

The Problem Is Not Our Emotions

It is how we relate to them

Many people spend a surprising amount of energy trying not to feel what they feel. We try not to be anxious, sad, angry, jealous, disappointed or vulnerable. We distract ourselves, analyze what is happening, push certain experiences aside or simply continue with whatever needs to be done.

There is nothing strange about that. Some feelings are difficult to bear, and at certain moments in life creating distance from them may even help us continue functioning. The difficulty arises when avoiding what we feel gradually becomes our usual way of dealing with ourselves.

What we push out of awareness does not necessarily disappear. We may continue to function remarkably well while something in us remains tense, alert or unsettled. And sometimes the harder we try not to feel something, the more energy it takes to keep it at a distance.

Over the years, this has led me to look at emotions differently. Not as disturbances that interfere with an otherwise well-functioning human being, but as part of the way our organism responds to life.

Emotion comes before understanding

Before we consciously understand what is happening, our body may already have responded. Our breathing changes. Muscles tighten. Our heart beats faster. We feel warmth, tension, a knot in the stomach or a lump in the throat. Something has happened within us before we have found words for it.

For me, this is where it becomes useful to distinguish between *emotion* and *feeling*.

I use *emotion* to describe the immediate, largely unconscious response of the organism to what we encounter. *Feeling* emerges when we become aware of that bodily movement and it begins to acquire meaning. A tightening in the body may become recognizable as fear. A lump in the throat may become sadness. Warmth may be experienced as affection, tenderness or joy.

This distinction is not meant as a rigid scientific classification. It is a way of understanding something I have encountered repeatedly in my work: our response to life often begins before conscious thought catches up with it.

We do not first decide what to feel. Something affects us, our organism responds, and only then can we begin to understand what that response means to us.

Emotions are not mistakes

This is one reason I have become increasingly reluctant to divide emotions into positive and negative ones. Some are certainly more pleasant to experience than others. Joy is usually easier to welcome than fear, and love easier to embrace than grief. But unpleasant does not automatically mean unhealthy or unnecessary.

Many emotional responses have developed over the course of evolution because they can help living beings respond to what happens around them. Fear can help us recognize threat and prepare for protection. Anger can mobilize energy when we experience that a boundary has been crossed. Sadness allows us to experience loss and may create space for adaptation and healing. Joy draws us toward what feels nourishing and often strengthens connection.

That does not mean every emotional response is always appropriate to the present situation. A person may feel intense fear when there is no immediate danger, or anger may arise in response to something that

another person never intended. Our emotional responses are shaped not only by what is happening now, but also by our history, expectations and previous experiences.

Emotions therefore do not tell us objectively what the world is like. They tell us something about *our relationship with what we are encountering*.

That makes them worth listening to.

Feeling is not the same as acting

Taking emotions seriously does not mean obeying them.

If I feel angry, that does not give me permission to hurt another person. If I feel afraid, it does not automatically mean I should avoid what frightens me. If I feel jealous, the feeling itself does not tell me what my partner has done or what I should do next.

This distinction is essential. We do not choose the first emotional movement that arises in us, but we do have responsibility for how we relate to it and what we subsequently do.

That is where feeling and thinking can begin to work together. Feeling makes something visible about our experience. Thinking allows us to reflect on it, place it in context and consider how we want to respond. Neither has to defeat the other.

For me, emotional maturity therefore does not mean becoming less emotional. It means becoming increasingly able to experience what we feel without automatically turning every feeling into an action or treating it as an objective truth.

When the struggle becomes part of the problem

Sometimes the original feeling is difficult enough. But then a second struggle begins.

We become afraid of our fear. We judge ourselves for being angry. We become frustrated that we are still sad. We tell ourselves that we should have moved on, should be stronger or should finally have learned how to control ourselves.

The original feeling then becomes surrounded by another layer of resistance.

I often use the image of a ball held under water. You can keep it below the surface, but doing so requires continuous effort. The moment that effort decreases, the ball rises again. Feelings can sometimes work in a similar way. What we do not want to experience may disappear from our immediate awareness, but that does not necessarily mean it has ceased to affect us.

This does not mean we should force ourselves to feel everything immediately. There are experiences that may need time, safety and support before we can approach them. But there is an important difference between not yet being able to feel something and believing that the feeling itself should not exist.

The first asks for care.

The second can become a lifelong battle with ourselves.

Curiosity instead of control

Perhaps that is why I have become less interested in the question of how people can control their emotions and more interested in how they can learn to understand what they feel.

What happens if we become curious about fear rather than immediately trying to remove it? What might anger be showing us about a boundary, an expectation or something that matters deeply to us? What does sadness reveal about what we have lost? What becomes visible when joy appears and we allow ourselves to notice what brings us alive?

Curiosity changes the relationship.

Instead of asking, *How do I get rid of this?*, we can begin to ask, *What is happening in me, and why might this matter?*

That does not guarantee an immediate answer. Feelings do not come with explanations attached, and interpretation requires humility. Sometimes we misunderstand ourselves. Sometimes what we feel belongs partly to the present and partly to experiences from long ago.

But curiosity allows us to stay in conversation with ourselves rather than immediately turning against what we experience.

Feeling more does not always mean feeling better

People sometimes come to therapy saying that they want to reconnect with their feelings. Understandably, they often hope that doing so will make them feel better.

Sometimes it does. But not always at first.

In my experience, people rarely lose contact with their feelings because those feelings were so pleasant to experience. More often, distance developed because something was painful, overwhelming or difficult to carry. Not feeling too much may once have been a way of protecting ourselves.

When contact with feeling begins to return, we may therefore first encounter precisely what we once needed to move away from. Sadness may become more noticeable. Fear may feel closer. Anger that has been suppressed for years may finally become recognizable.

That does not necessarily mean something is going wrong. Sometimes it means we are becoming more available to an experience that was already there.

The aim is therefore not simply to feel better as quickly as possible.

It is to become increasingly able to *feel well*.

The Art of Feeling

For me, feeling well means being able to remain in contact with what happens within us without immediately having to suppress it, explain it away or act upon it.

Our emotions are not infallible guides, and they do not dictate how we should live. But neither are they enemies that need to be defeated. They are part of our encounter with life. They tell us that something has affected us, that something matters, that something in the relationship between ourselves and the world has moved.

When we can become curious about that movement, feeling, thinking and acting no longer have to compete with one another. They can begin to inform each other.

Perhaps the problem, then, is not that we have emotions.

The problem begins when we lose the ability to meet them.

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