

3 Degrees of Emotion:

A System to Identify Emotion, Intensity, and
Interventions

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INTRODUCTION

At any given point in time, every human being is experiencing an emotional reaction to something. It may be a rude comment, a kind note, a song, a movie, or a smell. The possibilities are endless.

Besides feeling something in response to some antecedent, everyone will experience different levels of intensity of the emotion that has been experienced. At any given moment of the day, a typical person will experience emotions at a relatively low intensity. Otherwise, people would experience a significant amount of difficulty functioning in their daily lives.

Unfortunately, many individuals do have difficulty regulating their emotions and often feel them at high intensities too much of the day for them to successfully accomplish personal tasks.

Emotional regulation is of particular concern for individuals with autism

spectrum disorders (ASD) (Jahromi, Meek, & Ober-Reynolds, 2012). Prolonged and intense emotions can frequently impede the success of these individuals in a variety of settings. Therefore, strategies should be put into place from a young age to teach these children to regulate and deescalate intense emotions.

WHAT IS 3 DEGREES OF EMOTION?

3 Degrees of Emotion (3DE) is a system to help individuals identify the intensity of their emotions as well as provide them with short interventions to deescalate themselves whenever their emotions become too intense.

Although there are probably more different kinds of emotions than would be practical to keep track of, this system identifies 5 basic emotions: happy, sad, afraid, angry, and nervous. Emotions can become very complicated, but typically a person can identify their general state with one of these five emotions.

Within each of the five emotions, there are 3 degrees of intensity. The 1st degree represents a normal amount of intensity. This system recognizes that emotions are ever present, and it is okay to feel angry or sad or nervous sometimes. Someone in the 1st degree might be able to say, "I am calm and in control." The 2nd degree represents a moderate amount of emotional intensity and may be accompanied by the phrase, "I am having some strong feelings, but I can still stay in control." The 3rd degree represents a large amount of emotional intensity and may be accompanied by the phrase, "I cannot control my emotions right now. I need to calm down."

If an individual realizes that they are at the 3rd degree of emotional intensity, they should then refer to the intervention portion of the system. Each of the five emotions is accompanied by a 5 step intervention. These interventions are relatively easy, require few

if any additional materials, and can be done anywhere.

Each degree of each emotion has an area in which the child should keep track of what they are feeling. Perhaps a timer will go off every hour, upon which the child should identify their emotion as well as their intensity. This will allow the child along with supporting adults to determine if the interventions are working and/or if they are even needed to aid the child in regulating their own emotions.

WHY SHOULD THIS BE USED?

Children with autism have a particularly difficult time calming themselves whenever their emotions become too intense. Whenever typically developing children encounter situations that are frustrating or arouse a large intensity of emotion (either positive or negative), they utilize a variety of coping strategies including seeking help, goal directed strategies, or physical forms of venting in order to reach emotional equilibrium

(Jahromi, Meek, & Ober-Reynolds, 2012). Additionally, research on typically developing children has shown that the ability to emotionally regulate can buffer the impact of high emotional reactivity (Eisenberg et al., 1996), meaning that the ability to deescalate one's emotions can be an extremely valuable skill, especially for children who will inevitably experience a high degree of emotional turmoil.

A study by Jahromi, Meek, and Ober-Reynolds (2012) found that although children with autism may use coping strategies, they use a different repertoire of coping strategies, including more venting and avoidance (both maladaptive) and less constructive strategies. Additionally, because these children are more prone to prolonged and intense periods of resignation to assigned tasks, these children experience higher levels of failure, which leads to lower levels of motivation. Academic success then becomes a vicious cycle of high intensity

emotions, then frustration, then failure, then decreased motivation, and then back intensely negative emotions.

As evidenced by research, a product that could help children to monitor and track their own emotions as well as learn how and when to deescalate could be quite valuable.

WHO IS THIS FOR?

This product is geared towards children with an ASD, approximately age 8 through 14 (possibly younger or older depending on the cognitive capabilities and maturity of the child). The child should be minimally verbal, but it is imperative that they have the cognitive capability to understand what different emotions are and be able to communicate what they are feeling. It would be ideal if they were at a reading level such that they could read the 5-step interventions, but this is not absolutely necessary so long as an adult could read the interventions to them. However, it is important that they are able to understand the interventions and carry out the steps.

