

# Emotional patterning: A comic essay

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## Creative art therapist statement

I wrote this comic in response to my studies at MIECAT on 'emotional patterning'. Using personal and collaborative creative inquiries I unpacked moments of becoming hyper/hypo aroused (Seigal, 1999) and strategies of coping. Understanding the function of the amygdala and frontal cortex (Rothschild, 2004) helped me to further understand my emotional experience and what I might need when I am struggling.

While studying emotional patterning, the town I was living in flooded (Lismore, Widjabul Wia-ble Country). The climate-change-driven disaster was shocking and I needed to understand my signs of hyper/hypo arousal in order to be present with the situation at hand. During the crisis I noticed my dysregulated state, and while I couldn't always change it, noticing it helped me to make decisions and have more perspective (Rothschild, 2004). Understanding my own sensory profile helped me to address health as a social phenomenon (Unger, 2005) in a form that respected my own needs.

"In the framework of emergence, the whole is a mirror of the parts" (Brown, 2017, p. 13), and the process of writing the comic became a mirror to the comic's messages. After weeks of urgency and the physical effort of post-flood cleaning, focusing on the content of an essay seemed like an impossible task and drawing felt self-indulgent. The process of making this comic helped me to sit down, focus and soothe my senses. The visual narrative was also re-affirming. As I told the story of my learning how to self-regulate, I got to see myself learn and re-experience my own capacity. It was affirming.

As I write this, Victoria (where I currently live, in Wurundjeri Country) is flooding and has triggered the same patterns of hyper-arousal. It seems that sharing this comic publicly with JoCAT re-affirms my capacity to stay within my "Window of Tolerance" (Seigal, 1999). I hope that people can learn accessible tools for emotional regulation and it can help them as if it has me.



I dolled up  
for the  
bio pic

this is a comic essay  
about how I've  
come to understand  
my own patterns  
of  
emotional  
experience.

Growing up, no one  
taught me what  
emotions are, or how  
to regulate them

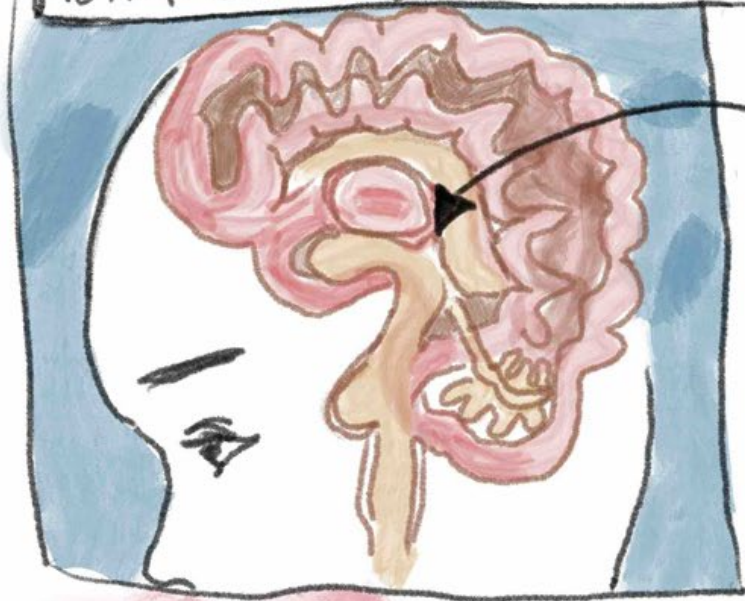
All information processing is emotional.



Due to my culture and upbringing, I'll interpret, celebrate, or stigmatize, emotions differently to you.

Due to my sensory profile, I'll experience environmental factors differently to you.

Charles Darwin thought that emotions evolved as a survival mechanism, as well as to help us manage life issues (1872).



The amygdala processes an experience as an emotion before the cortex can rationalize it



The survival response can become disregulated as with PTSD or a panic attack, whereby the amigdala continues to perceive and interpret a threat.



come on  
amigdala,  
CALM DOWN  
for me please!

