

## Understanding your Emotions - Following the ARC

### Goals

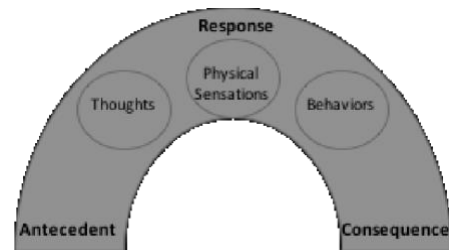
- To look for patterns in your emotional triggers (what causes your emotional experiences)
- To explore the short- and long-term consequences of your emotional responses

### Key Concepts

The goal of the previous chapter was to give you a better idea of exactly what is happening when you feel an emotion. Breaking your experience down into its three main parts (thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors) may make your emotions feel a bit more manageable. Paying attention to how these components feed off each other may help you to see how your emotions can escalate so quickly. The goal of this chapter will be to put your emotional experience in context – we will examine what happens before and what happens after you feel a strong emotion. First, we will look for patterns in the situations or events that trigger emotions. Being clear on what prompts your emotions will help you feel like they are more predictable, and as a result, more manageable. Next, we will look at how you respond to your emotions once they are triggered. Finally, we'll look at the consequences for how you respond to your emotions, both in the short term and in the long term. Understanding that the way you respond in the midst of any given emotional response can have consequences for the emotions you feel in the future may help motivate you to make changes in the way you're currently coping.

### The ARC of Emotions

We use the acronym ARC to help us keep track of how an emotional experience progresses. The word “arc” means to follow a path – we think that all emotions follow the path of **A**ntecedent (something triggers your emotion), **R**esponse (your thoughts, physical sensations and behaviors that occur during the emotional experience), and **C**onsequence (what happens as a result of your emotional response). Let's take a closer look of each part of the ARC.



**“A”** refers to antecedent. Here we are paying attention to what comes before an emotion – what provokes it. Sometimes emotions feel like they can come out of nowhere, but it is important to keep in mind that every emotion is triggered by some event or situation. Sometimes the trigger can be an event that has just happened (e.g., getting cut off in traffic, not getting a response to your text). Other times, it can be something that happened much earlier in the day or even last week. For example, if you get into an argument with a loved one in the morning, it may make you feel more sensitive to criticism later on. Additionally, the trigger isn't always an external event, but instead can be the way you feel physically (e.g. feeling jittery after too much coffee, feeling heavy because of lack of sleep). Finally, antecedents can also include things that make us vulnerable to experiencing emotions more strongly, such as being tired from a night of poor sleep, being hungry from not having time for lunch, or being generally stressed from a busy couple weeks at work.

Finding patterns in the situations and events that prompt emotions may also help you to feel less like you are on an unpredictable emotional rollercoaster. Being aware of your triggers can also help you prepare in advance when you know you might be faced with one. As you continue with this program, you will learn skills to use when you have strong emotions – you can be prepared to use these skills if you know you will encounter one of your triggers. See Table 6.1 for a list of “A”s associated with common emotional disorders.

<b>Table 6.1: Antecedents for Strong Emotions</b>	
Panic Disorder	Enclosed spaces (elevators), crowded places (movie theaters, sporting events), public transportation, caffeine, exercise
Generalized Anxiety Disorder	Making a schedule, errands, house-keeping, upcoming performance evaluations at school or work
Social Anxiety Disorder	Upcoming social events (parties, meetings, clubs), participating in classes, giving presentations, asking for help, introducing yourself, making small talk
Obsessive Compulsive Disorder	Touching something dirty, seeing something scary on the news, seeing/hearing anything that reminds you of your obsessions
Post-traumatic Stress Disorder	Seeing/hearing something that reminds you of the trauma, loud noises
Depression	Getting bad news, not feeling up to plans, taking much longer to complete tasks than before, seeing other people having fun
Borderline Personality Disorder	Disagreements with friends, family or partner, being alone, feeling slighted, stressors at work or school
Eating Disorders	Gaining a few pounds, feeling full, clothes feeling a bit too tight, an upcoming event where you have to dress up
Insomnia	Bedtime, seeing the time on a clock, an important appointment schedule for early in the morning

The “**R**” in the ARC stands for response. This refers to the thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors that make up an emotional response. These are same three components you tracked in Chapter 5.

