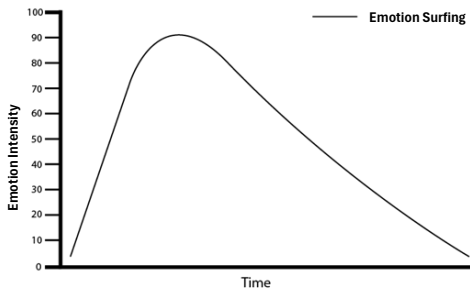


emotion surfing



Negative emotions can feel overwhelming, but it's important to remember that they do not last forever. The experience of emotions can be thought of like a wave - they rise, reach a peak, and then reduce over time. This can take anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours. No matter how long it takes, distressing emotions cannot stay at high levels forever and will naturally decrease.

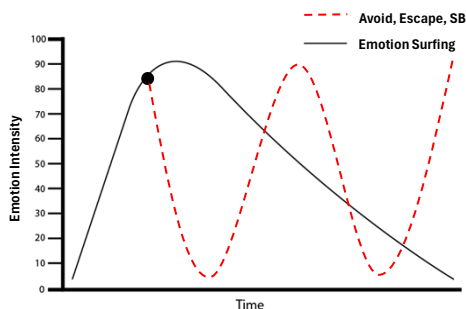
Using the strategy of **emotion surfing** means allowing difficult emotions to ride their wave and trusting that they will pass. In other words; **ride it don't fight it.**



What happens when we fight the wave?

When emotions are distressing, it's natural to want to reduce them. We often try to "fight the wave" of emotion by:

- **Escaping:** Leaving situations that make us uncomfortable.
- **Avoiding:** Skipping activities that cause distress.
- **Safety Behaviours:** Using certain behaviours to reduce our negative emotions (e.g. using phones to distract ourselves from anxiety, or using alcohol or other substances to numb unwanted feelings).



As shown in the graph above, these strategies may provide quick relief, but they also prevent us from learning that negative emotions naturally decrease on their own. If we escape before the emotion wave passes, our brain concludes that our distress would have kept rising or stayed uncomfortably high forever, thus making us more afraid of facing negative emotions in the future.

As a result, when we fight the emotion wave by escaping, avoiding, or using safety behaviours, we actually keep our negative emotions going in the long-term. Over time, they peak higher, take longer to pass, and reduce our confidence, making us more likely to rely on avoidance again.

Steps for emotion surfing

When you notice physical feelings becoming stronger try the following steps:

1. **Acknowledge:** Take a step back and describe what you're experiencing, such as physical sensations in your body (e.g. "I notice I am feeling angry right now, I can feel my heart rate increasing and my breathing getting quicker"). Don't try to distract yourself from these feelings, acknowledge them instead.
2. **Observe:** Rate the intensity of your emotion on a scale of 0-10, note where you feel it in your body, and observe any shifts.
3. **Accept:** Remind yourself not to listen to any unhelpful judgements or catastrophic thoughts about the emotion (e.g. "I shouldn't be feeling this way", "It's never going to stop", "Others can tell I'm anxious and are judging me").
4. **Remain:** Resist the urge to fight the wave with escape, avoidance, or safety behaviours tactics. Try to stay in the situation to give the emotion an opportunity to pass on its own and test whether it is truly unbearable.
5. **Be Patient:** Waves take time to come and go. Being in a rush to get through emotions can suggest fear of them.

Helpful tips

Coping imagery

Some people find it helpful to develop a coping image to support their practice of emotion surfing. To do this, find an image in your mind that represents your difficult emotion. Then, consider how the image would need to change to represent coping with this emotion and feeling better. Examples include:

Emotion Image

Emotion as a giant ocean wave I am drowning in

Emotion is a dark cloud above me

Emotion feels like a big rock weighing down on my chest

Coping Image

Surfing the wave into shore

The cloud passing by to reveal the sun shining down on me

Pushing the rock of my chest, standing up and taking a breath

Practice makes progress

It may be difficult to surf your emotion wave the first time you try - don't let this discourage you! With practice, this skill will become easier. You will gain confidence in your ability to cope with difficult feelings and, over time, negative emotions will feel less intense and won't last as long.

