

The Importance of Emotions

By: Sarvenaz Riahi RP, MSW, RSW

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Feeling our emotions has been a significant part of human evolution and survival as species, and when felt fully, these emotions can help us live a more connected and full life.

Unfortunately, throughout time, many of us have been taught to believe that emotions are the enemy and that they need to be tamed, pushed down, numbed, or controlled. We receive unspoken messages that it can be “weak” to express our emotions and therefore, we need to somehow find a way to not show our emotions in order to be “strong”. We have even gone as far as labeling individuals as “emotional” or “emotionally too sensitive” as a negative reference, rather than embracing and appreciating this incredible ability that lives within all of us.

Avoiding emotions may have been role modeled to you early on in your life. So, if your emotions were not welcomed growing up, it can be hard to experience them later on in your life as you age. As a result, many people struggle with acknowledging, understanding, and expressing their emotions.

Research shows unexpressed emotions to have a negative physiological and psychological response in the human body. In other words, avoiding our emotions can fuel symptoms of mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and eating disorders (Patel, J. & Patel P., 2009). Additionally, there is research that shows by suppressing emotions it can make people more aggressive and easily agitated (University of Texas at Austin, 2011). For example, if you were to push down feelings of anger towards your teacher or boss during the day, you are more likely to pick a fight or be quick to anger with your loved ones at home in the evening. Emotions need to be felt and when you interrupt them by pushing it down or ignoring it, you will feel it unexpectedly later on. This can leave you feeling out of control. Further, other studies show that avoiding your emotions can lead to problems with your physical health, such as higher rates in Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), heart disease, and lower immunity (Thakur, 2015; Bhattacharya, 2003).

Emotions were developed historically with our ancestors as an innate biological response in order to survive within our environment. Emotions are essential for us as humans and they help us navigate through our lives. There are three important roles that emotions play in our lives:

1. First, emotions provide us with information and point to important things in our lives to be aware of. Therefore, if we are not in touch with our emotions, we are losing valuable information about ourselves and our life. Lacking emotional awareness disconnects us from our situation, which will contribute to our ability to cope properly.
2. Second, emotions give us a sense of continuity or direction in life. The quality of the emotions that we experience provides us with a perception of who we are. In other words, it gives us a sense of wholeness.
3. Third, emotions help move us to action and progress forward in life. If we are aware of what we are feeling, then we can understand what we need or want, and we can

therefore figure out how to access those needs and wants. Lacking emotional awareness can leave us feeling aimless in our life.

As you can see above, emotions are essential for us as humans and help us navigate through our lives. Think of emotions as waves of energy that flow through our bodies and communicate to us. Emotions can be short-lived, such as a flash of annoyance at a friend or co-worker, or long-lasting, such as tolerating sadness over the loss of a loved one. Our emotions also provide bodily sensations and can give us clues as to what we are feeling. For example, sadness can feel like a tightening in your throat and anxiety can feel like a sense of heaviness in your chest. All of our emotions provide us with a need and when we are able to meet that need through some sort of action tendency, it can help reduce the intensity of the emotion that we are feeling. So, what does that look like? Below is a chart with an example of a few core emotions where we can observe the bodily felt sensation, the need, and the action tendency.

EMOTION	FEAR	SADNESS	ANGER
Bodily Felt Sense	Heart racing Sweaty palms Slowed digestion Etc...	Heaviness Slowness Tightness in throat	Heart racing Feeling hot/ flushed Tension in the body
Need	Safety	Comfort	Validation/ Setting a boundary / Feeling heard
Action Tendency	Run, hide, etc.	Reach out for a hug	Defending the boundary

The above table demonstrates that we can't behave well if we don't feel well. Therefore, when we can meet our needs or have someone close to us help us meet our emotional needs, it will provide a sense of relief which will allow us to navigate through our circumstances better.

If you are someone who has a hard time being in touch with their emotions, feels overwhelmed by them, or doesn't understand what emotions can feel like, you are definitely not alone. Educating yourself on how to regulate and feel your emotions in a healthy and productive way is the first step. Below are some ways to connect to and understand your emotions:

1. **Pausing and observing:** One of the simplest ways to start recognizing and labeling your feelings is by taking some time throughout the day to check in with yourself, physically and mentally. How are you feeling? Are you feeling any tension in your body? If so, where? It's important that when you are checking in with yourself to take a curious

stance, where you are nonjudgmental towards yourself, and just interested in finding out more about yourself internally.

2. **Breath through it:** Once you begin to identify your feelings and the bodily sensations that are accompanied by it, take some deep breaths, ensuring that the exhales are twice as long as the inhales. For example, inhaling for four seconds and exhaling for eight seconds. This type of deep breathing activates that vagus nerve, which is a part of our bodies that helps to regulate emotions and our nervous system. This is one way to regulate your emotions and its intensity as you are experiencing it.
3. **Being self-compassionate:** Self-compassion is the act of acknowledging your emotions, reminding yourself that you are human, and that feeling emotions is part of the human experience. For example, instead of just ignoring your pain or struggle, you actually acknowledge and tell yourself “I’m having a really hard time with this right now”, how can I comfort and help myself in this moment? Practicing self-compassion can be beneficial as it releases oxytocin (the “cuddle hormone”) in our bodies that can help soothe us (Neff, K., n.d.).

At first, it can feel scary and uncomfortable to start to feel your emotions, which is common and normal. It is important to know that emotions are short-lived and need to be felt in order to release them. Feelings do not last forever. The more comfortable you become in experiencing your emotions, the easier it gets over time to sit with your emotions and help yourself through it. As Dr. Les Greenberg states, “we need to live in mindful harmony with our feelings, not attempt to control them”.

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