Although this product is specifically geared towards children with an ASD, it may be used with any child who struggles to regulate their emotions. However, the same cognitive capabilities that are required for children with an ASD are also necessary for typically developing children.

EVIDENCE BASE

Although 3DE has never been studied, this system is made up of elements with a substantial base of evidence. The program is intended to be used as a self-management strategy for children with autism. Self-management strategies have a large body of literature to support their effectiveness. Additionally, the interventions of 3DE are essentially mindfulness strategies. Although the evidence base in the use of mindfulness strategies for children is small, the current evidence is promising.

SELF-MANAGEMENT

Self-management programs typically contain some elements of self-monitoring (assessing or recording one's own behaviors), self-evaluation (decision making or goal setting), and self-reinforcement. In 3DE, no self-reinforcement is built into the program (although this could be included at the user's discretion), the child engages in self-monitoring by recording their own emotional states and intensities at pre-determined intervals, and in self-evaluation by deciding if they are at such an intensity that they would need to carry out (on their own or with minimal assistance) the 5-step intervention.

Positive outcomes in the use of self-management strategies specifically for children with an ASD have been reported (Lee, Simpson, & Shogren, 2007; Southall & Gast, 2011). Increases in the performance of target behaviors as well as increases in socially acceptable behaviors were shown in children with ASD.

In addition to its apparent effectiveness, self-management programs tend to be rated as highly acceptable by multiple parties. These parties include experts in the area of ASD, who highly advocate for the use of such strategies in the population, as well as school teachers because such strategies teach the child independence and frees the teacher to perform other important classroom duties (Southall & Gast, 2011).

MINDFULNESS

The research base for mindfulness practices is relatively small, especially for children, but the available research has shown some promising results. Being mindful means having a clear mind that is focused on the present moment. Thus, focusing oneself into a state of mindfulness allows individuals to be much more aware of internal states of physiological arousal (Singh, Wahler, Adkins, & Myers, 2002). Despite the level of focus that is necessary to achieve mindfulness, a few studies have

demonstrated success when used in children (Semple, Lee, Rosa, & Mille, 2009; Sibinga et al., 2011; Weijer-Bergsma, Formsma, Bruin, & Bogels, 2011). Mindfulness exercises have been shown to reduce hostility, general discomfort, emotional discomfort, anxiety (Sibinga et al., 2011), externalizing problems, internalizing problems, and attention problems (Weijer-Bergsma et al., 2011).

There are clearly many benefits to mindfulness exercises. In fact, it is believed that mindfulness, when learned, can enhance one's self-management of attention (Semple et al., 2009). If a child can learn to increase their control over their own attention, they will likely find success in controlling their emotions.

MATERIALS

1. 3 Degrees of Emotion Chart

2. 5-Step Interventions Sheet
3. Counters (optional)
4. Writing Utensil (optional)

STEPS TO IMPLEMENTING 3 DEGREES OF EMOTION

1. A supporting adult (teacher or caregiver) should explain the intervention to the child. They should describe the purpose and explain to the child that this is a self-management strategy, meaning he or she will be keeping track of his or her own emotional states.
2. The supporting adult should then review each degree and what each one means. The first degree means, “I am calm and in control.” The second degree means, “I am having some strong feelings, but I can still

stay in control.” The third degree means, “I cannot control my emotions right now. I need to calm down.”

3. At predetermined intervals (every hour, every transition, etc.), the child should either mark with a writing utensils or a counter their current emotion and degree of intensity in the corresponding spot.
4. If the student indicates that they are at the third degree, they must then follow the 5-step intervention that corresponds with the emotion in which they are at the third degree. Ideally, employing the intervention will deescalate their emotional state.
5. The supporting adult should use the data that is supplied by the student’s markings or counters to evaluate if the students states of high emotional turmoil are decreasing as a result of the intervention. The 3 Degrees of

Emotion Chart may be laminated so as to be reused daily, or a new chart may be printed every day and kept at the end of the day for the student's records. If the chart is laminated and erased daily, the daily data should be transferred to a permanent source.

