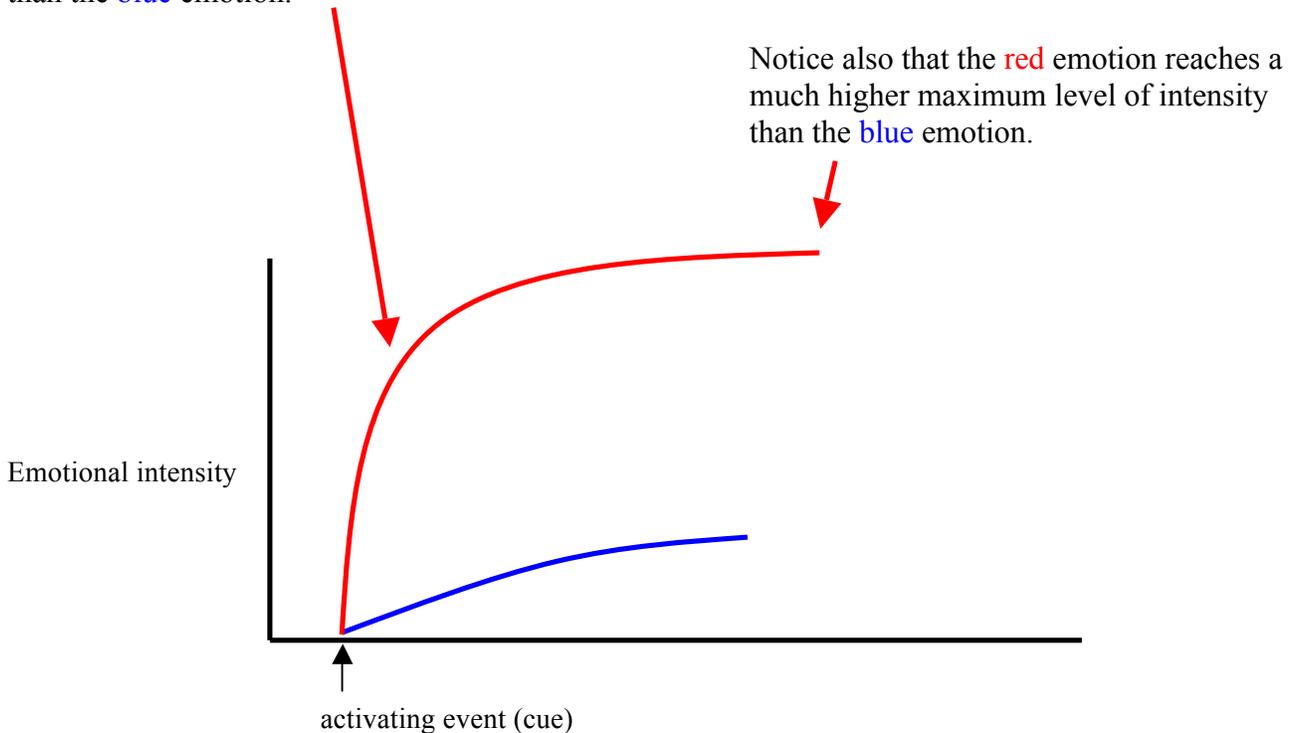
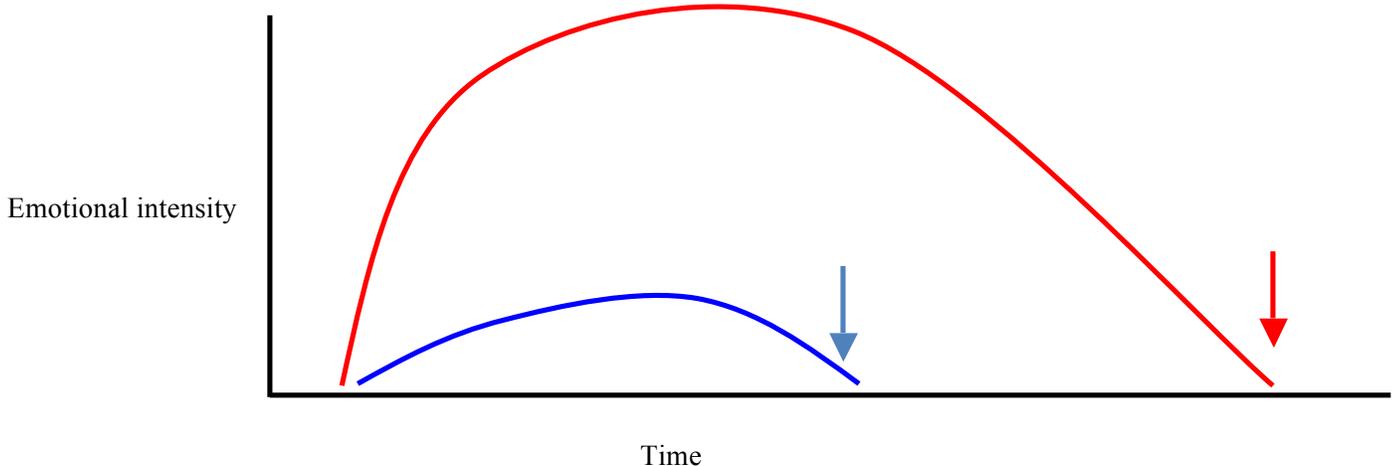


Emotional Vulnerability and Distress Intolerance

Some emotions crescendo more quickly than others. Notice how the **red** emotion rises much more quickly than the **blue** emotion.

