

Managing Intense Emotional Episodes

Objective

To effectively manage emotionally intense episodes by creating a plan to identify warning signs and triggers.

You Should Know

Do you experience intense emotional episodes? Marsha Linehan, the developer of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), refers to these as “emotional tornadoes.” One minute you feel fine – but then the tornado hits. You might become angry, overwhelmed, or want to hurt yourself or someone else. You might not understand why this happens, and you may not be able to predict when these outbursts will happen. It might seem like little things trigger the episodes. Keeping up with emotional changes, especially on bad days, can exhaust you. You might feel like you are on an emotional roller coaster 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Sights, thoughts, or conversations with other people can lead to emotional upheaval, significant distress, or catastrophizing.

Here are some suggestions for dealing with the intensity of your “emotional tornadoes” so you can manage these episodes more effectively.

- 1. Identify warning signs.** First, begin to notice when you might be vulnerable to episodes; for example, when you are lacking sleep, arguing with a loved one, or experiencing stress at work.
- 2. Notice triggers.** Pay attention to events or things that “set off” an episode. Identifying patterns is helpful to deal with episodes before they happen or become out of control. For example, certain conversation topics might upset you.
- 3. Take precautions.** There are things you can do to protect yourself. For example, you might choose to avoid certain people or places when you know you are vulnerable to an episode. You might take extra time to take care of yourself by getting more rest or distracting yourself by watching a movie.

What to Do

First, answer the following questions.

What in your life makes it likely you will have an episode?

When are you most vulnerable? When you are hungry, angry, lonely, or tired? Be specific.

Are there people who trigger you? Who?

Are there people who influence you to make risky decisions or engage in harmful behaviors? Who?

What types of situations or kinds of comments set you off?

Are there conversation topics that upset you? Explain.

Are you triggered by scents or smells? Songs? Anything else you can think of?

Are there people, situations, or events you simply need to avoid? Explain.

If you cannot avoid them completely, are there other people you can have around that can act as “buffers?”

Do you need to rearrange your schedule in some way? If yes, describe what you can do.

What can you do differently to ensure you get enough sleep? Eat a healthy diet? Exercise?

What can you do to avoid loneliness?

Are there things you can do to better tolerate loneliness?

What else can you do to protect yourself? For instance, surround yourself with positive people or take up a spiritual practice.

Now, refer to your answers above and create a plan manage or avoid intense episodes.

1. Identify warning signs (e.g., lack of sleep, stressful work day, overly hungry):

2. Notice triggers (e.g., watching the news, scrolling through social media, talking to a family member):

3. Take precautions (e.g., avoid certain situations, distract yourself, exercise):

On the following chart practice your plan when you feel triggered or “set off” an intense episode. Write down the date, what triggered or set you off, and whether or not you noticed the warning signs and triggers. Describe what you did to manage the episode, and then write down what you might do differently next time.

Date	What set off the episode?	Did you notice warning signs or triggers? (Y / N)	What did you do to manage the episode?	What can you do differently next time?

Reflections on This Exercise

What else can you do to manage or avoid intense episodes? Explain.

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

What did you learn in this exercise that was helpful?