If a student is feeling "excited," that may fit most appropriately under happy. The purpose of the five emotions is to use an appropriate 5-step interventions, so really, the student could (with the help of the supporting adult) just determine which intervention seems most appropriate.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Problem: The student is feeling an emotion that is not one of the five emotions.

Solution: There are, of course, more than just five emotions that can be felt at any given time. The five emotions are just broad generalities. Therefore the student should mark whichever of the five they feel their current state most closely aligns with. For example, if a student is feeling "frustrated," that may fit most appropriately under angry.

Problem: The interventions are too complex for the student to carry out or are simply not working.

Solution: A mindfulness exercise, which is essentially what the interventions are, often takes some amount of practice before it is really effective. The student may start with some more basic exercises such as deep breathing. Practice will help. Try to not get discouraged if the intervention does not feel very effective the first few times.

Problem: Fixed intervals are not ideal to use because the student experiences intense

emotions between those intervals and needs to use interventions immediately.

Solution: The pre-determined intervals are just a suggestion for the sake of consistency, and to be sure that data is taken throughout the day. If the student is able to determine that they are at the third degree and need to use an intervention, they should do so immediately. Just make sure that they mark it on the chart.

Problem: Why is there an intervention for happy? Isn't that a positive emotion?

Solution: Happiness, like all other emotions, is normal. However, when one is too happy (perhaps over excited), it can become difficult to focus. The intervention for happy is more geared towards increasing focus.