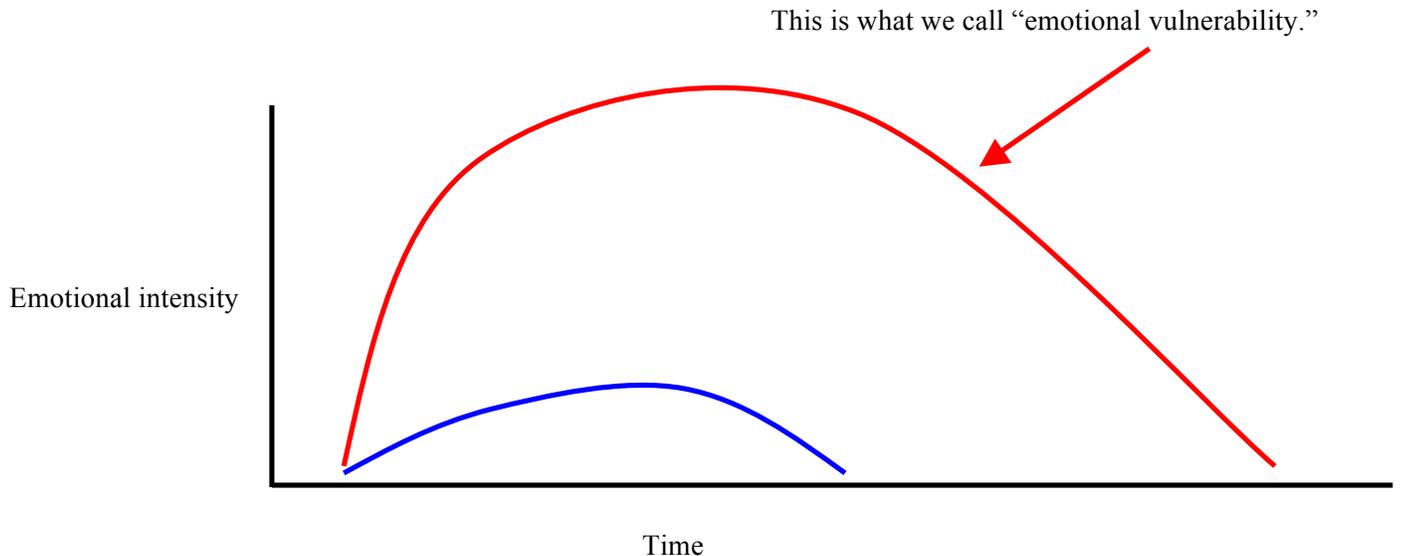


Notice now how the **red** emotion also lasts much longer than the **blue** emotion. It takes much more **time** for the person to recover from the **red** emotion than the **blue** emotion.

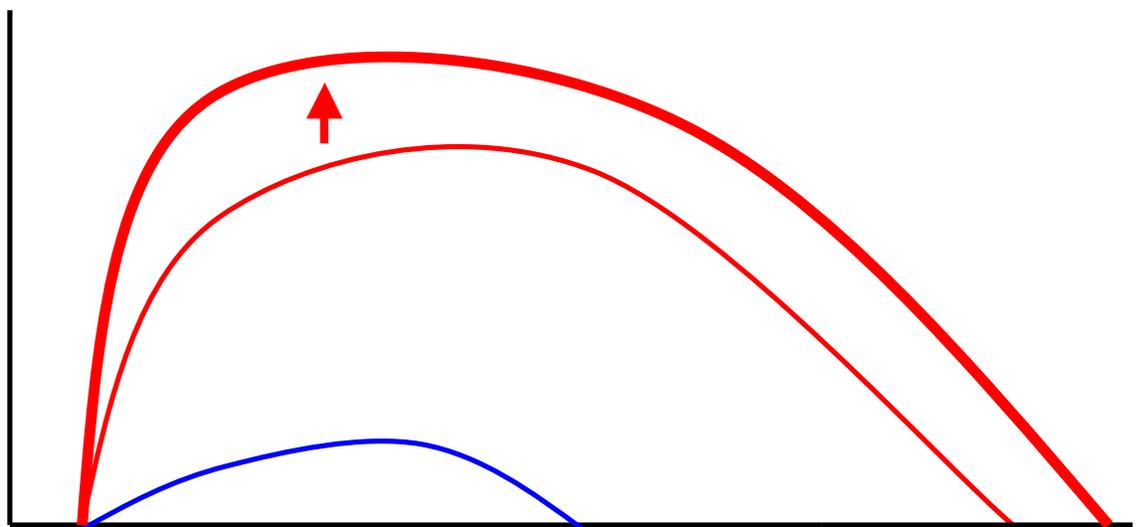


Life looks very different to people whose average emotional response looks like the **red** curve than to people whose average emotion looks like the **blue** curve. We call this overall pattern of having more emotions, “**emotional vulnerability**.” Emotions are much “bigger,” more challenging events for people who are emotionally vulnerable. People with emotional vulnerability need to learn special

