Teaching Emotional Regulation: Using a Reservoir and Dam Analogy for Skill-Building in Therapy

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Abstract

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 article will connect the analogy of a reservoir and dam to emotion management, providing a framework for counselors in practice.

**Keywords**: Emotion, Emotional Regulation, Analogies, Skills, Counseling
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Emotions form the language and context for personal experience, flavoring the lens through which live our lives. Without emotions, life would be robotic, lived within a flat world of black and white (Borgman, 2009). As many authors have suggested, emotions are an action that require an object for expression, they are always about something (Ekman, 2003; Elliott, 2006; Goleman, 1997; Omaha, 2004). Emotions form the basis of our current actions and the context and lens through which we both store and retrieve memories, intertwining with our identity to provide context and content to our autobiography (Omaha, 2004). Emotions are critical for living and are experienced and expressed in both positive and negative ways, always active but often existing outside our conscious awareness (Ekman, 2003).

As Goleman (1997) described, the word emotion itself means “to move away,” “suggesting that a tendency to act is implicit in every emotion” (p. 6). It is through our experience of emotions that we live life and with the expression or repression of emotion that determines whether life is lived poorly or well (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988). The skills of emotional knowledge, emotional regulation, and emotional expression, known collectively as emotion management, form critical connections between the mind and the body (Hillman, 1960) and as such, provide a focal point for practice in mental health counseling (Grant, Salsman, & Berking, 2018). The skills of emotional knowledge, emotional intelligence, or emotional consciousness form the necessary foundation for relationship through self- and other-awareness (Goleman, 1997). Davidson and Begley (2012) described this foundation as an Emotional Style, highlighting how a person’s emotional style goes beyond personality traits or moods and forms the foundation for life experience as measured across the six dimensions of resilience, outlook,
social intuition, self-awareness, sensitivity to context, and attention. Most mental health
counseling addresses some element of either emotional knowledge, regulation, or expression
with any related skills in these three areas providing critical treatment strategies across all areas
of psychological and physical health (Cloitre et al., 2019; Fernandez, Jazaieri, & Gross, 2016).
Researchers have linked skill deficits in these areas to symptom factors in PTSD, depression,
anxiety disorders, eating disorders, substance abuse, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder,
borderline personality disorder, poor physical health, childhood behavioral problems, anger,
aggression, social competence, cyberbullying, work burnout (Buruck, Dörfel, Kugler, & Brom,
2016; Cloitre et al., 2019; Di Maggio, Zappulla, & Pace, 2016; Enríquez, Ramos, & Esparza,
2017; Goleman, 1997; Grant et al., 2018; Linehan, 2015; Lópe-Pérez, Guumerum, Wilson, &
Dellaria, 2017; Metsala, Galway, Ishaik, & Barton, 2017; Miles, Thompson, Stanley, & Kent,
2016; Prefit & Szentagotai-Tătar, 2018).

With the skills of emotion management playing such critical roles for clients today, a
means for explaining, practicing, and maintaining these skills is essential for effective mental
health counseling. The links to diagnostic categories and deficits in these skills span the ages and
stages of development, demonstrating the need for a flexible framework for explaining the role
and function of these skills that is simple enough for a child to understand and apply and
complex enough to balance the depth and variety of skills needed for adults (Metsala et al.,
2017). Analogies provide concrete contexts for discussing abstract ideas like emotions while also
providing distance between the experience of emotions and the discussion of them so that such
topics can be safely explored, explained, and resolved (Suthakaran, 2011). In my clinical
practice, the analogy of a reservoir and dam has provided a helpful concrete (no pun intended)
context for conceptualizing the topics of emotion management. In this paper, I will describe the
role and significance of learning and skill-building in each of these three areas, explain the
benefit of using analogies in counseling, and then apply the analogy of a reservoir and dam to a
person’s experience of emotion in knowledge, regulation, and expression as a useful tool for
clinical work, concluding with a case example.

