## Building Impulse Control

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Impulse Control is the ability to resist or delay an impulse, drive or temptation to act driven by our emotions.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>Emotions express themselves through three channels—thoughts, physical sensations, and the impulses that translate the feelings into behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When sad, most people have the impulse to cry. When angry, people often have the impulse to say something ugly or even to hit. Impulse control involves having good command over when we allow our emotions to be expressed in our behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good control requires an intervening thought that measures and judges the consequence of turning the impulse into action. When impulses are translated directly into behavior, we call it acting out, i.e., acting out the feeling represented by the impulse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People behave impulsively, without thinking through the consequences, when the pressure of emotion builds up beyond their ability to inhibit unwise behavior. People with strong impulse control are able to restrain their actions until they have time to think, even in response to intense emotional pressure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>While acting out an impulse can involve either good or bad impulses and behaviors, it is the bad behavior that is usually associated with the term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acting out, and the damage that often results, is what has given emotions a bad reputation in Western philosophy. Learning to manage the power of our emotions can open up an untapped reservoir of effectiveness. The energy that fuels impulsive behavior is the same energy, when better controlled, that motivates us to high achievement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exercise 1

Learn to look before you leap—trite but true!

Impulsive behavior can have us feeling foolish because we behaved foolishly. We sometimes act impulsively in an attempt to solve a problem that makes us anxious. Then we have to clean up the results of our poor attempt—and still solve the original problem.

We may have to repair relationships that we have harmed by speaking before thinking, or we may lose the relationship altogether. We may hurt someone physically, when we hit or when we drive aggressively. We may run out of money because of impulsive spending.

Identify three or four times in which you have hurt yourself or someone else with impulsive behaviors. Also, list the price you had to pay for not controlling your behavior.

The goal of this exercise is not to beat yourself up. It's so that you have some concrete examples of your impulsiveness in your conscious memory, at a time that you are taking concrete steps to improve your impulse control. Those conscious memories will help you to remember why it is worth it to you to go to the effort that will be required.

Exercise 2

You're likely to be impulsive if your ability to tolerate feelings of frustration is low, you chronically feel stressed out, or you have low faith in your problem solving skills.

To further assess your own propensity for impulsive behavior, check the following items and identify the ones that sound like you. (It often helps to ask people whom you know and trust to what extent any of these statements sound like you.)

- You have little delay between an idea and acting on it.
- You respond to frustrations with an outburst of temper.
- You jump into problem solving instead of planning, and consequently frequently have to redo projects and assignments.
- You become impatient easily.
- You find that most other people are too slow to make up their minds.
- You often regret not taking enough time with decisions because later you see that you had much more attractive options than you used.
- You engage in frequent impulse buying.
- You frequently drive in an angry fashion.
Exercise 3

Spend one or two weeks simply observing yourself before you begin your change program.

- On a daily basis, record one incident of impulsive behavior, major or minor, that you can recall from that day.

- Look for the pattern(s) of activating events. You don’t behave impulsively 100% of the time. See if you can figure out the situations that are most likely to provoke impulsive behavior on your part. For example, are there particular people around whom you are more likely to be impulsive?

- Identify the self-talk in each of those situations. What emotions did you experience in response to your self-talk? In particular, rate the degree that you were either anxious or angry on a scale from 0 to 100.

Anger and anxiety are the emotions that most commonly provoke destructively impulsive behavior—but don’t limit yourself to finding just those two emotions. For example, love has been known to lead people astray as well.

Exercise 4

Create alternatives in your mind: First, picture how you would typically respond to the following situations, i.e. your thoughts, feelings and actions—then develop an alternative. (Practicing this skill will make it a lot more available to you when you are in the midst of real situations.)

- Your presentation to the CEO is tomorrow morning. Late this afternoon you discover that a direct report has not completed action that you need to include in your report. What is your first impulse?

  Stop and think. Rather than indulge your emotion, what action can you take that will result in good outcomes in both the short and long term?

- A vendor is late with a needed report or delivery. What is your first impulse?

  Stop and think. Rather than indulge your emotion, what action can you take that will result in good outcomes in both the short and long term?

- A subordinate is rude to you in front of an important client. What is your first impulse?

  Stop and think. Rather than indulge your emotion, what action can you take that will result in good outcomes in both the short and long term?

