

Coping with Strong Emotions



BRAC SCHOOL OF
JAMES P. GRANT PUBLIC HEALTH



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Session 1

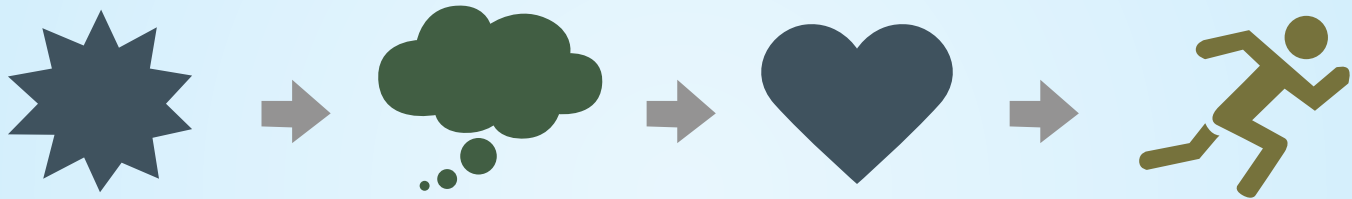
Introduction

As a teenager, you may be dealing with lots of emotional highs and lows. Some emotions can be positive — like feeling happy, loving, confident, inspired, cheerful, interested, grateful, or included. Other emotions can be more negative — like feeling angry, resentful, afraid, ashamed, guilty, sad, or worried. Both positive and negative emotions are normal. Emotions come and go. Most of us feel many different emotions throughout the day. Some last just a few seconds. Others might linger to become a mood. One minute you might feel great, the next you feel sad and tearful. This kind of shift in your mood is okay. Emotions can be mild, intense, or anywhere in between. The intensity of an emotion can depend on the situation and on the person. Strong emotions are a natural part of adolescence. They are part of the adolescent period when physical changes occur. Although, when you become older, emotions will remain, they will become somewhat less intense.

Understanding Emotions

When something happens, we tend to have thoughts, bodily sensations and feelings, leading to a certain behaviour. There are no good or bad emotions, but there are more or less effective ways of expressing emotions, and acting upon them. We might judge ourselves for feeling a certain way, for example, feeling jealous. But instead of thinking we shouldn't feel that way, it's better to notice how we actually feel. That is, observe the thoughts that are connected to this feeling, and the behaviour that is led by those thoughts and feelings.

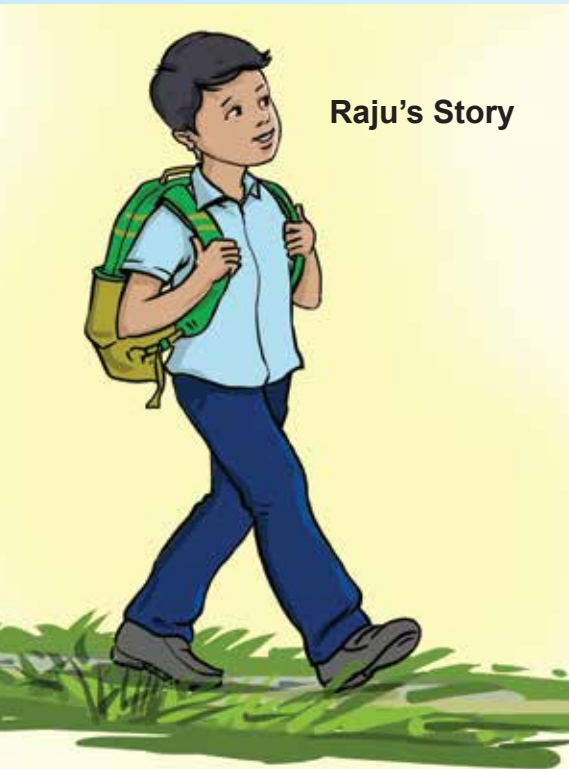
We can often see a pattern when a situation happens in which strong emotions plays a role:



Situation	Thought	Emotion	Behavior
something happens	the situation is interpreted	a feeling occurs as a result of the thought	an action in response to the emotion

Story 1

Today's focus will be on strong emotions and the pattern illustrated above. Let us start with a story.



Raju is 13 year old. He is in the 7th grade. He is very studious.



His teacher praises him every other day, for doing well in his class work. This makes Raju very happy.



