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OVERVIEW

Much of therapy relies on skill-building around emotions experience and expression. The abstract principles of emotion management are difficult for many clients to grasp, requiring new language and skills. Therapy often uses analogies to assist clients in understanding by making abstract concepts more concrete. A helpful analogy is a description of our experience of emotions as the water in a reservoir and our expression of these emotions as the function of a dam. In the same way that a reservoir provides multiple benefits and protections, our emotional reservoirs provide health and life when operating correctly. Lacking sufficient outlets for our emotions, we become stagnant and distorted. This analogy of a reservoir and dam to emotion management provides a framework for counselors to teach emotional intelligence, regulation, and expression in practice.

Emotion Management

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence involves the identification of an emotion and the connection of that experience to the language used to both acknowledge and share that emotion. This process is the development of self-awareness, requiring the connection between the experience of the emotion from the amygdala in the emotional brain to the labeling and interpretation of that experience in the prefrontal cortex of the rational brain (Goleman, 1997; Grant, Salsman, & Berking, 2018).

Emotional Regulation

Emotion regulation skills include all these necessary elements, defined as the ability to (1) be consciously aware of our emotions, (2) identify and label our emotions, (3) recognize the past cause and current trigger of the emotion, (4) inhibit impulsive behavior related to strong positive or negative emotions through active modification, or (5) tolerate and accept undesired emotions when change or modification is not possible, (6) confront and explore triggers to reduce their control and improve our control, (7) apply effective self-support or self-soothing to cope with strong emotions, and (8) maintain attention and response in the presence of strong emotions (Grant et al., 2018; Linehan, 2015; Omaha, 2004).

Emotional Expression

Emotional regulation flowing from improved insight and emotional identification enables the effective application of concrete skills to emotional expression. Without effective externalization of emotions through expression, emotions become internalized and build below the surface of expression and awareness, bursting forth through dysregulated expression, somatic symptomatology, or aggressive behaviors (McLean & Foa, 2017).

