

# Understanding Emotions

Having emotions is one of the things that makes us human, although the extent to which people admit to being emotional and experiencing feelings (a term often used when talking about emotions) varies greatly. Despite the differences in how we engage with emotions, we can gain a lot from exploring them, and learn about the part they play in our personal and social lives. This is particularly important if we are trying to create change and build closer connections with others to strengthen our communities. Understanding feelings is also an important step in our quest for solving problems in relationships.

## What are Emotions?

Perhaps you would describe, as some do, that at times your mental state is imbued with certain feelings, while at other times your mental state is not. These feeling states are what we can call emotions and some notable examples are: joy, delight, excitement, fear, jealousy, sadness, confusion, embarrassment, and anger. Some of them might be difficult to process, others might overwhelm us; some of them we consider to be good, others less so. But however we respond to or judge our feelings, they are important - they occur for a reason, and we should sit with them to understand ourselves better.

Perhaps the most well-known categorisation of human emotions was that spearheaded by the psychologist Paul Eckman. In the 1970s, Eckman identified six basic emotions – happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, surprise – that he suggested were universal to all humans across the world and across cultures (though he later updated his list to include additional emotions). The purpose of his categorisation was a bid to understand such feelings, the impact they have on those experiencing them and how they manifest. Someone experiencing fear, for example, could have physiological reactions such as an increase in heart rate, facial expressions such as the widening of the eyes, body language that is indicative of a desire to hide or run, and a tense and alert mental state.

Importantly, emotions do not exist in a vacuum. They respond to and alert us to changing situations that may be instigated by internal or external stimuli. We should, therefore, be in touch with our emotions so that we can process them, identify any triggers and make any changes that we think appropriate.

In thinking about yourself and your feelings, consider the following questions:

- How many words associated with emotions do you use (regularly) in relation to yourself and others?
- How many different kinds of emotions do you identify in yourself?

- How were emotions handled in your family of origin?
- Has this impacted how you deal with emotions today?

## Differences in Emotional Expression

- Do you have any difficulty expressing some emotions, but not others?
1. What are these emotions?
  2. Why might this be the case?
- How do you show your feelings?
  - What do you do to avoid showing your feelings?
  - How much choice do people have around experiencing feelings?

Something you may well have noticed recently, or even before the onset of the Covid-19 crisis, is the different emotional responses that people have. Why do some people panic at other things people calmly take in their stride? Why are some things stressful to some and to others not? Is this just a question of personality differences in relation to emotions? And what exactly do we mean by personality?

When it comes to emotional expression, there is no right or wrong. We are all different and we all process our emotions differently. Understanding this is important as it can help us better empathise with others and ourselves. Understanding our emotions can also help us better understand our needs and those of others.

## Childhood and Emotional Expression

It is also important to understand that people have been shaped by their experiences in life, and that these experiences, particularly if they occur in childhood, can impact their emotional responses.

To understand the connection between childhood and emotional expression, we should step back to the 1940s and to the work of Abraham Maslow, **who proposed that humans have a hierarchy of needs**. All needs below self-actualisation, Maslow considered as basic needs, which if not met would hinder the process of self-actualisation – becoming the full human being a person could be. Maslow also called these basic needs neurotic or deficient needs, arguing that adult sensitivities and/or neurotic behaviour arose from basic unmet needs in childhood. Neurosis he considered was a fixation on trying to meet that old unmet need, a repeated trying that could never satiate the feeling of need and which was driven by underlying fear. In other words, needs not met produced fear responses that could linger and affect motivation, behaviour and thinking.

Maslow's model has been revisited and reassessed, and while the levels have been tweaked and the notion of hierarchy challenged, there is something that has persisted in the notion of

unsatisfied needs being the basis of hurt feelings. These hurt feelings are associated with the unmet need and persist despite the fact the need may now be fulfilled. This is like feeling hungry when not really needing food, feeling that you don't fit in or belong despite having friends, and like feeling unsafe and suspicious when nothing is threatening. And these feelings unhealed lead to uncontrollable urges and driven repetitive behaviours: it is as if the unmet needs of early childhood become frozen in time and can never be sated for long.

Does Maslow's model resonate with your view of the human being?

## The Impact of Childhood Trauma

**Gabor Mate** is a psychotherapist who describes all early unmet needs as being very traumatic to infants and children. This early trauma affects feelings, thinking and behaviour, leaving wounds on a child's psyche into adulthood – feelings that they are less than completely lovable, or acceptable or worthy; contributing to thoughts that they are to blame for things not being right; or conversely that others are to blame; and addictive behaviours like over-striving, or numbing feelings with drugs.

## The Effects

The unhealed distress from these early experiences leaves different kinds of damage:

- It can lay down tension in our bodies – in our muscles and organs – leading to vulnerabilities in health and wellbeing in later life (from research in the field of psycho-neuro-immunology).
- It can affect our thinking and our beliefs: the ways we think about ourselves, about others and about the world.
- It makes us vulnerable to being emotionally tripped, overtaken with feelings that have nothing to do with the current situation, except that there is a small reminder of what originally had upset us. For example, when a person reminds you even in a subtle way of someone who once hurt you, it can make you dislike or avoid that person for no really no good reason, other than you just don't feel comfortable in their presence.
- It can make us vulnerable to accumulating more hurt in later life, so that painful feelings in the now may be the culmination of a long series of painful events for the past, with each encounter adding more associations that trigger the feelings.
- It makes us vulnerable to hurting others, especially in ways that we were hurt.