This made him feel happy. This would make him eager to do his class work.



After school, he went to play football with his friends.



After his side lost the game, his friends blamed him. Their behaviour hurt Raju a lot.



He feels insulted and becomes sad. Without talking to anyone, he leaves the play ground.



In the evening, he remembers that he has an exam the next day. He has a lot to study, this makes him nervous.



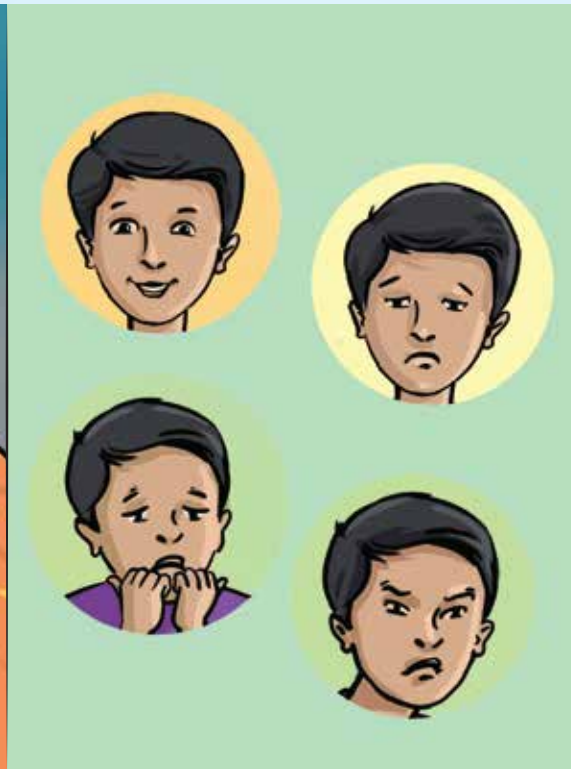
At night, his mother calls him to have dinner. Raju tells her he is busy and he would have dinner later.



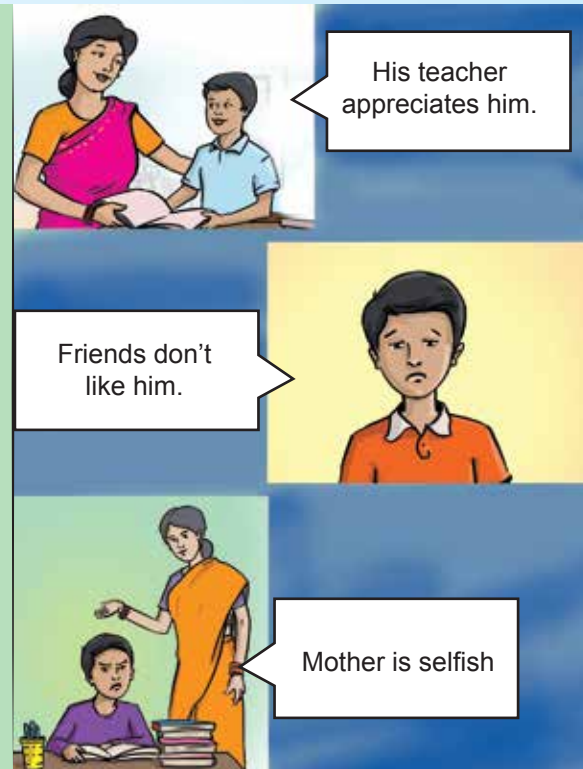
Raju gets very angry. He shouts at his Mom, and skips dinner



Before going to bed, Raju reflects on his day.



He realizes, throughout the day, he has experienced some extreme emotional highs and lows.



These situations led to different thoughts, accompanied by a range of feelings and behaviours.

When something happens, we tend to have different thoughts or interpretations, expectations, these form 'cognition'. When Raju thought about his teacher appreciating him, his friends not liking him, failing exams, mother being selfish, these thoughts led him to feel emotions. Thus leading him to take different actions, such as, do classwork more enthusiastically, leave his friends, study, shout at his mother. These behaviours were his responses to the thoughts and emotions he had throughout the day.

