

# ADHD and Emotional Regulation

Intense emotions are a hallmark of ADHD. Children with ADHD can be up to a third delayed in their emotional, social and behavioral maturity. An ADHD child will feel emotions quickly, deeply, and are more likely to express them outwardly.

## Why does ADHD make it difficult to regulate emotions?

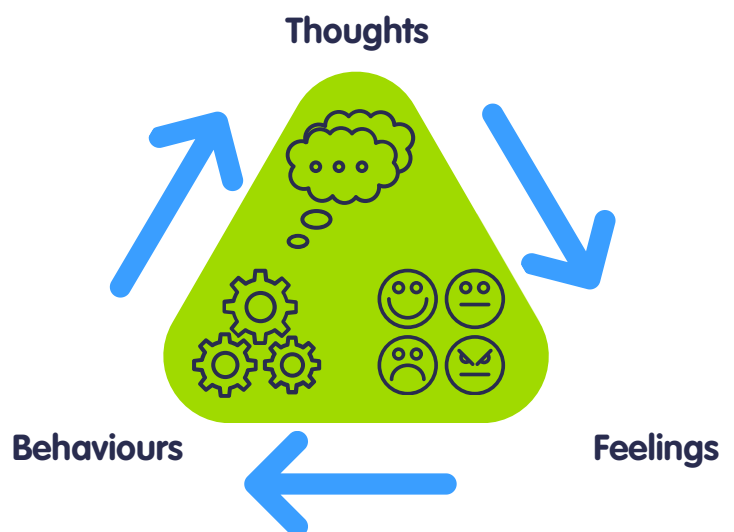
ADHD children are very sensitive to emotional triggers and have a high emotional impulsivity. Emotional reactions are intense, overwhelming and they may struggle to moderate their emotions. An ADHD brain will struggle to focus attention away from strong emotions, making it difficult to replace an emotion with a different one. Poor working memory makes it difficult for a child to self-soothe, and means it is hard to organise and execute an appropriate emotional response.

## What is emotional regulation?

Emotions are made up of our thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Each part interacts with the others to create moods and emotional patterns.

Altering one results in a chain reaction that changes the others.



### Thoughts

Thoughts are like a running commentary we hear in our minds throughout our lives.

### Feelings

Feelings are the hard-wired physical manifestation of an emotion.

### Behaviours

Behaviours are the things we do or don't do.

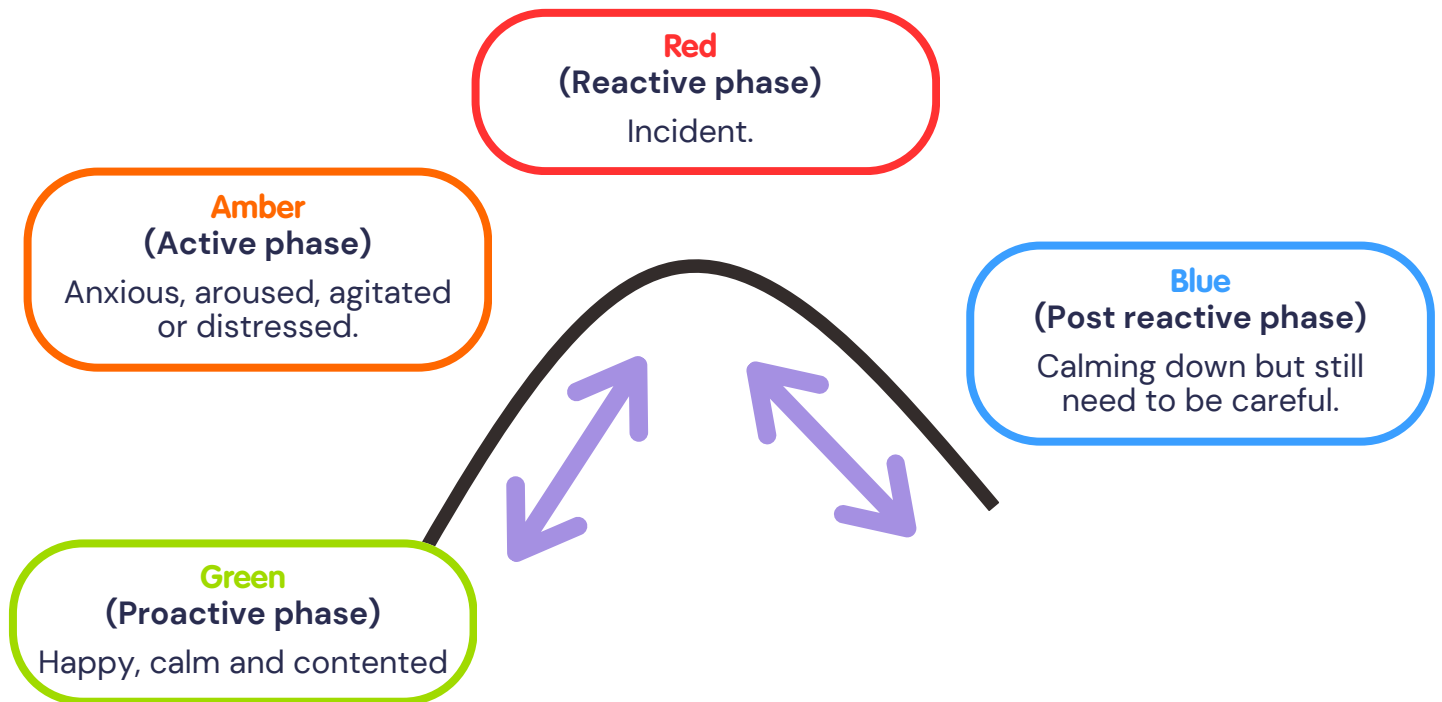
## Validate, Acknowledge, Normalise (VAN)

Validating, acknowledging and normalising will help diffuse difficult emotions as well as helping your child understand and manage their emotions.

See our '[ADHD Strategies' factsheet](#) for more details on how to validate, acknowledge and normalise with your child.

## Emotional Arousal Curve

The curve of emotional arousal describes the stages of behaviour caused by emotional dysregulation.



**Green – the proactive phase:** Your child is calm, happy and content. This is the only phase where they can process information to the best of their ability.

**Amber – the active phase:** Your child is becoming anxious, agitated or distressed. It is becoming difficult for them to process information. Sensory tools like weighted blankets, fidget toys or foods can be helpful to bring your child back to green.

**Red – the reactive phase:** Your child is in meltdown or shutdown and cannot process any information. A meltdown is often external while during a shutdown the child will 'switch off' and be unable to think or react. Keep language simple and communication to a minimum. Be understanding, stay calm and avoid conflict. Give simple choices, which will reduce demand and give some sense of control. Offer a comforter and protect your child or others from harm. Remove yourself from the situation (if safe to do so).

**Blue – the post-reactive phase:** Your child is becoming calmer, and can begin to process information. At this stage, shame and guilt can be challenging and it is important to wait until your child is in **green** before discussing what to do next time. Social stories can help to discuss how to keep them safe next time they are in the **red**.

## Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD)

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) is when someone experiences a severe emotional pain caused by the perception of being rejected; teased or criticised. It can be also triggered by disappointing important people in their lives or by disappointing themselves when they failed to attain their own standards or goals.

The emotional pain the person experiences is real and extreme. The pain can become overwhelming very quickly and will not be easy to dismiss.

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