## Chronic Feelings vs Intermittent Feelings

The damage from habitual childhood trauma can become chronic in adults: the upset feelings, which alerted the child to something not being right, can often be replaced by a 'new view of reality' based on the experience. Instead of being upset at being told they are stupid, with

repeated exposure to derision like this and no opportunity for healing, the child ends up believing that they are stupid, agreeing with the putdown, in order to survive these kinds of situations. When this child as a super striving adult is praised and lauded for their achievements, the hurt child inside often resists this, with the adult clinging to their belief of being stupid.

- Have you encountered examples of people like this? People who know at some level they are good but they don't feel it or believe it.

Intermittent feelings are those that don't play all the time, and haven't been totally accepted. The flare-ups and overreactions that we notice are often examples of this. When someone is treated less than respectfully in the present, they are reminded of something similar that happened in the past and are catapulted back there emotionally and sometimes behaviourally. Their reactions of upset may be understandable (yes, there was something not right happening in the original situation), but their ability to handle the current situation is hampered by the triggering of unhealed feelings from previous experiences. These can be generalised or very specific – for instance a person may function very well giving presentations to a small group, but will feel terrified and freeze in front of a large audience.

- Can you identify triggers in your life that make you feel certain emotions?
- Do you recognise that you have some habits that might arise from childhood like, for example, avoiding certain situations?

## The Processes of Recovery

The damage created through not having any or many of our early needs met, can be healed, as there are internal mechanisms for doing so, but unfortunately they are interfered with to a greater or lesser extent by a society's norms and taboos, by the habits of the family, and by institutional practices. In fact, we could add an all encompassing dimension around Maslow's hierarchy: a need for healing, because we do know that the human mind and body can recover if the conditions are right.

However, it can be difficult to facilitate our healing. One view is that we confuse the expression of pain with its healing. Societies have tried to shut down certain feelings like crying (be strong!) when actually crying is both an indication of pain and an important part of the recovery from it.

One factor that seems to make a big difference in healing and processing pain is the presence of love, care and attention from one person or more (the basis of many therapies). Another is that emotional expression also happens in the recovery process, and this needs to be accepted not stopped. Crying and raging, etc, are as much the healing of grief and anger, as they are an expression that there is emotion there to be healed. Other signs include blushing, yawning, laughing, trembling, and animated talking.

So the good news is that much of what we struggle with – painful feelings, unwelcome thoughts, habits we'd like to be rid of – can be changed, especially if we set out to change ourselves. The evidence is that the healing processes can be initiated years after the hurt or abuse. Humans will take opportunities to heal themselves if the conditions are right.

The not so good news is that helping adults recover is harder work than helping children. Many more layers of more distresses are likely to have been added as well as entrenched habits developed to avoid the feeling of unbearable feelings, making many of these feelings deeply buried in very defended ways. And it does look like we need to face these feelings if we are to fully recover from them.

## Implications for Change

Fortunately, therapy is not the only place where healing and recovery can take place. Any structure or group that allows people to relate to each other in a human way can make a huge difference to how people feel about themselves and then develop enough trust to go deeper into recovery.

Acknowledging that we are emotional creatures is an important first step. It is becoming more acceptable in society to show signs of our emotions, and now we can do so knowing that these are also indications of our attempt to recover. When people are interviewed on television recounting past painful experiences they may start crying, and these days the camera does not immediately stop or edit it out as would have happened years ago.

As a prelude to creating a more emotionally intelligent society, and while necessary but not sufficient, we can learn to run our group and community meetings differently, recognising that we are emotional creatures, and that building care and interest in each other into the way we run things will start the work of undoing old hurts.

The description above of how individuals develop difficulties and limitations also happens on a larger scale through social oppression. The fact that entire groups face similar struggles has implications for how we proceed with making change, like in the way we run meetings. Women for instance as a group are not as competitive as men, and thus find interactions in small groups easier than having to compete to be heard in a large one.

Moreover, we need to understand that everyone is carrying emotional baggage. Some people have been so hurt around just expressing their feelings that they have gone numb and silent in order to survive. Others keep away from talking about feelings just in case they fall apart (have a tear or two). We have to be sensitive to people's different places and needs, and facilitate opportunities for people to gradually engage with their feelings. We could, for example, share our feelings in check-ins or through the use of ice-breakers. Once people are accustomed to this sharing process and trust has been established, deeper check-ins, which provide people space to share more of their struggles and difficulties, can be adopted.

Many of the exercises in the Trust the People modules invite you to reflect on your past, and inevitably this will trigger past painful experiences. If you can share this with others who are non-judgemental it will initiate a healing process and will allow you to better connect with those listening and with people generally: understanding and supporting others is much easier once you have understood and supported yourself.

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