions in terms of the action tendencies they produce. She argues that positive emotions are less prescriptive than negative emotions about which particular actions should be taken. Positive emotions are suggested to broaden a person's momentary thought-action repertoire. Experiences of positive emotions prompt individuals to discard automatic (everyday) behavioural scripts and to pursue novel, creative, and often unscripted paths of thought and action. In other words, positive emotions create more room for choice and introduce an action tendency to explore new options. This broadening function of positive emotions has been found to have important consequences for well-being. Through the exploration of new ideas or novel actions, the person builds individual skills and resources, which could be either physical, social and/ or intellectual in nature. These become a resource center which can be accessed at a later time to assist in coping with a difficult situation, leading to greater resilience. Thus, over time, positive emotions can promote positive growth, both in terms of positive experiences as well as resilience.

This experiential tool was developed to increase clients' awareness of action tendencies that result from both positive and negative emotions.



Author

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Goal

The goal of this tool is to increase awareness of action tendencies that result from both positive and negative emotions.



Advice

- Clients who are completing the exercise for the first time should bring to mind scenarios that are only moderately distressing (ie., a 5 or 6 out of 10 on their personal stress scale). As clients become familiar with the technique, they might explore more difficult scenarios.
- In the event that your client struggles to bring to mind a recent positive experience, take some time to gently explore recent events until he or she finds something to use. Clients with depression or anxiety may have trouble attending to and recalling pleasant experiences, but it is unlikely that they have not experienced anything positive in the past, say, month.
- This tool is particularly helpful for clients who tend to be impulsive, as it promotes awareness of the urges that are created by an emotional experience, and creates space between the experience and the reaction that follows.



Suggested Readings

Barrett, L. F. (2006). Are emotions natural kinds?. *Perspectives on psychological science*, 1, 28-58.

Fredrickson, B. L. (1998). What good are positive emotions?. *Review of general psychology*, 2, 300-319.

Frijda, N. H. (1986). *The emotions*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Frijda, N. H. (1988). The laws of emotion. *American Psychologist*, 43, 349-358.

Harris, R. (2006). Embracing your demons: an overview of acceptance and commitment therapy. *Psychotherapy in Australia*, 12, 70.

Keltner, D., & Gross, J. J. (1999). Functional accounts of emotions. *Cognition & Emotion*, 13, 467-480.

Strack, F., & Deutsch, R. (2004). Reflective and impulsive determinants of social behavior. *Personality and social psychology review*, 8, 220-247.

Tool Description

Instructions

Part 1: Action tendencies resulting from negative emotions

This visualisation exercise invites you to tune in to how you respond to emotions.

1. To begin, gently close your eyes, and bring to mind a recent time where you experienced a difficult emotion ... Maybe you were nervous about giving a presentation, or missed an important deadline, or had an argument with a friend ... [20 secs]
2. As best you can, put yourself back into this difficult moment in time. Picture where you are ... who you are with, if anyone ... and what you are doing ... [30 secs]
3. Picture yourself exactly as you are in this difficult moment ... [20 secs]
4. Now, notice any feelings or emotions that are connected to this difficulty ... Take the strongest feeling or emotion, and notice where this seems to be located in your body ... [20 secs]
5. If you can, give this feeling or emotion a name, for example, anxiety, stress, guilt, shame ... [20 secs]
6. Now, notice what you want to do right now, in response to this feeling or emotion. Disregard what you actually did at the time, and stay in this imagined moment. Is there an urge to act in a particular way? Is there a sense of wanting to run away, to escape? Or is there a sense of wanting to stay here in this situation? [30 secs]
7. Now, let this moment go. Let go of the difficulty, and associated feelings and emotions, and when you are ready, gently open your eyes.

Debrief:

- How was this experience for you? What did you notice?
- What did you want to do in response to this difficult experience? What was the action tendency?

Part 2: Action tendencies resulting from positive emotions

1. Gently close your eyes again, and bring to mind a recent time where you experienced a positive emotion ... Maybe you reached a milestone at work, spent time with a loved one, or cooked something new and delicious for your friends ... [20 secs]
2. As best you can, put yourself back into this pleasant moment in time. Picture where you are ... who you are with, if anyone ... and what you are doing ... [30 secs]
3. Picture yourself exactly as you are in this moment ... [20 secs]
4. Now, notice any feelings or emotions that are connected to this experience ... Take the strongest feeling or emotion, and notice where this seems to be located in your body ... [20 secs]
5. If you can, give this feeling or emotion a name, for example, joy, pride, happiness ... [20 secs]
6. Now, notice what you want to do right now, in response to this feeling or emotion. Disregard what you actually did at the time, and stay in this imagined moment. Is there an urge to act in a particular way? Is there a sense of wanting to run away, to escape? Or is there a sense of wanting to stay here in this situation? [30 secs]
7. Now let this moment go ... and come back into the room. When you are ready, gently open your eyes.

Debrief:

- How was this experience for you? What did you notice?
- What did you want to do in response to this positive experience? What was the action tendency? How did this differ from the first scenario?