**Emotion Management: Emotional Intelligence, Regulation, and Expression**

Goleman (1997) suggested that the basics of emotional intelligence include “learning how
to recognize, manage, and harness… feelings; empathizing, and handling the feelings that
arise in … relationships” (p. 191). These basics, known collectively as emotion management,
form the core emotional and social skills for personal control and interpersonal competency
(Goleman, 1997; Grant et al., 2018; Omaha, 2004). The skills of emotion management usually
occur in childhood when the identification of personal emotions extends to the awareness of
others’ emotions, providing opportunities for the adjustment and control of those emotions in
appropriate ways according to the context (Di Maggio et al., 2016). With the effective learning
and application of these skills, social skills develop, positive interpersonal relationships form,
and competency builds through repeated use. However, research is demonstrating that many
people are not learning these skills in early childhood for a variety of reasons, including trauma,
attachment, learning disabilities, or lack of modeling, perpetuating the impact of the absence of
these skills across the lifespan and building ineffective coping and interpersonal skills with
dyregulation of emotions contributing to mental health symptoms noted above (Cloitre et al.,
2019; Enriquez et al., 2017; Fernandez et al., 2016). This section provides succinct descriptions
and examples from the research within each of the three domains of emotion management,
providing the background and context for building the analogy of a reservoir and dam as
concrete learning elements for effective emotion management.
Emotional Intelligence

As Goleman (1997) explained, 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 et al., 2018). Emotion and cognition are intertwined, but in the initial experiences of emotion, without practiced insight and reflection, much of our emotional experience is prereflective and reactive (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988; Suthakaran, 2011). It is the role of awareness to provide the feedback that enables the recognition of emotions in context and the choice of an emotional response in place of a reaction (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988; Laaser & Laaser, 2013). As Davidson and Begley (2012) suggested, emotional intelligence and self-awareness require the integration of neurological elements through learned practice. Practice provides the repetition of identification of the emotions that exist outside our conscious awareness, triggering a reaction through the amygdala before the activation of conscious control (Ekman, 2003).

Ekman (2003) proposed that emotions are not private because each of the primary seven emotions (sadness, anger, surprise, fear, disgust, contempt, and happiness) have a distinctive expression that signals their presence. Although the experience of these emotions is difficult to mask, the cause of the emotion is private and unknown, sometimes even to the person experiencing the emotion, because emotions exist as triggered responses to stimuli in our private thoughts (Ekman, 2003; Grant et al., 2018). “Emotions are brief, involuntary, full-system, patterned responses to internal and external stimuli” (Linehan, 2015, p. 6). These responses,
interacting and firing in response to real and perceived internal and external cues, establish emotional responses that can vary drastically from person to person. It is this unconscious influence on the experience of emotions that necessitates self-awareness requires for the identification and labeling of an emotion, but also the exploration of its source and trigger if the emotion is to be regulated and expressed appropriately (Di Maggio et al., 2016; Linehan, 2015). As Ekman (2003) encouraged, the key in developing awareness, what he calls attentiveness, is that it provides the means for identifying our emotions to control our emotional behavior before this expression does harm to ourselves or to others. This control is the role of regulation, flowing directly from the attentiveness and awareness of emotional knowledge.

**Emotional Regulation**

Grant et al. (2018) provided a comprehensive definition that mirrors many of the other researchers, stating, “Emotion regulation can been defined as the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions, especially their intensive and temporal features, to accomplish one's goals” (p. 1). Di Maggio et al. (2016) echoed these key elements of management, control, modulation, and modification for the purpose of facilitation and adaptation of coping and engagement within relational contexts. Just as wisdom acts as the application of knowledge to a specific situation, emotion regulation functions as the “[application of] acquired emotion knowledge” (Di Maggio et al., 2016, p. 2627). This subjectivity is not to say that all emotions are wrong or inaccurate and should simply be controlled or ignored, but that our emotions must be honed and trained, cultivating beneficial emotions and changing destructive emotions so that our emotions can “help us to work efficiently, assist our learning, correct faulty logic, and help us build relationship with others” (Elliott, 2006, p. 53).
With the absence or inability to regulate our emotional cues, experiences, perceptions, and responses, dysregulation and invasive emotional experiences occur. Emotions that we cannot control begin to control us, appearing without warning or perceived reason, spiking and dropping without provocation, clouding our perception, distorting our thinking and responses, clogging our emotional reservoirs until the only emotions we experience are negative and reactive. This process can dissociate our response from the reality of our present experience and cloud our insight until past, present, and future become one timeless void of raw emotion (Grant et al., 2018; Linehan, 2015). It is through the absence of regulation that emotions present in many psychological disorders (Fernandez et al., 2016; Goleman, 1997; Metsala et al., 2017; Miles et al., 2016).