“**C**” refers to the consequences of our emotional responses. When we experience strong emotions, they leave lasting impressions. We remember what triggered our emotions (the A) and what the response felt like (the R). This information influences how we respond to similar

situations in the future. As humans, we repeat things that make us feel good and to avoid things that make us feel bad. For example, if you accidentally grab a pot handle that is very hot, you experience pain and immediately pull your hand away. When you reach for that pot handle the next time, you may stop yourself and grab a potholder so that you avoid the unpleasant experience of being burned again. You have learned that in order to avoid pain, you should think twice before grabbing that pot. What's more, we also quickly apply what we have learned to other similar situations. You not only stop yourself from grabbing the handle of the pot that burned you before, but also hesitate before grabbing other pans off the stove. Even further, it's not just pans on your own stove you hesitate to touch, but pans on any other stove you may come across as well. For the most part, the ability to learn from our emotions and change our behavior based on them is helpful.

So what does this have to do with your symptoms? In addition to being able to learn from our emotions after they occur, humans also have the gift of foresight. This means that we can imagine whether certain situations could *possibly* bring up strong emotions and change our behavior to prevent *potential* bad feelings. This may lead us to avoid situations and events that aren't actually threatening. In fact, sometimes the focus becomes more about avoiding uncomfortable emotions than about preventing problematic events from occurring. For example, what if you gave up cooking altogether because you had previously been burned by the pot handle? Or never brought up disagreements with a loved one for fear that you might get angry and lose your temper? Or avoided crowded events because you might feel panicky, even if being at the event itself is important to you? Avoidance of situations and events because they might bring up strong emotions is what leads to the problematic interference in your life that may have prompted you to pick up this book. This program will help you tell the difference between what is a real threat and what is a *perceived* threat, allowing you to better understand how your emotions *should* guide you.

There are also consequences to engaging in behaviors that the strong emotion pulls you to do (e.g., running away when afraid) when such a response does not fit the situation. For example, fleeing when you feel fear in the context of a panic attack (which is not actually dangerous) has both short- and long-term effects on your emotions. In the short-term, escaping the situation usually provides some relief. Remember, humans are programmed to do things that make us feel good and to avoid things that make us feel uncomfortable. Since fleeing made you feel better this time, you're likely to do it again in order to find that same relief. However, there are also long-term consequences that must be considered. Unfortunately, when you avoid something because you're afraid, you are essentially telling yourself that the situation was indeed dangerous. In this case, by attempting to escape a panic attack at any cost, you confirm your belief that panic attacks are harmful ("if I'm leaving this concert to prevent it, this panic attack must be really dangerous"). The next time you start to notice the racing heart and shortness of breath that go along with a panic attack, you will still be afraid that something bad will happen if your panic escalates. By immediately fleeing, you were not able to see that panic attacks, while uncomfortable, don't last for very long and don't create lasting damage (e.g., heart attack). It becomes a vicious cycle, the more you avoid now, the more likely you'll be to feel the emotion again in the future.

## Following your ARC

The **Following your ARC** form is a helpful way to track the ARC of your experience. This form builds upon the Three Component Model of Emotions form from Chapter 5. In addition to tracking your thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors (your “R”s), you will also be paying attention to your triggers (“A”s) and both the short- and long-term consequences (“C”s) of your response. Complete this form any time you’re experiencing a strong emotion (or at least once a day).

There are many different ways the ARC of an emotion can progress. Across all of your ARCs, notice how engaging in responses that push away emotions only works for a short time. In the long-term, avoidant responses to emotions backfire, making these emotions more likely to come up in the future. That’s why a goal of this treatment is to approach our emotions, instead of avoiding them.

## Summary

In this chapter, we built upon our observations from Chapter 5. In addition to tracking our emotional responses (thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors) themselves, we discussed the importance paying attention to what happens before (antecedents) and what happens after (consequences) them. Noticing patterns in what triggers your emotions, instead of viewing them as coming out of the blue, can help them feel a bit more predictable and manageable. We also discussed how our responses to any given emotional experience can impact the likelihood that we’ll experience strong emotions in the future. Specially, we tend to engage in responses that make us feel better in the short-term, but set us up to continue to experience overwhelming emotions in the long-term. Using the **Following Your ARC** form will help highlight how the things you’re doing to get quick relief from your emotions may actually be making you feel worse overall. These observations may help motivate you to start the process of changing your responses.

## Homework

- Use the **Following Your ARC** form to track the ARC of your emotional experiences. Be sure to consider both immediate and distant triggers and consequences.

## Self-Assessment Quiz

Answer each of the following by circling true (T) or false (F). Answers can be found in the appendix.

1. In the “ARC” of emotional experiences, “A” stands for what triggered the experience, “R” stands for how you respond, and “C” stands for the consequences to how you responded.

T      F

2. Triggers for emotional experiences only include events or situations that just happened, and not events from earlier in the day.

T      F

3. Our emotions help us to learn to approach or repeat things that make us feel good and avoid things that make us feel bad.

T      F

4. There are usually only short-term consequences for how we respond to an emotional experience.

T      F