

Understanding and Handling difficult emotions

Or - Debunking the happiness myth?

Look! Nice, happy students!!!



Myth v Reality

- ALWAYS
 - Happy
 - Confident
 - Solvent
 - Capable
 - A 'leader'
 - Effortless achievement
 - Great social life
 - Fantastic romantic/sexual relationships
- SOMETIMES
 - Unsure
 - Stressed
 - Anxious
 - Sad/depressed
 - Self-conscious
 - Struggling with work/money
 - Romantic/sexual relationships are good-enough – sometimes!

A vicious circle

- How come we get caught up in this?

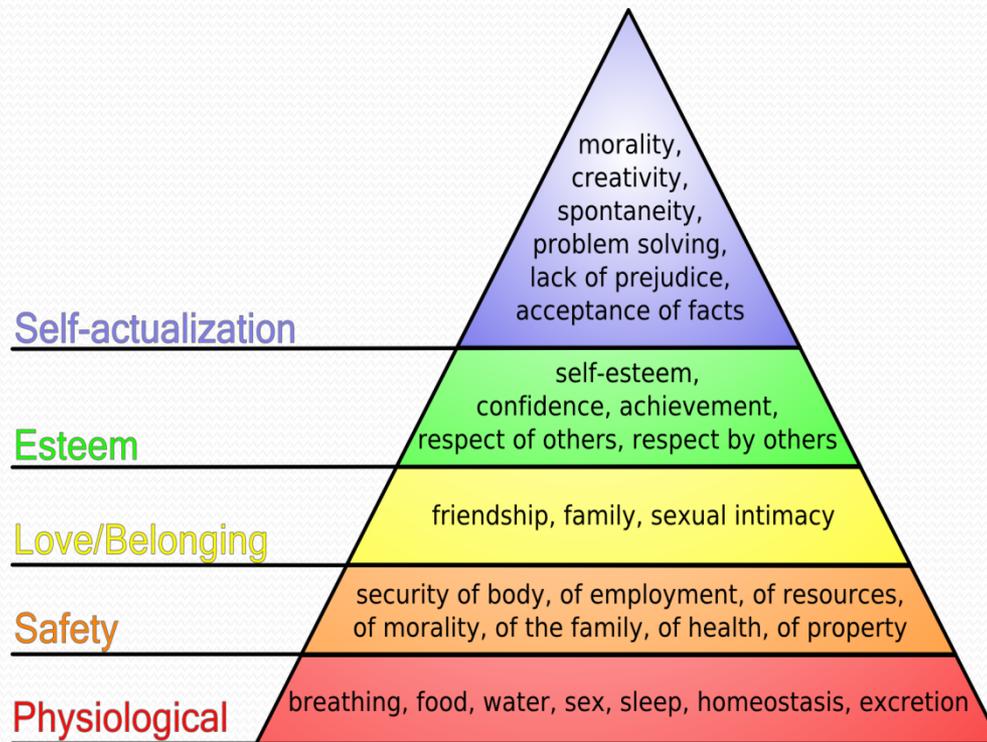


Status Anxiety

- Human tendency to ‘compare upwards’ – looks, wealth, achievements...
- We get ‘hooked’ by norms
- Humans always very aware of ‘how I’m doing/fitting in’ – evolutionary necessity

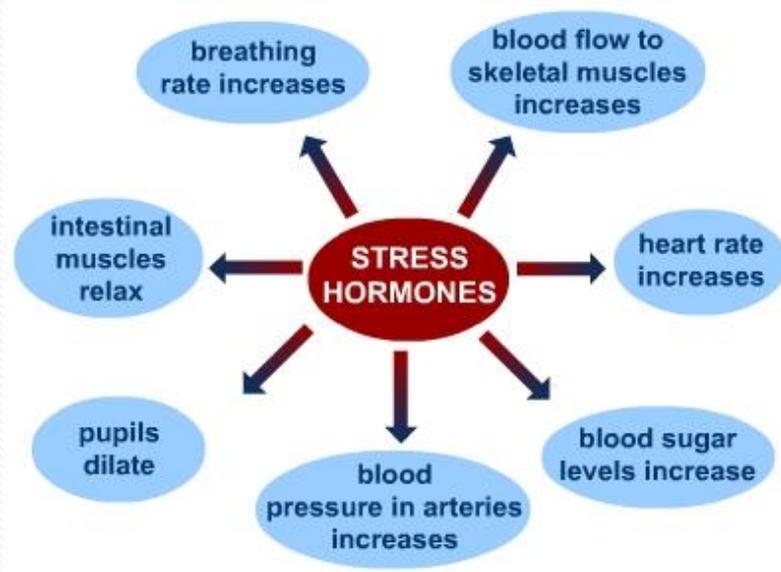


Difficult feelings also arise when our needs are not met.