Emotion regulation skills form the foundation for many therapeutic interventions, acknowledging both the significant role of dysregulation as a factor in producing turmoil within our relationships as well as the absence of learned skills in emotional regulation and response in our daily functioning (Buruck et al., 2016; McLean & Foa, 2017; Prefit & Szentagotai-Tătar, 2018). Although emotions initially occur as prereflective responses, we have a responsibility to understand and regulate these emotions, which comes through identification of the physiological and motor responses that occur reflexively, recognizing the origin of emotional memories triggered by an event, and owning our resulting cognitive response to the current situation resulting in our interpretive emotional and behavioral reaction (Elliott, 2006; Greenberg & Johnson, 1988). 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). Emotion regulation skills are critical for effective relational functioning, providing the necessary resource and depth for modulating our emotional expression within the triggering dynamics of relationship (Laaser & Laaser, 2013).

**Emotional Expression**

In describing emotional intelligence and the resulting skills of impulse control, Goleman (1997) highlighted how a critical element of control is knowing the difference between feelings and action and using this knowledge to regulate the expression of the emotion following consideration of alternative actions and their consequences. This flow forms the structure of emotional management addressed thus far, beginning with the importance of identification and labeling of emotions through knowledge and then using this knowledge to regulate and change emotions before their expression. An awareness of the ability to control the expression and experience of emotions is a hallmark of emotional knowledge and the foundation for effective skill building and coping within counseling (Di Maggio et al., 2016; Linehan, 2015; López-Pérez, Gummerum, Wilson, & Dellaria, 2017).

In dealing with the expression of emotions, it is important to first distinguish some of the related but different terms used to describe this experience. Omaha (2004) described the progression from affect to feeling to emotion, starting with affect because “affects are the genetically hard-wired, physiological building blocks from which feeling, emotion, and mood are constructed” (p. 4). Affect is the neurophysiological base while emotion is the autobiographical
experience tied to that perception (Omaha, 2004). By identifying and separating these elements, effective emotion regulation can occur in that gap between the physiological arousal of affect and the interpretation, response, and expression of the feeling through emotion.

Emotional regulation flowing from improved insight and emotional identification enables the effective application of concrete skills to emotional expression. Didactic learning of coping and calming skills is ineffective if clients lack awareness to the presence of their emotions and the expression of their emotions occurs without an ability to identify its type, source, or trigger (Linehan, 2015; López-Pérez et al., 2017). One strategy frequently employed in the literature is the use of mindfulness or attentiveness for modulating both the experience and expression of emotion (Ekman, 2003; Enríquez et al., 2017; Linehan, 2015; McLean & Foa, 2017; Omaha, 2004). Mindfulness draws together the components of emotion management by intentionally acknowledging one’s current emotional experience while seeking to identify its source and describe its impact without judgment or reaction (Davidson & Begley, 2012; Linehan, 2015).

For this final step of emotional expression to be effective in drawing together the disparate elements of understanding one’s needs and emotions, understanding the needs and emotions of others, and bridging this difference through effective communication of all these elements, each part of emotional intelligence, regulation, and expression must be working correctly. Mindfulness is a tool that provides concrete practice and strategies for applying these emotional skills both inside and outside of therapy. For many people that lack the necessary insight for labeling their emotions and recognizing their source, mindfulness skills remain too abstract for effective use in counseling. Reaction to affect produces emotions that clouds the
ability to recognize how emotions are flavoring these reactions and creating a negative feedback loop in emotional memory and experience.