emotion coping skills. **Distress intolerance** is a perceived inability to fully experience unpleasant, aversive or uncomfortable emotions, and is accompanied by a desperate need to escape the uncomfortable emotions. Difficulties tolerating distress are often linked to a fear of experiencing negative emotion. Often distress intolerance centers on high intensity emotional experiences, that is, when the emotion is ‘hot’, strong and powerful.



Unfortunately, we sometimes encounter things that *increase* our emotional vulnerability. This can take us *up* from one curve to an even higher curve:



There is no doubt that emotions at this level are extremely painful!
This is **not** an experience anyone would intentionally choose to have!

Some of the things that can increase emotional vulnerability are: emotional avoidance, invalidation (from the environment or from yourself), traumatic or painful events, drug or alcohol use, not getting enough sleep or poor quality of sleep, physical or mental illness, skills being blocked, feeling overwhelmed, or trying to do too many things at once. It is very important for individuals to

understand the things that increase *their* emotional vulnerability factors, so that they can address these factors in treatment.

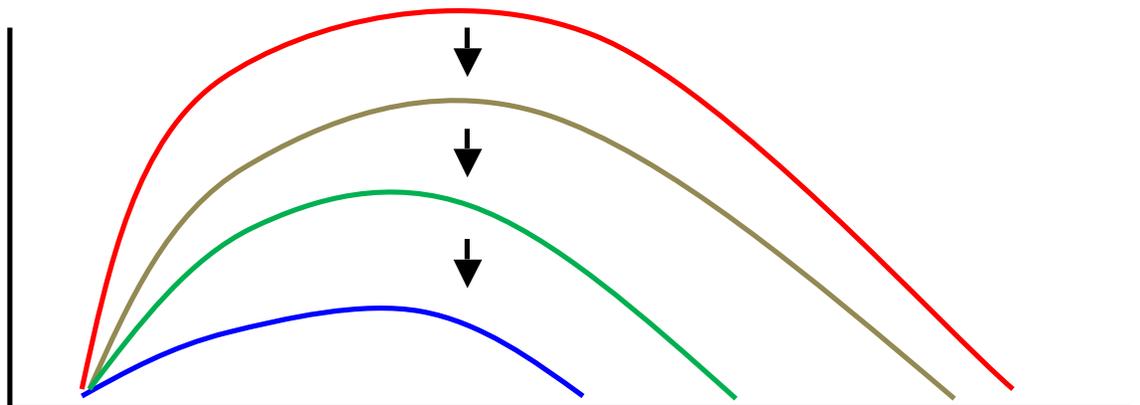
Many of the factors that increase emotional vulnerability tend to do so because they increase *emotional avoidance*. For example, drinking alcohol increases avoidance by numbing the brain. Self-harm behaviors often replace emotional pain with physical pain, and invalidation teaches people to suppress their feelings. Normally, it makes a lot of sense to try to get away from things that feel unpleasant. This strategy seems to work for other things that make us uncomfortable (e.g., heat, cold, pain, hunger, etc). Unfortunately, this strategy backfires when applied to emotions.

Imagine your emotional distress is a puddle of water blocking your path. If you can recognize that emotional distress is not something to be feared, nor something to run away from, then all you have is a puddle of water. If you just wait there it will eventually dry up enough to jump over it, or you could just splash through it and keep on going. However, if instead you fear your distress, struggle with it and try everything to escape from it, all you do is add more and more water to the puddle, and very soon you are faced with a deep pond that it impossible to jump over or splash through. The bigger the pond, the harder to find a way through it, and hence the longer you will feel stuck and unable to move forward.

So you can see that avoidance increases emotional vulnerability and Distress Intolerance. When we avoid an emotion, we teach our brain to be afraid of the emotion, or to believe that the emotion is too strong and powerful to be endured. Then the next time something activates the emotion, not only are we freaked out by whatever caused the emotion, we are also freaked out by the *emotion itself*, and so the whole response is much stronger. That's why emotional avoidance takes you up from lower curves to higher curves, increasing your emotional vulnerability (see previous graph).

Avoidance Distress Escape methods are situational avoidance, reassurance seeking or checking, distraction or suppression. Other ways are to numbing, withdrawing, and harmful releases. (See Module I: Understanding Distress Intolerance)

The good news is that by using your skills to decrease avoidance and *increase acceptance* of emotions, you can bring yourself down from higher curves to lower *and even lower curves*.



Skills like mindfulness, validation, interpersonal effectiveness, radical acceptance and opposite to emotion action can decrease emotional avoidance and decrease emotional vulnerability. The result is an *increase in wise mind*, and an ability to *use emotions effectively*, rather than being used by them!