



Embracing your Emotions

Well like most people I came to looking at the area of emotions because I had a personal need to better manage them. Like most people I was going through life keeping very busy trying to not feel what I was obviously feeling, pushing through the discomfort and not showing anybody what things were really like for me. I must have been a good actor as people would often comment about how well I was coping, how relaxed I looked and that I had obviously come to terms with things in my life. But like most of us I only ended up strengthening the hold my issues had on my life because I was not prepared to allow myself to feel. My partners in crime were;

- Avoidance
- Suppress
- Control

These were my coping strategies and I am sure you are already seeing that these are not mine and mine alone! I commonly see control, avoid, and suppress (in its many forms) as the core coping mechanisms in the people I work with. When I became aware of how I was coping and how unhealthy it was for me I happened to be working in a holistic Drug and Alcohol rehabilitation centre and was exposed to many different forms of healing. Two that really seemed to talk to my difficulties with emotions was Gestalt/Humanistic Therapy and Emotional Intelligence.

What I want to focus on in this short article is an introduction into how these ideas may assist you. This is important as most clients come through my door with one (or several) emotion that they absolutely struggle with. Further they are often stuck in negative emotional patterns that maintain or worsen their situation (remember these; control, avoid suppress). And often when I start to dig around their emotional world I find that there are other emotions that are causing them problems also. This is why the information given by Gestalt/Humanistic therapy and Emotional Intelligence is so valuable in helping people change how they cope with their emotions. It is so useful that I find it influences what I do with almost every client.

There are a number of things you need to know about your emotional world and skills you need to master in order to have your emotions be a positive influence on your life. Lets not forget emotions are designed to enhance life not detract from it.

Below is a diagram that gives an overview of the steps involved in healthy emotional experiences, this is followed by a short overview of each step.



Valuing Emotional Experience

Arriving

Promoting Emotional Awareness
(The emotional Alphabet)

Welcoming, allowing and staying with emotion
(Emotional fitness)

Labeling your Emotions

Accepting your emotions

Putting emotions into words

Identifying if your emotions are primary or secondary
(Keeping your eye on the ball)

Leaving

Understanding Emotional Logic

Identifying if your primary emotion is healthy or maladaptive

Respond to Healthy Emotion
Follow, guide, use etc

or

Respond to maladaptive emotions
Identify the destructive beliefs or views
attached to the maladaptive emotion

Facilitate access to alternate adaptive
emotions and needs

Facilitate the transformation of
maladaptive emotions and destructive
beliefs

So let me take you through these steps one at a time;

Valuing Emotional Experience

• The first step that people need to take is what I call the “paradigm shift”. Basically you need to realize that emotions are here to help, they are here to contribute to life and that they are as important and useful as your intellect or physical body. Making this change in perspective gives the motivation and desire to work through this material and stay with your emotions even when they get hard.



Supporting your health
and wellbeing

People normally fall into two camps, people who do value emotion and people who don't. The people who do value their emotions normally do for 2 reasons, one it is a natural part of the persons beliefs system or something has happened in the person life that has forced them to look at emotions and see them as valuable (eg illness with emotional factors or causes or a relationship breakdown due to the persons lack of emotionality).

The second camp is full of people who do not value emotions, however in my view that these people are destined to enter the first camp at some stage in their life as emotions are a normal, healthy and vital part of life.

Once you get your head around valuing emotional experience you then need to learn the skills. It is useful to split emotional skills into two stages, arriving and leaving.

Arriving

The Emotional Alphabet

- The emotional alphabet, emotions express themselves in the body realm primarily using sensory motor pathways to communicate with you, fear is a good example, you know you are feeling fear when you feel butterflies in your stomach, sweat, increase heart and breathing rate and blood pressure, tension in muscles and blood flow changes etc. That is why the first fundamental skill is being able recognize bodily sensations

Emotional Fitness

- In order to work out what you are feeling and fully arrive you need to stay with these sensations and feel them in your body. This actually means allowing you body time to get use to physically feeling (holding) the sensations of emotion, which involve physiological changes. Hence why I call it emotional fitness!