Although the seven primary emotions (sadness, anger, surprise, fear, disgust, contempt, and happiness) people experience have distinctive facial expressions that demonstrate the presence of these emotions, insight is required for people to connect the experience of these emotion with its label, source, and resulting expression (Ekman, 2003). Emotions are about something and the act of expression of emotion is implicit in its meaning (Goleman, 1997). However, if the affect we sense becomes misinterpreted through our memory or experience, our ability to connect the expression of the affect with its appropriate expression becomes blocked, limiting or eliminating critical elements of insight, regulation, and modification. 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 symptomology, or aggressive behaviors (Miles et al., 2016; Rossi, Bruno, Chiusalupi, & Ciaramella, 2018; Villanueva, Görriz, Prado-Gascó, & González, 2015).

Without the skills of emotional intelligence and regulation, emotional expression becomes mood-incongruent with the primary emotions hidden from awareness and expression. Tension 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. In a society that seeks quick fixes and escape from discomfort, we are losing these critical social and relational skills with limited means for effective emotional
expression. 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. Moving forward to teach awareness and the skills of insight, regulation, and expression is a critical component in counseling today, but counselors need additional resources to explain the importance and practice of emotion management in concrete terms, providing a framework to teach the requisite skills to clients of all ages and stages.

**Making an Analogy**

Research demonstrates that experiential learning provides the best format for increasing self-awareness in counseling (Suthakaran, 2011) and enhancing all forms of didactic learning and abstract concepts through illustration and analogy (Kolb, 2014; Metsala et al., 2017). Suthakaran (2011) discovered that general behavior change is limited or absent if the only emphasis in counseling is on cognitive development or knowledge acquisition. Analogies and roleplay provide the means for new and existing knowledge to transfer to application within a new context (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010; Carey, 2014; Kolb, 2014; Suthakaran, 2011). Analogies provide a connection to the existing operational knowledge clients have and use this connection to make new material more understandable, “creat[ing] more robust knowledge representations in [clients’] minds” (Ambrose et al., 2010, p. 33).

Because emotions also include complex triggers that produce discomfort and avoidance for many clients, a concrete analogy provides counselors with distance from the clients’ personal experience while still promoting insight and skill building at this safe distance. Using analogies to discuss emotions also increases the clients’ perspectives on their emotions by allowing a bird’s eye view of their experience. Using an analogy like a reservoir and dam to describe emotion management and the three components of emotional intelligence, regulation, and expression
provides a wonderful framework for enhancing basic self-awareness and skills training as a foundation for a future return to the more abstract elements of emotion management. For the analogy of a reservoir and dam to be effective, therapists must first understand how a reservoir and dam function and then make the connection through the analogy to emotion management.

**A Reservoir and Dam**

A reservoir is a body of water formed or modified by humans to improve the control and reliability of the water resource (Alberta Water Portal Society, 2018). People construct dams across rivers to form reservoirs to restrict the rivers’ flow and control the amount of water that flows from the river, pooling behind the dam to form a reservoir (National Geographic Society, 2011). People have been building reservoirs and dams for thousands of years for a variety of purposes, including: power generation; stabilization of water flow and irrigation; flood prevention; land reclamation; the creation of water supply for urban or industrial areas; the creation of recreational areas for activities like fishing, boating, swimming, sports, bird watching; the creation or maintenance of habitats for fish and wildlife; improvement of navigation; water diversion; or containing and storing waste from mines (Alberta Water Portal Society, 2018; National Geographic Society, 2011). Water flows into the reservoir from the river, building in the reservoir to provide all these benefits. The dam regulates the flow of water from the reservoir, often directing the water through pipes in the dam wall called the penstock with gates to further regulate the water flow before sending the water through a turbine in the power house to generate electricity (Bonsor, 2019).