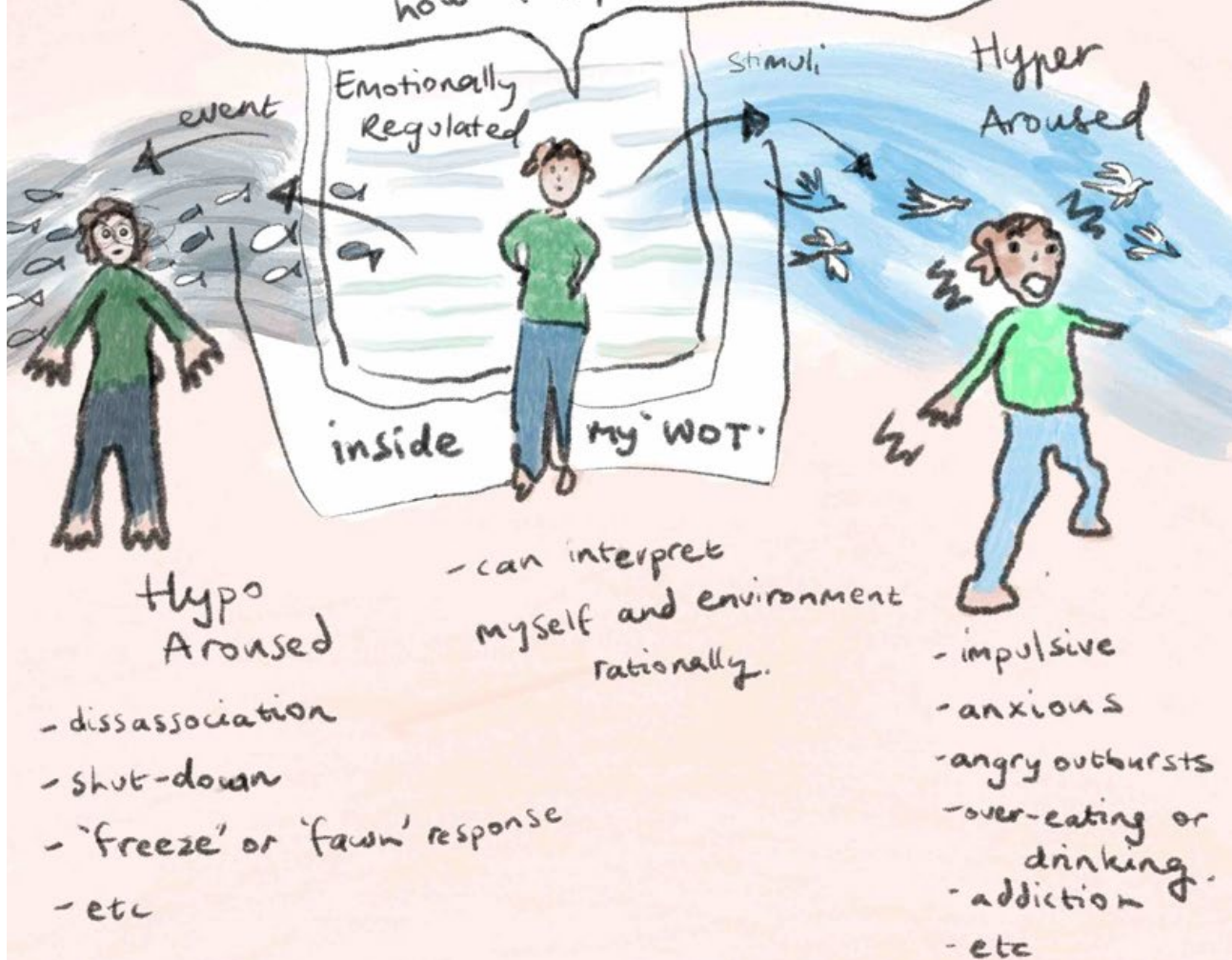


“The amigdala is immune to the stress response and may even continue to sound an alarm inappropriately” (Rothschild 2004)

My amigdala doesn't respond to reason, it requires sensory input, like exercise or touch.

The 'Window of Tolerance' (WOT) (Seigal, 1999) is a useful framework. It's helped me to notice which habits indicate emotional dysregulation.

being 'emotionally regulated' means that I can process emotions and arousals, and be in the drivers seat of how I respond



When something causes me to leave my 'WOT', like a thought or a sound, I can experience hyper (too much) arousal or hypo (too little) arousal, or both. Noticing when I leave my 'WOT' is the first step of learning what triggers me and how I can regulate myself.

