



Understanding Emotions

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

If we look upon ourselves as a car, our emotions would be the engine. They rev us up. They get us going. They provide raw power. But if we want to get anywhere, we need to remember that it's our thinking that steers the car.

Researchers who have studied emotions describe them as having three primary parts.

The first part is feeling. What we feel arises from our personal, or subjective, experience. If someone talks about sadness, everyone knows what this is. Every one of us can feel it.

The second part of an emotion is our physical response. This includes such internal indicators as our heart rate, our blood pressure, the tension in our muscles, that shaky feeling in the pit of the stomach, and the hormonal changes within the body.

The third is the cognitive. This part has to do with our thoughts. We all have certain thoughts, memories, and images associated with certain feelings. Our thoughts actually store our feelings in memory.

These three parts, known as the "emotional complex," always occur together. This is important because when we use our feelings as an explanation of why we do things, we're not exactly right. We have our body and our mind involved too. Even when we feel a severe emotion such as rage, the mind still has a role. The mind can help to steer us.

Our past learning experiences usually determine what type of feeling we'll have. Take two people who both see a big, hot air balloon rising into the clouds. One person might experience a feeling of wonder or joy at the sight of this beautiful object going up. Another person, who in the past has experienced fear with new sights, might feel anxious and ill at ease. The feeling is not based on what the person thinks, the feeling comes about as a reaction to the stimulus, based on our very unique, earlier life experiences.

Sometimes our feelings take over, as if we have no chance to think at all. For example, some of us fill with fear the instant we see a snake. This is a gut reaction. There's hardly any thought involved. Often it seems that we can't think until we're far enough away from the animal and our body begins to calm down.

In some cases, our emotions cause ongoing problems. We may feel sad too often or fearful too much of the time. Or we feel we can't control certain negative emotions that keep recurring.

That's when therapy can help. Through therapy, we can learn to change the cognitive component to our emotions. By changing the way we think, we can change the way we deal with emotions and to some extent how we react.

Concerning how we react, it helps to know that we have an array of choices. If we're experiencing a negative reaction to something, we can ask ourselves, "What can I do next time I

meet this situation?” Actually we can decide to do something different. Instead of the negative reaction, we can do something that will “feel” better.

In addition, it helps to know that an initial emotional reaction usually lasts only 20 to 30 minutes. That is, our physical response to an emotional situation lasts only that long. But, if we keep thinking about the emotion or the situation, replaying the scene in our mind and re-experiencing it, the emotion can last longer. If we’re angry, we can keep ourselves seething for hours. If we’re depressed, this can start with the simple feeling of sadness. This feeling then acts as a trigger which starts us thinking all kinds of sad thoughts such as, “my life’s no good, I’m not going anywhere, nobody likes me, things have always been bad for me,” and so on. By changing these thoughts, we can encourage the sadness to go away.

Two Therapeutic Techniques

First, we need to make sure we don’t feel bad about ourselves because we react emotionally to something. Our emotional reactions are built into our nature. We have little control over the fact that emotions arise in us. In other words, it’s okay to have feelings!

Second, although we might not have control over our initial emotional reaction, we do have influence over how we react to the feelings. When feeling sad, we can allow ourselves simply to experience the sadness. It’ll last about a half hour. It will soon pass if we quiet our thinking, if we keep our minds from elaborating all the details. It can help even more if we replace “sad” thoughts with relaxing thoughts or if we do something physically relaxing (such as walking, stretching exercises, or deep breathing). In other words, if we don’t feed the negative feeling, it will end.

Sometimes our negative feelings and negative thoughts can be so powerful, they may seem impossible to change. In this case, going to a therapist can be an invaluable help.

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