- You are late for a meeting and the old lady ahead of you is doing ten kilometers an hour under the speed limit on this two-lane street. What is your first impulse?

  Stop and think. Rather than indulge your emotion, what action can you take that will result in good outcomes in both the short and long term?
### Exercise 5

**Practice alternative behaviour some more:**

- Write down a recent event in which you behaved impulsively. It doesn't have to involve anger, though it could. It can simply be a time you made a rash decision that proved to be unwise.

- Now write down the way you would handle the situation, if you could turn back the clock.

- Picture a similar situation happening in the future. It probably will 😊. Spend several minutes picturing yourself handling the situation more carefully. Notice what the outcome is like. Notice what your long-term feelings will be. The next time you face a similar situation the chances of your slowing yourself down will grow if you have repeatedly done this exercise.

### Exercise 6

According to Steve Stein, Ph.D. and Howard Book, MD, authors of The EQ Edge (The EQ Edge: Emotional intelligence and your success, 2006, Toronto, Canada: Jossey-Bass/Wiley.), *self-talk that generates impulsive behavior* is often related to the following factors:

- Interpreting others’ behavior towards us as abusive, insulting or overly personal, e.g. “My boss snubbed me! He was rude. I can’t let him get away with that. My honor is at stake.”
  
  **Alternative:** Perhaps your boss had a headache and was treating everyone badly that day.

- A desire to impress someone, i.e. “If I don’t dazzle the brass in this meeting, I’ll never get a promotion.”
  
  **Alternative:** “I would like them to see me ‘as the knight in shiny armour’, and I’m more likely to impress them if I don’t put so much of my focus on impressing them.”

Each of these kinds of self-talk potentially creates a danger for you. You’re most vulnerable to acting impulsively when you talk to yourself in any of these ways.

Over the next week or two, listen carefully for this sort of self-talk. When you hear yourself saying things like the above, choose to substitute the kinds of alternatives listed.
Exercise 7

Exercises 3 and 6 can give you a good idea of situations in which you are most likely to behave impulsively. Pick out one or two types of situations to work on for the next few weeks.

Make a plan to protect yourself from impulsive behavior in the types of situations you select for your immediate focus.

Example: Instead of speaking harshly to a team member who makes an unreasonable request, I'll:

• Take a deep breath to remind myself to stay calm.
• Let my muscles relax just a bit to also help me stay calm.
• Let the team member finish his or her explanation.
• Ask questions to be sure I understand the message.
• Respond in a conversational tone of voice.
• Ask for more time if I am unsure whether to grant the request or not.

Example: Before I respond to an angry peer who is being rude to me, I'll:

• Take a deep breath to remind myself to stay calm.
• Let my muscles relax just a bit to also help me stay calm.
• Repeat back to the peer, using different words than his, what his main statements are to be sure that I've heard him correctly.
• Calmly let him know that he seems angry, which is having me feel uncomfortable.

Example: Before I make an impulsive purchase I will:

• Take a deep breath to remind myself to stay calm.
• Let my muscles relax just a bit to also help me stay calm.
• Take 24–48 hours to review the potential purchase and my finances.
• Discuss the purchase with my spouse or someone whose advice I trust.

Exercise 8

When you're in a situation that carries danger for you to be impulsive, give yourself permission to walk away for a while. Calm yourself down. Make a plan about how to gain this respite.

• Example: “Would you like a cup of coffee? I think I'll get one.”
• Example: “Let me check with my assistant about my schedule.”
| Exercise 9 | Most people hate the feelings they have when they lose control. Is this true for you?
One way to keep yourself focused on building impulse control is to **remind yourself that by keeping control, you will not have to feel those bad feelings.** |
| --- | --- |
| Exercise 10 | **Practice not interrupting others when they are speaking.**
You will want to, and you can hold back. Every time you do so, you will have built yourself-control muscles. |
| Exercise 11 | **Much impulsiveness comes from excess stress.** If this is true for you, do the exercises in the Stress Tolerance menu. |
| Exercise 12 | **Practice speaking more slowly and softly.** Let yourself take a deep calming breath before you speak.
As you practice this skill, you may find your pace slowing just enough for your pre-frontal cortex, the part of the brain that is the seat of emotional intelligence, to take charge rather than your reptile brain, which is the part of the brain that pushes for impulsive reactions. |