Without a consistent flow of water from the river upstream through the dam wall and back downstream, sediment from upriver sinks to the bottom of the reservoir, reducing the water capacity of the reservoir over time (National Geographic Society, 2011). If the water does not
consistently flow through the reservoir, the water may also become stagnant, causing the environment of the reservoir to become polluted and reduce its value for recreation, drinking, wildlife, and more. If the gates or penstocks in the dam wall are insufficient, blocked, or closed, the water will build up behind the dam wall, breaching the wall and causing damage downstream. Finally, if the water does not flow through the penstocks, the dam cannot turn the turbines in the power house to produce electricity. If no water flows over or through the dam, the people downstream experience a drought. If too much water flows through or over the dam and gets out of control, those downstream experience flooding. Effective regulation and control of the water at each stage of the process, from entry to the reservoir, to containment in the reservoir, to flow through the dam, and downstream must be regulated and controlled for the water to provide the expected benefits and to limit its damage.

**Our Emotional Reservoir and Dam**

As noted above, emotion management includes the three components of emotional intelligence, emotional regulation, and emotional expression and each of these components relates to an aspect of the reservoir and dam through an analogy (see Table 1). Just as the reservoir provides a means for containing water that is clean and enjoyable for many purposes, the skills of emotional intelligence allow people to understand their emotions as they experience them, correctly identifying their type and source as they occur, and retain them appropriately until their expression is needed or useful. Emotional intelligence involves the insight and accuracy of identifying and labeling the emotions experienced while also containing all these emotions without one emotion engulfing and distorting all the other emotions. When emotional intelligence is not working properly, the source of emotion is not understand and the interpretation of the emotion infects the whole self, distorting the experiential memory of
emotions and flavoring every emotion through the lens of this one. In the analogy, this is exemplified in water flowing into the reservoir and spreading bacteria or toxins throughout the body of water, infecting all the clean water with this bacteria. For the water to be useful again, the source of the bacteria must be identified, stopped, or combatted. By correctly understanding our emotions, the experience of the emotions in our containment allow for the effective expression of emotion through regulation.

The dam wall, reservoir sides, dam gates, and penstock pipe all illustrate the skills of emotional regulation (see Figure 1). Emotional regulation involves the monitoring, evaluation, and control of emotional reactions, ensuring that our emotions function correctly and continue to serve their purpose of allowing us to accurately experience the world around us. The analogy illustrates these regulation skills by demonstrating how the dam ensures the purposes of the reservoir and dam are met by regulating the flow of water through the gates and penstock. If the gates are not working properly, the water flow is interrupted, through either restriction or release, negatively impacting the intended purposes of the reservoir and dam. For example, if the water is not regulated correctly and flow is restricted, sediment will build on the base of the reservoir and dam, reducing the reservoir’s capacity and potentially damaging or blocking the gates, penstock, and turbine. Furthermore, restriction can cause water stagnation which produces bacteria and limits the benefit of the water for consumption and recreation. If the water builds behind the dam, the continued inflow of water will breech the dam wall and its flow downstream becomes unregulated.

Applying this analogy to our emotional regulation, emotions that are not understood cannot be effectively controlled or modified, preventing their transition from the reservoir to downstream. When emotions overwhelm us, they distort our thinking and our experience of our
existing emotions, toxifying our emotions and reducing our capacity for experiencing any emotion, good or bad. This reduction of emotion means that when we continue to experience even good emotions, upon entrance to our toxified reservoir positive emotions become interpreted as negative and we lack the ability to direct our emotions appropriately. Without appropriate flow of emotions in and out, through insight, identification, labelling, and expression, our emotions distort and build in the reservoir increasing the pressure behind the dam wall. Without increasing the means for effective regulation and expression of our emotions, the water of our emotion periodically breaches the dam wall, spilling toxified emotions, usually expressed as anger, haphazardly and uncontrolled across our downstream environment. When the water of emotion cannot be controlled, we seek to retain all emotions because any emotion that is released has been distorted and toxified. A common occurrence of this experience is when someone lashes out in anger without provocation and apologizes by noting, “I’m so sorry, I have no idea where that came from.” This occurrence is an example of the toxic emotion breaching the dam wall and spewing anger at the unsuspecting villagers downstream.

