

Step 1: Describe the Experience – What Just Happened?

! The Problem:

Emotional overwhelm can trigger impulsive reactions or withdrawal, making it difficult to process triggering events effectively. Without awareness, responses may be shaped by automatic patterns rather than intentional choices.

🧠 Psychological Foundation:

Emotions do not arise solely from external events but from how we interpret them. Cognitive appraisal is the process of evaluating an experience based on personal beliefs and past conditioning to determine emotional responses (Lazarus, 1982).

When something happens, our minds automatically assess whether the event is threatening, neutral, or supportive. “It is not the stressor itself that causes emotional responses, but how we evaluate it” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This assessment is subjective, meaning two people may experience the same situation but react entirely differently based on their conditioning and perspectives. Recognising this process allows us to step back, observe our reactions, and shift from automatic emotional responses to more thoughtful reflection.

🔥 Your Body’s Response:

When the brain perceives stress, the amygdala activates the fight-or-flight response, releasing adrenaline and cortisol (Sapolsky, 2004). This causes physical changes such as an increased heart rate, muscle tension, and heightened sensory awareness. The digestive system slows down, which may lead to nausea or appetite suppression (McEwen, 2017). Over time, unregulated stress can contribute to chronic tension, fatigue, and emotional instability.

⚠️ Risks If Unaddressed:

If stress responses remain unchecked, prolonged exposure to elevated cortisol levels increases the risk of hypertension, digestive disorders, and weakened immunity (Sapolsky, 2004). Unregulated emotions may negatively affect relationships, professional interactions, and overall well-being (Gross & Thompson, 2007).

✅ Action Step to Support Your Body:

- **Deep breathing:** Stimulates the vagus nerve, helping regulate the nervous system (Porges, 2011 – Polyvagal Theory).
- **Progressive muscle relaxation:** Reduces tension by activating the parasympathetic nervous system, promoting calmness (Jacobson, 1938).

🏆 The Benefits:

Recognising emotional triggers helps distinguish instinctive reactions from intentional responses. Developing self-awareness reduces automatic defensive behaviours and increases emotional regulation skills, leading to improved emotional resilience (Gross, 2015).

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Step 1 Journal Questions:

1. What event triggered a strong emotional response?
2. Where were you, and what was happening around you?
3. Who was involved, and what role did they play in the situation?
4. What were your first thoughts when the event happened, and how did they evolve as time passed?
5. If someone else had witnessed the event, how might they describe it?
6. How did your body respond during the experience? What physical sensations did you notice?

Step 1 Example Answers:

1. My manager pointed out an error in my report during a team meeting, making me feel exposed and frustrated.
2. I was seated in a crowded conference room, surrounded by colleagues. The atmosphere was tense as we discussed deadlines.
3. My manager was the one who made the remark, but I noticed my colleagues looking at me, intensifying my discomfort.
4. At first, I thought, “I should have paid more attention.” Later, my thoughts shifted to, “Now everyone thinks I’m incompetent.”
5. Someone else might say it was simply a correction, but to me, it felt like public scrutiny.
6. I noticed my heart rate increase, my face felt hot, and my hands tensed up. I also realised I was holding my breath. Later, I felt drained and didn’t want to eat anything.