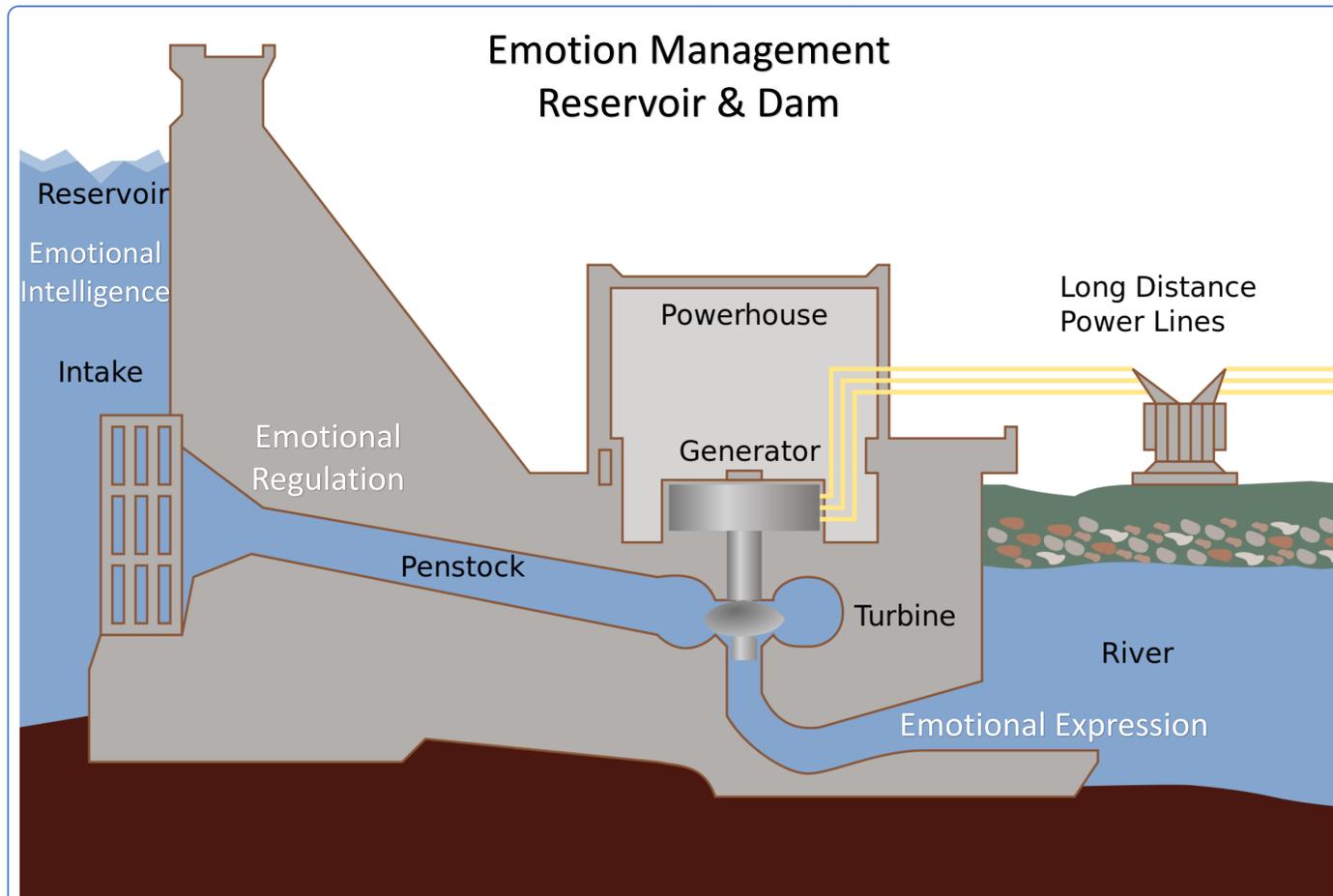


Figure 1. Hydroelectric dam (Tomia, 2000) Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hydroelectric_dam.svg

Comparing the Components of Emotion Management with a Reservoir and Dam

Emotional Intelligence	Reservoir
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification and labeling of emotion • Identification and understanding of source & cause • Insight and containment of emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify water presence for capacity and purpose • Identify upstream sources to permit flow • Maintain water purity and clarity
Emotional Regulation	Intake & Dam
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring and modifying emotions for coping • Control emotions for effective awareness & interpretation • Maintain power and purpose with appropriate expression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gates control inlet of water to penstock and outflow • Gates regulate flow to support intended purposes of both reservoir and dam • Control gates regulate water flow from penstock to turbine and outflow
Emotional Expression	Dam and River
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rate of expression matches rate of experience to ensure accuracy of content and context • Expressed emotion matches experienced emotion following insight and modification • Expressed emotion modulates based on consideration of consequences and context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gates and penstock regulate water flow to maintain reservoir levels match desired purpose and protect against drought, flooding, and stagnation of water in reservoir • Gates ensure appropriate water level through penstock and turbine for power and flow • Gates and penstock regulate water flow to maintain reservoir levels match desired purpose and protect against drought, flooding, and stagnation of water in reservoir

CONCLUSION

Without the skills of emotional intelligence and regulation, emotional expression becomes mood-incongruent with the primary emotions hidden from awareness and expression. Tensions build below the surface as select secondary emotions attempt to handle and express unacknowledged primary emotions (Becker-Asano & Wachsmuth, 2008). It is through this limited expression of experienced emotions that our primary emotions become distorted, modifying our perception and expression of all emotions to a stagnated outflow of anger, aggression, depression, and pain. The skills of emotion management must be learned and practiced to be effective. When emotions lack an appropriate outlet and are left repressed and unexpressed, our emotions stagnate and steep, producing feelings of anger, aggression, depression, and pain. Issues in emotion regulation and dysregulation form the basis for most psychological symptoms and presenting concerns in counseling. It is imperative that counselors learn effective strategies to assist clients in learning the skills of emotion management and analogies provide helpful concrete steps to aid in this process (Suthakaran, 2011). The reservoir and dam analogy provide counselors with a helpful framework for explaining emotion management skills and the relationship between the symptoms and presenting problems clients experience which connect to the skills and tools necessary for improvement.

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