Incidents of Raju	Thoughts of Raju	Feelings of Raju	Actions of Raju
Homework	Teacher likes me	Happy	Does regular homework
Loses the game	Friends do not like me	Sad	Leaves the playground
Remembers about exam	Will fail in exam	Scared	Studies
Called by his mother to have dinner	Mother does not understand me	Angry	Shouts at his mother

If we look at Raju's story, we can see that there are 4 basic/core emotions working in him. The emotions are: happiness, sadness, fear, and anger. Due to these 4 emotions, we have different bodily responses, and we behave in different ways. The responses can be of different degrees as well.

If we can connect the incidents with our responses and emotions, we will be able to know ourselves better, therefore become aware of our behaviours.

Think of a recent situation in which you experienced strong emotions, such as stress, anger, fear, or happiness.

Incident/Situation	Cognition	Feelings/ Emotions	Behaviour or Act
Describe the situation Happiness Sadness Fear Anger	What did you think?	How did you feel?	How did you react at that moment?

Discussion

Divide into four groups and discuss your situations within the groups.

Session 2

In the previous session, we talked about different kind of strong emotions, how normal they are, especially for adolescents like you, and that often a pattern can be identified when something stressful happens. Who remembers the pattern?

Today we will continue the discussion about strong emotions. We will do this by focusing more on the different thoughts that you have when something bad or good happens, and how those thoughts lead you to feel and react in certain ways. First, let's find out a bit more about thoughts/cognition.

Cognition

Our emotions and behaviours are influenced by our perceptions of situations. The thoughts that come to our mind in any given situations are automatic; because of those thoughts we show different emotional responses. These automatic thoughts reflect the way in which we think about a situation, and have a major effect on the way we feel and behave.

These automatic thoughts can be different based on the beliefs we have about ourselves or our world. After any incident, sometimes we tend to think the worst case scenario; this can scare us, as we may imagine a disaster, hence, aggravating panic. The question that comes immediately to our mind is “What if.....?” And generally, it is answered by anticipating the worst. That is, overestimating the possibilities of something bad happening, or, imagining potential failure, or disaster, which can demotivate us.

Sometimes we judge or critique ourselves right after anything happens to us. For example, we think ‘that was stupid!’. Also, we tend to jump on any mistake, often comparing ourselves to others, pointing out our flaws and limitations. Sometimes we feel like a victim and feel helpless. Like we think “I can’t” / “I’ll never be able to”. We tell ourselves that we are deprived and unworthy, our condition is incurable or there is no chance to recover, so we don’t even try. Sometimes we think about the potential of something good happening, which makes us more confident. We feel like ‘I can do this....’ Which can lead to positive actions. These positive or negative thoughts influence our behavioural reactions.

Mitu's Story (First part)



Mitu is in 8th grade.



She loves going to school



She loves reading.

One month ago



Recently Mitu looks very depressed. Last month, Mitu had her first menstruation.



Prior to this, she did not know anything about menstruation. She got very scared when she saw blood on her bed.



She did not tell anyone and started crying.



Her mom noticed that Mitu was not coming out of her room.



Her mother found blood stains on the bed cover.



She explained menstruation and menstrual hygiene to Mitu.



Say something!

Why are you so depressed?

What happened?

Her friends ask her why she looks so sad these days.

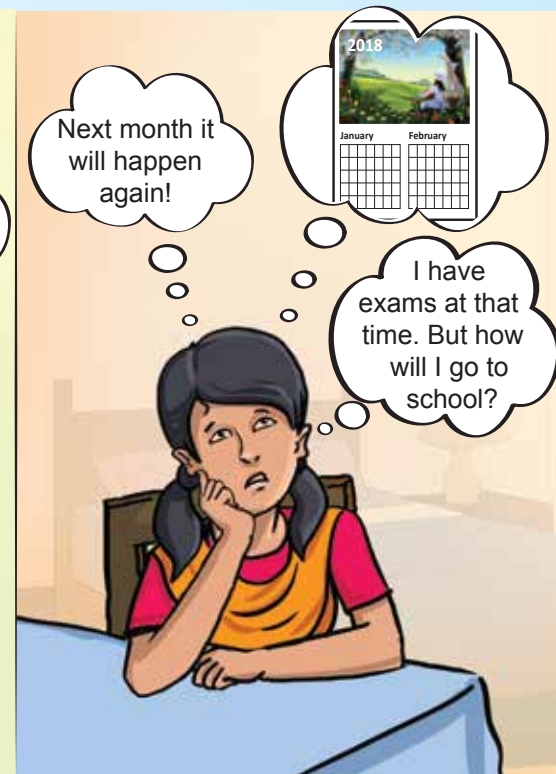


I cannot tell anyone, they will laugh!