I can also be on the 'edge' of my 'WOT'. Feeling triggered yet safe and supported. From here I can straddle the experience of hyper/hypo arousal and rationality.



using slightly uncomfortable creative processes - like poetry, dancing, or painting, can help me stay on the 'edge' of my window, and explore my emotional patterns from a safe place. Doing so has expanded my capacity for emotional regulation.

Once, I tried using body percussion and spoken word to explore a moment of panic I'd had at a restaurant, when I couldn't decide what I wanted from the menu.



Using minor triggers, rather than larger and more stressful ones, is more effective for me in working through general patterns.



Using the creative process, I slowed down the memory of discomfort, and identified details of the room, and details of my bodily experience.



Practicing pausing or slowing down when I'm emotionally aroused is empowering. I have more confidence in myself to handle confronting environments.

Afterwards, I felt wired. Uneasy. Like I'd just time-travelled and re-written a memory.

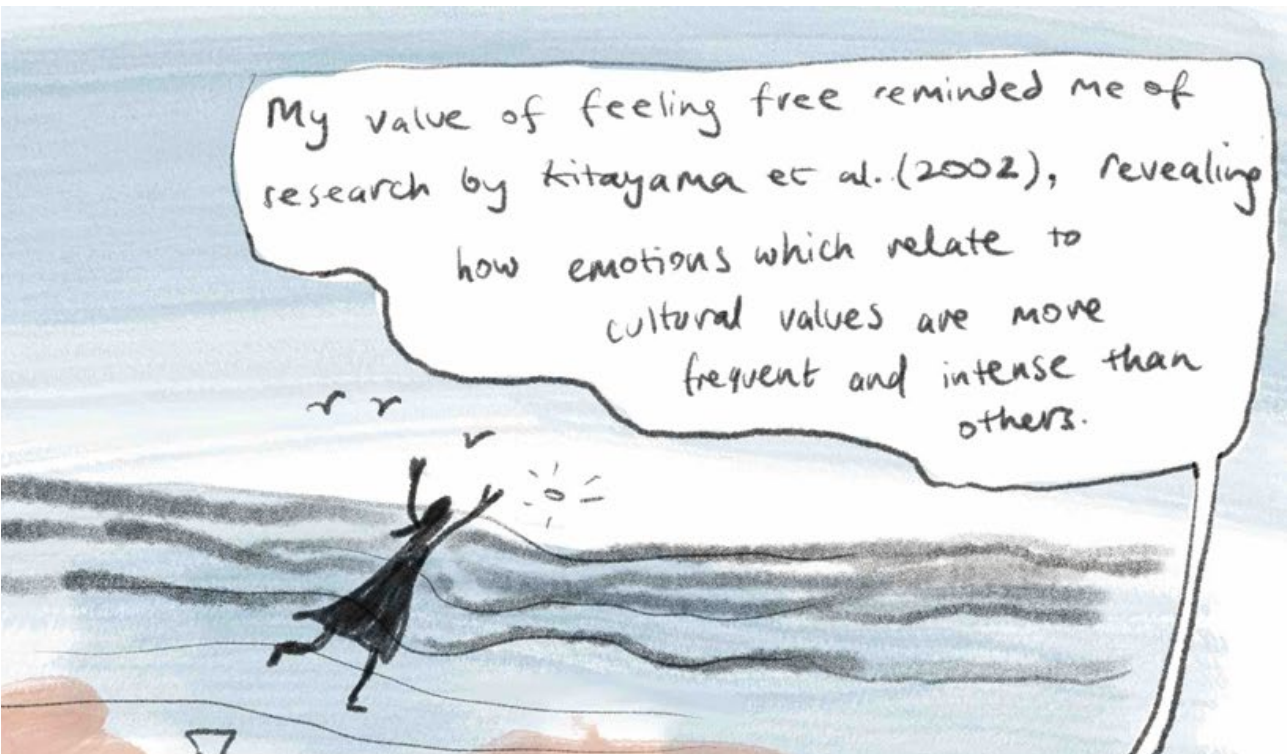
I curled up in a ball under a blanket



and had a clear image come to me

It seemed like the anecdote to my sense of pressure, was to fly in an expansive blue sky.





My value of feeling free reminded me of research by Kitayama et al. (2002), revealing how emotions which relate to cultural values are more frequent and intense than others.

