

Take your EMOTIONAL TEMPERATURE

Keeping your emotions balanced is the key to happiness and harmony, say experts. But how can you keep them from boiling over? Maria Lally finds out

Photograph LEO ACKER

MY TWO-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER'S emotions flit between hair trigger anger, laughter, calm and explosive jealousy throughout the day. So far, so typical of a toddler. But how many of us can honestly say we never have a 'terrible twos' moment of our own? 'It's a myth that adults grow out of emotions,' says Robert Kelsey, author of *What's Stopping You?* (Capstone, £10.99). It's perfectly natural to feel a flash of anger when your boss questions your work, or to be furious in a traffic jam, he says. 'Ever since childhood, we're told off for having these emotions. But the first step to getting them under control is to accept they're normal and stop beating yourself up about them.'

What you need to do is to learn to process them healthily. That's how you ensure you don't end up with an emotional 'hangover' from suppressed or ignored emotions. You know the feeling – you find yourself exploding at the wrong person, depressed, anxious or self-medicating with drink, drugs or food. We've all been there.

The first step is to explore *why* your emotional temperature soared. 'Negative emotions are basically a neural hijacking,' says Kelsey. 'By that, I mean past events

are imprinted on your brain and current events subconsciously take you back there.' So if you grew up with a critical parent, he says, you are likely to take any criticism – even if it's constructive or mild – very badly. Or if your parents were distant or you were bullied in childhood, you may easily default to feeling socially rejected.

'Often you're not aware this neural hijacking is taking place, you just feel bad,' he says.

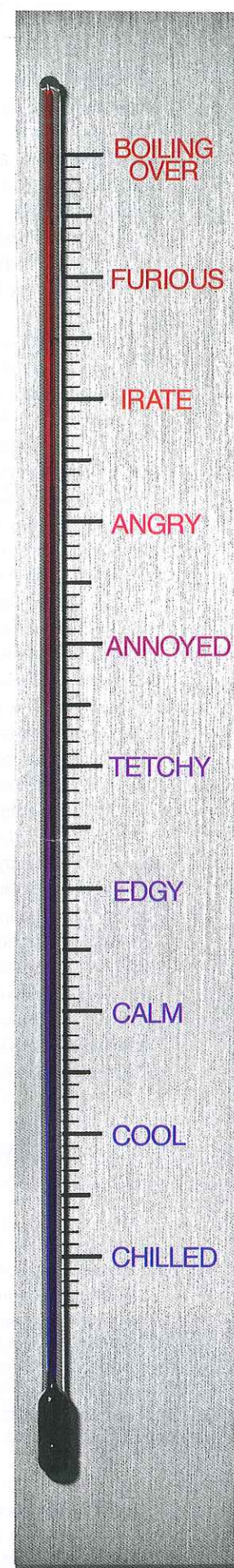
'Growing up, I always thought my parents favoured my older sister,' says Claire Turner*, a 34-year-old nurse, from London.

'She was prettier and smarter than me. When she set up a business last year, they

lent her some money and I felt irrationally angry when I found out. My husband gently suggested I was taking things back to when I was aged 10, and felt in her shadow. He was right. There was no need to feel jealous because now I know my parents love us both the same and that they'd lend me money, too, if I needed it. Recognising my old feelings helped calm the current ones.'

If you can get to grips with *why* you react a certain way, the next step is dealing with the emotion itself. Because while it might be okay to have negative emotions, it's usually >>

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not okay to act on them (you don't want to shout or have a crying fit in the office, for example).

Easier said than done. One effective strategy is writing it down. 'Writing down what's bothering you helps rationalise your thoughts and unravels tangled thinking,' says Kelsey. 'Writing also injects a gap between what happens and how we react to it.' If you can't write – say you're at the pub with friends – go to the loo for some head space.

OTHER FIXES TO TRY IN-THE-MOMENT, are counting to 10 and distracting yourself with happier thoughts. What *not* to do is to swallow bad emotions, or keep on mulling over them. 'They'll only linger, which can lead to increased anger or even anxiety and depression,' says Kelsey.