Finally, emotional expression occurs as the consequence of intelligence and regulation either through positive and effective expression or through negative and misdirected expression (Di Maggio et al., 2016; Linehan, 2015). As noted earlier, mindfulness provides the tools for regulating our emotions and supports the flow of emotions from inlet to outlet. Just as the reservoir and dam function together to provide useful purposes, emotions flowing through this process provide power when expressed appropriately and responsibly. Each emotion we experience has a related expression to provide the effective release of that emotion in a constructive manner (Ekman, 2003). To use the analogy of the dam, each emotion we experience requires a unique penstock pipe to allow its outlet, providing power through the appropriate
expression of that emotion. Many people lack the insight to identify the emotions they are experiencing and the language and skills for effective expression of those emotions, causing the emotions to build behind the reservoir wall without opportunity for a controlled response. The goal of therapy is to support clients in improving their emotional skills by increasing their emotional intelligence through insight and identification; supporting their regulation through mindfulness and recognition of distortions; and increasing their emotional expression through roleplay in communication, improved language of emotion, and the practice of coping and calming strategies (Buruck et al., 2016; Miles et al., 2016; Omaha, 2004).

The dam provides a concrete analogy of this process by illustrating the need for gates and penstocks shaped to fit each emotion, or at least the seven primary emotions of sadness, anger, surprise, fear, disgust, contempt, and happiness. By drawing a quick diagram of a reservoir, dam, and river, the counselor is able to attach specific skills for intelligence, regulation, and expression to each section, providing measurable treatment goals as clients work in therapy to improve their emotional skills across these three components. Using the analogy of a reservoir and dam provides a concrete framework for counselors to assist clients in drawing from their knowledge and experience to learn the language and skills of emotional management.

**Applying the Analogy**

The following is a fictional example of how a therapist could use this analogy in a session to support the development of emotion management skills. Tim is a 20-year-old White male college student struggling in his relationship with his girlfriend.

**Tim:** I get so frustrated trying to explain to Cindy how I feel and what is going on. I know that I care for her, but she’s right when she says that I often don’t act like I do by how I treat her.

**Counselor:** Could you give me an example, Tim, of a time that something like this happened?
Tim: Sure. Last weekend we were on the way to dinner and a movie when this jerk pulled right in front of me in the parking lot and took the spot I was about to enter. I started yelling at the guy and was about to get out of the car to tell him off when Cindy got upset. She said she can’t understand why I have to ruin such a nice evening by losing my temper all the time. I started yelling at Cindy too. I don’t know where that came from. I struggle to be able to tell her the good things that I feel but the bad things seem to spew all over her when I am stressed or upset. What can I do?

Counselor: Tim, it sounds like you are experiencing a lot of different emotions, but that the emotions you find easiest to express are the negative ones, like anger and frustration?

Tim: Yeah, but why is that? I know I feel more, but I don’t really know what or how to express it and this anger just comes out of nowhere.

Counselor: Maybe an analogy would help to explain what you may be experiencing, Tim. Are you familiar with the functions of a reservoir and dam? Reservoirs provide fresh drinking water, recreation like swimming and fishing, control floods and droughts, and uses turbines to generate electricity as the water flows through the dam. When the reservoir and dam are functioning correctly, together they provide useful resources and protections, but when they aren’t working correctly, problems occur, causing sediment to collect in the reservoir, reducing the capacity of the water, clogging the turbines for power, and creating bacteria in the stagnant water. If the water builds behind the dam wall, continued inflow can cause the water to break over the wall and damage homes and innocent bystanders nearby. Does that process make sense to you?