Cultures which promote 'independence' are found to have more intense 'socially disengaging' emotions.

This suggests that emotions can serve to restore cultural harmony, or to help us to feel 'belonging'.

Cultures which aim for interdependence, experience stronger emotions from relatedness



Emotions can reveal how we relate to the world, but they are not definitive of who we are. I can re-consider implicit, cultural values.

My specific, personal needs for self-regulation are not always as simple as breathing or yoga.

deep breaths,  
HOOOOO

Due to the diversity of sensory profiles, everyone is stimulated differently by their environment.



hAGGHH! # @

I've found that forms of self regulating can be just as diverse, unique to each individual and context.

Stevenson (2022), recommends that, to find tools of emotional regulation, working backwards can help. Thinking about what hobbies I like, and bringing them into my daily life, in small ways.



I know that horizons and watching birds flying in the sky relaxes my body.

I can use this, by being outside more, and by looking at the sky if I feel stuck, or uncomfortable.



Teas brewing.

wanna drink them outside?

Understanding my emotional patterns helps me to prepare for situations which could cause me to leave my 'WOT'.

'situation selection' is when I choose to engage in certain activities, over others (Gross, 1998)



I'd prefer not to go to that party, actually, maybe I'll visit my sister.



I love drawing at parties

'situation modification' is when you adapt a space to help you feel more comfortable (Gross, 1998).

Another tool for reflecting on my emotional patterning is using an externalised 'body'.



this is 'my body!'

After a minor incident 'freeze' response,

I represented my bodily experience on 'my body'.

I felt wavery... like I was... disappearing.



Representing how my body felt using textures and colours helped me to articulate how I felt and name a previously unknown emotion.

Once I can name it its easier to regulate.

Using artistic mediums to explore emotions, I notice characteristics which relate to my medium - its texture or pitch - and relate it to my experience.



Discovering my emotions has helped me to discover my values.





Working with materials is emergent. The relationship between us reveals new perspectives and narratives.

I want to expand the blue to fill my whole body.



Paying attention to what I notice enhances my relationships with people and things.

oh, my pastel broke at my throat.

"In the framework of emergence, the whole is a mirror of the parts" (Brown, 2017, pg 13)

My emotional patterns will change over time. In fact, as soon as I start to really understand them they seem to change.



expressing my perspective and needs is important to me. Perhaps the struggle to do so is the reason I make art?

emotions reveal our values and needs,  
"emotion is not merely a feeling, as say, pain is a feeling, it is... a reaching out to the world" (Solomon, 2003, pg. 49).

Noticing when I, or someone else, is in/out of their 'WOT' is useful so we can better support each other.

how activation can show in others:



me, nervously over talking until they have a break-down.



- speed of speech
- breathing
- hunching
- lifting shoulders
- micro gestures
- clenching jaw
- tremor in voice
- avoidant eye contact
- etc

Noticing signs of dysregulation in others is useful because I can become hypo/hyper when around others who are themselves hypo/hyper aroused.



that's my extended networks.

They're important, because emotional resilience isn't a character trait.

wanna come play?  
our well being needs each other!

"The dominant discourse of health as an individual phenomenon renders invisible the social context of people's lives."  
(Unger, 2005, pg 90).

Widjable-wiable Country

For about 2 weeks after Lismore flooded, 2022, I was hyper-aroused. Alert, active and committed to helping.



Going into hyper, whilst remaining clear-headed, saved many lives on the night of the flood.



By the eighth day a voice inside me said 'I'm not coping'. Recognising that voice as exhaustion, I gave myself a rest day.

I know I can be more helpful if I regulate myself.

While self-regulation is unique to each individual, sharing our methods can enhance its effectiveness and create a culture of resilience.



Singing on Keen St,  
Post-floods, led by the  
Fijian boys.

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Sofia is an artist and community-engaged arts coordinator living on unceded Wurundjeri Country. She uses arts-based research, story-telling, sensory ecology and murals to celebrate the local ecology, and explore her role in the environment, as a settler Australian during a time of climate crisis. Her work is informed by her Palestinian and Irish heritage, and the need for land/earth rights via stories which generate hope, belonging and resistance. She has been working as an arts facilitator and eco-literacy educator for people of all ages and sensory profiles for five years.



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