In fact, a recent study from Ohio State University showed that over-analysing why you're angry can actually make you more angry. 'If you focus too much on how you're feeling, it usually backfires,' says Brad Bushman, professor of communication and psychology at the university that worked on the study. 'It keeps the aggressive thoughts and feelings active in your mind, which makes it more likely that you'll act aggressively.' The researchers found that what works best is 'self distancing', imagining yourself as a fly on the wall, looking down on the situation.

This makes sense to Georgina Hughes, a 37-year-old accountant, from Winchester. 'I used to feel sorry for myself a lot,' she says. 'My parents divorced when I was seven and I lost touch with my dad. He remarried and had two more children, and there was a time in my twenties when I over-analysed the situation to death. I felt terribly rejected. Now I take a more detached view of things. Yes, it hurts and yes, I'm angry, but I can see my dad as a flawed human being and that helps to ease my feelings of rejection.'

If your first instinct is to discuss the issue with a friend, remember there's a fine line between thinking and over-thinking. As Chip Conley, author of *Emotional Equations* (Piatkus, £12.99) advises: 'Have a short bath in self-pity, but don't wallow in it. Studies show a bad emotion lasts for just 90 seconds in the body. Don't keep it there any longer by going over it too much in your head.' That means not endlessly rehashing the ins and outs. A study from the University of Missouri in the States backed this up. They found that while discussing a problem diffuses feelings of anger or sadness, rehashing it excessively makes you more likely to develop feelings of anxiety and depression. Child behaviour guru Noël Janis-Norton, author of *Calmer, Happier, Easier Parenting* (Hodder, £14.99) teaches the person listening to someone who's upset, to use a technique called 'reflective listening', where the listener simply acknowledges the emotion ('You must be feeling really frustrated and angry by not getting a pay rise'). Just that can be powerful enough to help you move on.

Lastly, don't be afraid to tackle somebody head on. If a person consistently makes you angry or upset, it's a sign that action is needed, according to Kelsey. 'Adults, unlike children, are often too polite to confront people for fear of causing a row,' he says. 'But sitting on your emotions is just asking for trouble. Don't be afraid to take a person head on, but in a calm and non-confrontational way.'

'My mother-in-law often made negative comments about my house or children,' says Rosie Baker*, a 38-year-old charity events organiser, from Kent. 'They made me seethe with anger, but I didn't want the fallout from a family row. One day, I just calmly told her that her comments were hurtful, then changed the subject. She was so shocked, she hasn't done it since. And I've felt a lot calmer for it, too.' ■

5 WAYS TO DEAL WITH STRONG EMOTIONS

1 CONSIDER POSSIBLE TRIGGERS. Is it a past event or pattern that's making you feel bad about a current situation? It might take professional help to find out. Chip Conley, author of *Emotional Equations* (Piatkus, £12.99), says: 'We're at the whim of our emotional triggers unless we know what they are.'

2 REMEMBER THERE'S A SPACE between what's provoking you and your reaction, when you have the choice about how to react.

3 WRITE YOUR WORRIES DOWN ON PAPER: It has to include *why* you might be feeling bad. 'Writing down why you're feeling a certain way helps you to process these thoughts,' says Conley, 'which helps you move on. It can make them appear less troublesome, too.'

4 BUT DON'T EMAIL! 'Don't send an angry or self-pitying email,' says Conley. 'Emotions don't come across well on email – or text for that matter – so you

may make the situation worse. Call or write a letter, instead.'

5 DON'T ALWAYS TRY TO TALK YOURSELF OUT OF NEGATIVE EMOTIONS, says Robert Kelsey, author of *What's Stopping You* (Capstone, £10.99). 'Repeated frustration or anger are sometimes "action signals". You could be frustrated because you know you should be in a better place or you're capable of more. Anger is a more extreme version of the same – an attempt to regain control of a situation you think you're losing. If necessary, take action.'