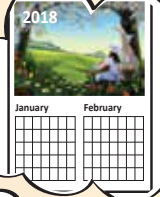
What if my blood leaks!

This is too shameful!

Mitu did not say anything to them. She didn't even share anything with her best friend, Sufia.



Next month it will happen again!



I have exams at that time. But how will I go to school?

Mitu started to anticipate her next menstruation.



Mitu decides to skip her exams during her menstruation.

Exercise

Mitu seems to feel rather anxious, scared, and ashamed because of her menstruation. If we go through the story, which thoughts and feelings did Mitu have? Which behaviours followed?

- Can you think of alternative, more optimistic, or realistic thoughts in her situation? What feelings and behaviours would those lead to?

Best that can happen	Worst that can happen	Realistic thing that can happen

Coping Mechanism

Having discussed negative, positive, and realistic thoughts with their relation to feelings and behaviours; we will now discuss different types of behaviour as a way to deal with strong emotions. We call these kinds of behaviour, 'coping mechanisms'.

Coping is putting effort to solve personal or interpersonal problems in order to minimize or tolerate stress. Coping mechanisms or strategies are the methods we apply in stressful situations in order to feel better.

There are different way to cope with stressful situations. Coping mechanisms vary from person to person, also, varying in different situations. Which means two things: Everyone will not cope with similar stressful situations in the same manner. A person may want use different coping mechanisms for different stressful situations.

In general, there are three main types of coping:

- Trying to change circumstances (e.g. through understanding what is going on, trying to change the situation by yourself, finding help to change the situation)
- Trying to change yourself/your response to the situation: Changing your thoughts about a situation (e.g. by reflecting on how realistic they are with yourself or with others, trying to change your thoughts to be more positive) and/or changing your emotions (e.g. through breathing exercises, praying, physical activity (boxing into a pillow), mindfulness, diary writing, talking with friends/parents about your emotions)
- Escaping emotions/avoidance: Temporarily distracting yourself if you are too preoccupied with a situation/thought/feeling. If ruminating does not help you in the moment, one can distract him/herself by watching a movie, or going for a walk.

It is important to know there is no 'one right' way of coping. Different situations call for different coping mechanisms. But it may be useful to understand when to apply what. For example: diary writing does not help us feel less stressed in a situation where someone is getting harassed. Here, it is important to go for another coping, such as taking action.

Link between Cognition and Coping Mechanism

As we discussed before; cognition means how people's perceptions, spontaneous thoughts about a situation influence their emotional and behavioural reactions. Meaning, what we feel right after a situation occurs, will lead us towards the coping mechanism we are going to adopt. Thinking too pessimistically or too optimistically might influence the choice of coping mechanism. For instance, if you think your parents will react very negatively to a bad grade by yelling at you and expressing their disappointment, you may choose to remain silent (do nothing). This may make you feel guilty about the bad grade.

Exercise

In Mitu's story, she behaved/reacted according to her emotions regarding certain situations. Read the following questions and try to answer:

Which coping mechanism did Mitu choose when:

- She talked to her mother.
- She decided not to go to school.
- She decided not to tell her friends about her menstruation.

Mitu's Story (Second part)



In this situation, she remembered her cousin, Munira Apa.



Munira asked Mitu about her problem



Mitu tells everything to Munira Apa.



Munira apa listened to Mitu attentively and understood her pain and despair.



Munira suggested using pads, when going to school during her period. They are easier to change and safeguard against leaking blood.



Munira told Mitu about going to a pharmacy. There she will be able to buy sanitary napkins.



Mitu came home feeling great relief. She started to go to school regularly.



At school Mitu went to the toilet to change her napkin, but she felt uncomfortable as she saw that the toilet was unhygienic.



Mitu went to the Assistant Head Master to talk about the cleanliness of the toilet.

The assistant Head Master called the cleaner and instructed her to clean the toilets every day.

Discussion: Which coping mechanism does she choose in the second part of this story? Reflecting on how we behave in different situations due to strong emotions, helps us become more aware of the consequences of our thoughts and behaviour.