Tim: Yeah, I guess so, but what does that have to do with me and Cindy?

Counselor: Well, Tim, your ability to manage your emotions works a lot like the reservoir and dam. You experience emotions continually from a variety of sources, like water flowing into the
reservoir from upstream. Our emotions build inside of us like water in the reservoir, providing benefits as we can identify and label our emotions and understand their source in an appropriate way. As we experience emotions, we seek to regulate them so that we can express them appropriately, using the right words and behaviors in the right contexts. However, like the analogy, if we lack insight into what emotions we are experiencing, our emotions build faster than we can appropriately express them. If we lack awareness of our emotions and the skills to regulate and control them, the expression of our emotions will be limited. As our flow of emotions in and out becomes imbalanced, our capacity to experience emotions is limited and all our emotions become distorted and foul, muddied in our interpretation as our insight and awareness is distorted. Without the means to appropriately express the variety of emotions we experience, we lose the power in expressing our emotions and these emotions, now fouled through stagnation, break loose over the dam wall and spew onto innocent bystanders, like Cindy. If the outlets for your emotions are insufficient to express all the emotions you experience, they will build behind the wall and flow free without your control, as you experienced. Does that make sense?

**Tim:** I think so, but what can I do to increase my outflow and reduce my spillage?

**Counselor:** There are three main areas for growth and improvement. First, you need to improve your insight around what causes the emotions you experience and how you understand and interpret these emotions. This is the reservoir. You can improve your emotional intelligence by increasing your emotional language and improving your awareness through identifying and labeling the emotions you experience. Second is emotional regulation which is the control and modification of the emotions you experience exemplified by the dam walls and outlet pipes leading through the power turbines and to the river. By increasing your conscious control over
your experience of emotions, you gain power as to how these emotions are expressed. You can work on this regulation through the skills of mindfulness. Third is your expression of emotion which is represented by the variety of gates and outlet pipes to the river. Each emotion you experience, such as happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, fear, needs its own outlet for effective expression. You can work on this by learning new skills for coping with and expressing emotions. Once you improve your identification of your emotions in the first step, matching these emotions to their expression in the third step becomes easier. Without enough matched outlets to express the emotions you experience, your emotions build and become toxic. Learning to identify and label your emotions in step one and regulate and modify your emotions in step two, you improve your ability to direct and express our emotions correctly in step three.

**Conclusion**

Learning to interpret and express emotions appropriately is critically important for effective relationship. 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. 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.
References


Table 1
Comparing the Components of Emotion Management with a Reservoir and Dam

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Emotional Intelligence</th>
<th>Reservoir</th>
<th>Dam</th>
<th>Dam and Downstream</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identification and labeling of emotion</td>
<td>Identify water presence for capacity and purpose</td>
<td>Gates control inlet of water to penstock and outflow</td>
<td>Gates and penstock regulate water flow to maintain reservoir levels match desired purpose and protect against drought, flooding, and stagnation of water in reservoir</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identification and understanding of source &amp; cause</td>
<td>Identify upstream sources to permit flow</td>
<td>Gates regulate flow to support intended purposes of both reservoir and dam</td>
<td>Gates ensure appropriate water level through penstock and turbine for power and flow</td>
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<td>Insight and containment of emotions</td>
<td>Maintain water purity and clarity</td>
<td>Control gates regulate water flow from penstock to turbine and outflow</td>
<td>Gates and penstock regulate water flow to maintain reservoir levels match desired purpose and protect against drought, flooding, and stagnation of water in reservoir</td>
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<td>Monitoring and modifying emotions for coping</td>
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<td>Control emotions for effective awareness &amp; interpretation</td>
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<td>Maintain power and purpose with appropriate expression</td>
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<td>Emotional Expression</td>
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<td>Rate of expression matches rate of experience to ensure accuracy of content and context</td>
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<td>Expressed emotion matches experienced emotion following insight and modification</td>
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<td>Expressed emotion modulates based on consideration of consequences and context</td>
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Figures.

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