Our bodies react physically to stress, fear and loss

- E.g. 'Fight or flight' response

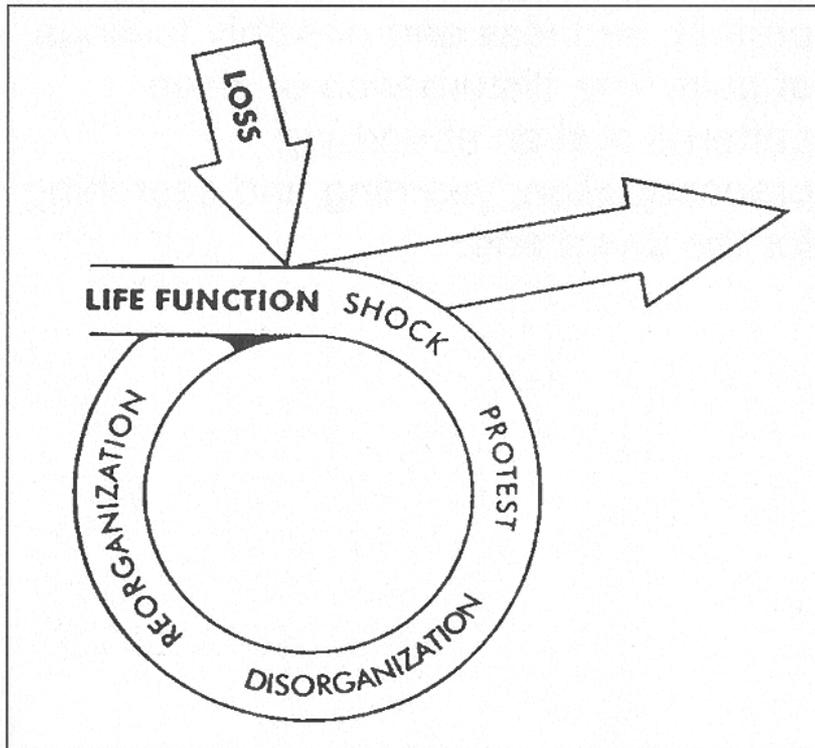


-Common response: AVOID the difficult situation

-Common belief: I mustn't feel anxious or everyone will see that I'm not coping and judge me.

-Another common response: deny that anything is wrong

Loss/grief are not 'problems' to be fixed: they are emotions to be processed



- Takes time
- Pain is inevitable
- 'Grief is its own medicine'

Not what we expect...



*'Nice and happy' –
so what's wrong
with me?!*

- ...we can feel shell-shocked
- Like a failure
- Pathetic
- Depressed
- Full of self-loathing
- Angry
- 'What's the point?'

We all want to be 'normal'

- We measure ourselves against unrealistic and imaginary ideals.
- Ideas of '*how things should be*' oppress us and lead us into self-condemnation



OK – they're really getting annoying now! Good looking, hard-working, happy, obviously well-off, great relationships....

Self-condemnation



Unrealistic beliefs that oppress us

- “I *must* perform well and/or win the approval of important people or I am inadequate.”
- “You *must* treat me fairly and considerately and not unduly frustrate me or else you are worthless to me.”
- “My life *must* provide the things I want and keep me from harm or else life is unbearable and I can’t be happy at all!”

Other unhelpful beliefs

- “I must *never* feel anxious or sad. If I do, I’m a failure and I must never tell anyone how I’m feeling or they will judge me and condemn me.”
- “I must *never* fail an exam, an interview, coursework... and I must never be rejected by anyone –parent, friend, lover.... If this happens, I will become totally depressed and give up.”
- “If I don’t have a 5-year plan mapped out for when I leave university, I’m a failure and my life is circling the drain.”

How do we often try to cope with painful feelings?



SEX



Yup...not that smart, but we do it anyway!

So we know what doesn't help



Self-condemnation

Self-medication

Pretending to be OK

Zoning out

Unhelpful and unrealistic beliefs

Upwards comparison

Head in sand

Running away - avoidance

... *what can help?*

- Self-care – eating, sleeping, exercise
- Connecting with family and friends
- Taking time-out when you really need to: talk to tutors about impact on work
- Taking some risks in telling others how you *really* feel (taking the mask off)
- Being ‘gentle/firm’ with yourself – not ‘hard/soft’
- Reading supportive books
- Being *very* aware of unhelpful beliefs and expectations, and challenging them within yourself
- Trying to come to terms with your basic humanity: the *inevitable* insecurity and uncertainty that accompanies that

Self-compassion is important too...



A moment of self-compassion
can change your entire day.
A string of such moments can
change the course of your life.
↳ Christopher K. Germer

What does self-compassion look like?

- Being as understanding of yourself as you would be of a friend who was struggling.
- Acceptance of human frailty – including your own.
- Trying not to ‘catastrophise’ when things don’t go to plan.
- Reminding yourself of your strengths – not just focusing on limitations.
- Leads to ***OTHER-compassion*** – a desire to support others”.

Other things that can help...

- See your GP
- Samaritans/Niteline – available overnight.



<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/studentservices/counselling/Self-Help-Guides.aspx>

Difficult emotions affect us all...



With self-compassion, humour, and realistic expectations of what life is *really* like, we can give ourselves the opportunity to grow and mature – even when times are very tough.