Labeling Your Emotions

- Now you need to label what you are feeling correctly, given enough body awareness and sensation a very specific emotion should reveal itself, as every emotion has a very specific set of somatic experience, as in the example of fear that is detailed above

Accepting your Emotions

- In order to use your emotions in a health way you first must accept or allow them, this is not always as easy as it sounds.

Verbalizing Emotions

- It is very important to verbalize you emotional experience with people and this often comes next

Keeping your Eye on the Ball

- Once you know what you are feeling you need to evaluate whether it is a primary or secondary emotion, this is where it gets a little tricky but with some practice this can be done quite easily. Essentially primary feelings are your first response to a situation and secondary feelings come



latter. It is essential that you identify the primary feeling and focus on what this feeling is about and respond to it positively as this will give you the best results. However most people spend most of their time fumbling with secondary or instrumental emotions and thus never resolve the issue, and often do not even know what the primary feeling is.

Well this gets us through the arrival phase and to be honest, developing these skills alone can change peoples lives dramatically and many systems don't teach much more than staying with your emotions and accepting them in this way.

Leaving

In the leaving phase we tend to apply the following idea to the primary emotion as this gives us the best results, but sometimes it is also important to deal with the other types of emotions

Emotional Logic

- Next is emotional logic, if I had a dollar for every time I have heard, "there is no logical reason why I am feelings this way", I would be rolling in it! BUT THERE MUST BE, is my response to people as emotions have a very useful and precise logic that when understood can tell you definitive information about what you are going through and what to focus on to promote change

Identifying if your Primary Emotion is Adaptive or Maladaptive

- Once you have identified your primary emotion and stay with it you need to work out if it is a healthy adaptive emotional response to a current situation or unhealthy maladaptive emotional response to a current situation. Commonly the unhealthy maladaptive emotions have occurred because past experiences and negative beliefs have caused you to respond with an unhealthy maladaptive emotion.

Responding to Adaptive or Maladaptive Emotions

- It is this stage and the ones that follow that can become a little more complex especially if the maladaptive emotions are based on painful past experiences and trauma. This is were you may seek the support of a professional.

From here you have two very distinct paths, stay with and follow the healthy emotional response in the present using it as it was intended. Versus dealing with a maladaptive emotional response that is based on past negative experiences and patterns.

It may help me to use an example here, guilt is a good one, the emotional logic of guilt is simple, guilt is a moral emotion it is designed to tell you if you are doing something wrong. So first scenario, you have done something wrong by your partner and you feel guilty about it, you stay with this allow it to guide you, in this case make the situation right, which may involve an apology or more etc.



Scenario two you feel guilty as someone has asked you to do something and you have said no, you have said no because what was asked of you was unrealistic and you did not have the time etc. The person is ok with you saying no, however you feel guilty about not being able to help. Why? Have you done the wrong thing? NO, but you have an unrealistic belief system, eg I must help everyone who asks, or I cannot say no to people, this causes the guilt response and probably comes from negative past experiences and patterns that caused this unhealthy core beliefs. Thus the response here is very different, manage the guilt and confront the core belief not apologies.

Can you see how responding to healthy and maladaptive emotions are very different and hence why it is so important to work out which one you are feeling.

- At times during these steps you may also need to use traditional emotional management techniques (eg breathing for anxiety) to help you to stay with the emotion. This is fine when it is done from the perspective of staying with the feeling and not using these techniques to get away from your feelings (which is how those techniques are mostly used)

This may look a bit very complex now but these skills do become easier and even automatic over time, especially in the arrival phase. It is important to note that your experience won't always follow the path mapped out above and that these skills build and feed off each other and often you may be apply many of them at once. For example to evaluate if your emotion is primary or secondary (keeping your eye on the ball), you need to be staying with it (emotional fitness) and accept it. However at any moment one of the stages above will be in the foreground of your experience.

Most of the material above has been adapted from two books, "Emotion Focused Therapy" by L. Greenberg and "Emotional Intelligence" by D. Goleman, my person experience and work with clients.

A longer version of this article has been adapted into a short manual and offers more detail and exercises to help you learn the emotional skills explored above.

If you have any questions don't hesitate to contact me.

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