

Understanding Your Impulsivity

Objective

To identify the negative consequences of impulsive behavior and practice emotion regulation techniques to curb your impulsivity.

What to Know

Impulsive behavior is one of the core symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). You can learn to recognize it, control it, and replace it with thinking/feeling behavior before you act in a way that might harm yourself or others.

If you are impulsive, you may tend to act before thinking – and before gathering important information. “Acting out” refers to performing risky actions impulsively, in contrast to pausing and managing your feelings. Impulsive actions that might cause harm can be aggressive, addictive, or destructive.

If you lash out or act with urgency (without an action plan or healthy alternative choices), you might be acting out. You may feel you are losing self-control and fail to consider the consequences of your behavior.

If you have PTSD, your anger may be intense and difficult to manage – leading to impulsive behaviors or acting out. It is essential to learn healthy ways of managing intense emotions like anger or rage. Specific emotion regulation strategies are described below.

- Sit in your safe place.
- Cry or express another emotion. Identify other emotions you are experiencing.
- Do a physical activity like exercise or dancing.
- Reorganize your desk, drawer, closet, or bookshelf.
- Practice a grounding or breathing exercise.
- Connect with a supportive person who can help you.
- Call a friend or talk with a compassionate family member.
- Create artwork – draw, paint, or compose a song.
- Hit a punching bag or scream into a pillow.
- Practice assertive communication.
- Take a shower or bath.
- Write in a journal.

Have you experienced negative consequences from your impulsive behaviors? If yes, describe.

You can begin to recognize situations that trigger impulsivity. Keep a diary for two weeks. Note the date and time, describe the situation and what triggered you. Describe your thoughts and feelings. Write down how you controlled your impulsivity (if you were able to!). Apply different emotion regulation strategies from the list above.

Date and Time	Situation	Trigger	Thoughts	Feelings	How did you control your impulsivity?

Which technique was most successful for you? Explain.

Did practicing the above emotion regulation techniques curb your impulsivity? Why or why not?

What else can you do to be less impulsive?

Reflections on This Exercise

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

What did you learn from this exercise?