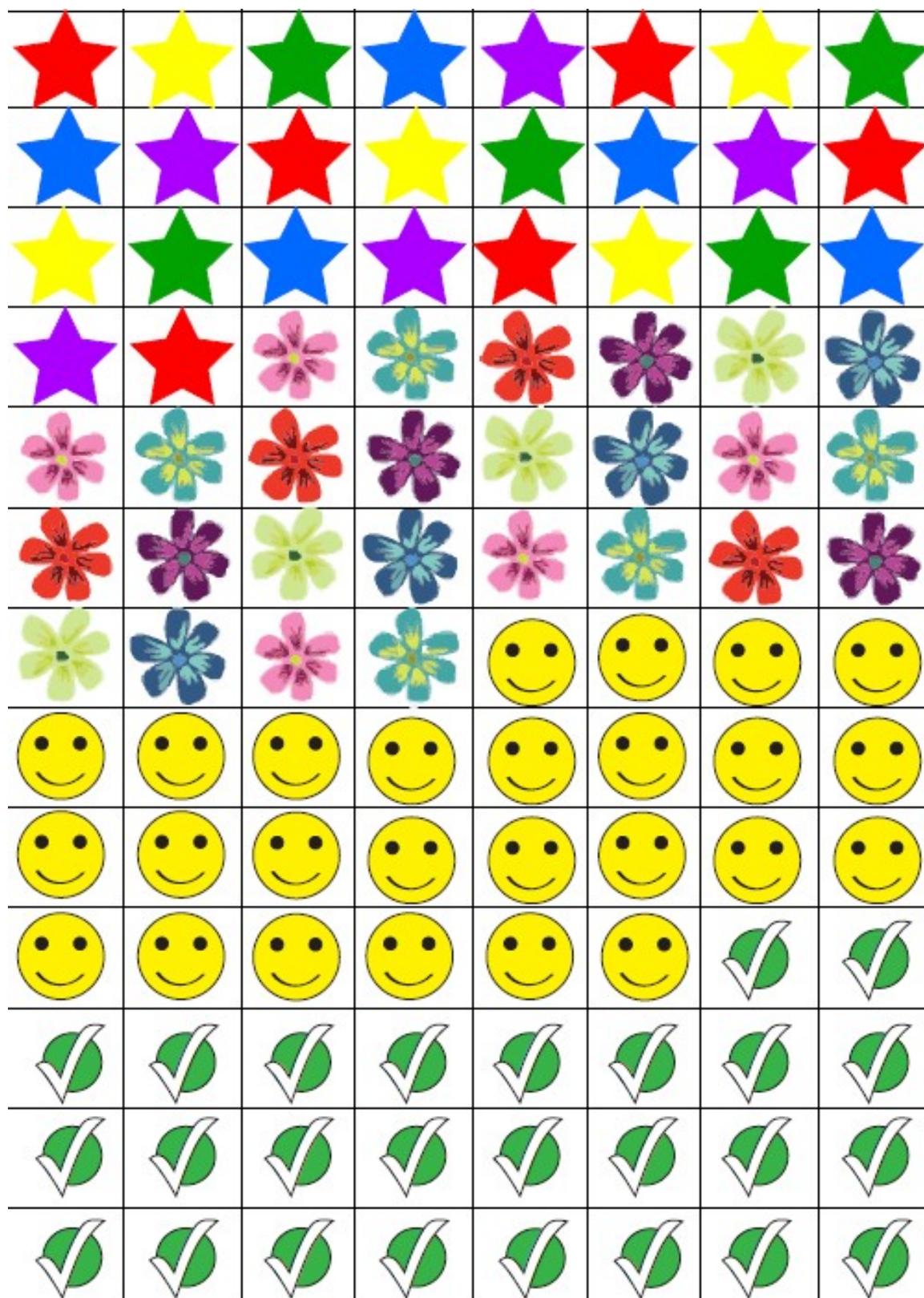
NOTE

The interventions were taken and adapted from the following sources:

1. Singh, N.N., Wahler, R.G., Adkins, A.D., & Myers, R.E. (2003) **Soles of the Feet: a mindfulness-based self-control intervention for aggression by an individual with mild mental retardation and mental illness**
2. **BYU Counseling and Career Center's Stress Management & Biofeedback Services Resources-** https://caps.byu.edu/sites/caps.byu.edu/files/pdfs/stress_management/15_second_refresher.pdf
3. Bowden, T. & Bowden, S. **ACT on Purpose-** www.actonpurpose.com.au

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Happy

Sad

Nervous

Angry

Afraid¹²

1. Close your eyes or look at the floor.
2. Focus on your breathing and only your breathing. Feel how your belly rises and falls.
3. If your mind wanders, that is ok! Bring your mind back to your breath as quickly as you can.
4. Every time your mind wanders and you bring it back, tell yourself “good job” and continue to focus on your breath.
5. After about 1 minute (or however long you need to regain focus), bring your mind back to your present situation.

1. Find a comfortable position on the floor and lie down. You may either close your eyes or gaze up at the ceiling.
2. Imagine you are just waking up. Open your eyes and take a few normal breaths, noticing your belly going up and down.
3. Now slowly turn your mouth up into a smile- not a big, exaggerated smile, just a normal smile like you would give to someone you like.
4. Notice how your lips feel. Then notice how your cheeks feel. Finally, notice how the rest of your face feels when you smile.
5. Now bring your attention to the rest of you. When you are ready, slowly raise yourself up as if you are getting out of bed. Gently give yourself a stretch and sit back up. It is like starting a new day!

1. Relax your shoulders and neck. Rotate your shoulders forwards and backwards, and move your head from left to right several times. Look over your left and right shoulders.
2. Gently move your jaw from side to side while keeping your upper and lower teeth apart.
3. Take a deep breath. Hold that breath and count to five while clenching your fists. Blow all of the air out and relax your hands.
4. Say something positive about yourself, either out loud or in your head.
5. Smile. It will come naturally as you relax.

1. Stand or sit naturally with your feet flat on the floor.
2. Breathe naturally.
3. Think about what made you angry.
4. Now Stop! Think only of the soles of your feet. Feel your feet against your shoes, socks, or the floor, and think only of that.
5. When you feel calm, walk away with a smile on your face because you controlled your anger!

1. Figure out where the fear is. Is it in your head? Your stomach?
2. Use your imagination to describe what the fear looks like (maybe a lump of clay) and feels like (maybe it moves or jumps).
3. Slowly take some deep breaths and let the air fill your lungs.
4. With each breath, imagine the air going around and through the uncomfortable feeling, making room in your body. The feeling doesn't have to go away- you just need to make some more space for it.
5. Say, “I can feel you there, but it's okay. I can still do what is important to me. I don't like this feeling but I can make room for it and still keep going.”

Happy

Sad

Nervous

Angry

Afraid¹³

1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3	3

1- I am calm and in control. 2- I am having some strong feelings, but I can still stay in control.

3- I cannot control my emotions right now. I need to calm down.