

Understanding emotions: A key ingredient of a happy life

“What Would I Do If I Could Feel?”

Nipsey Russell, as the Tinman in the Motown musical “The Wiz”

(Check out it out at www.inspirationjukebox.com/page19.htm)

I found the next few pages of notes in the attic recently. I wrote them to clarify my own thoughts. I originally did a politics degree and so was familiar with ideas of socialisation but it wasn't until I got involved in Co-Counselling International (CCI) and other therapies that I came across the link between thoughts, feelings and body states.

My notes date back to 1997 but I haven't really changed my views as my life experience and reading has tended to confirm them. However, I am aware that they have no references and that you may understandably treat them with caution because of this. Despite this I still hope you will find them stimulating and useful, both in your own life and to do further research around. Try the Emotional Processing website at

<http://www.emotionalprocessing.org.uk/Emotional%20Processing%20&%20Psychological%20Therapy/Emotional%20Processing%20&%20Psychological%20Therapy.htm>

Alternatively if you prefer to learn by doing, a good starting point is to check out CCI. (Details at [www.inspirationjukebox.com/Cocounselling\(1468356\).htm](http://www.inspirationjukebox.com/Cocounselling(1468356).htm))

Mark Burns. 2010.

NOTES ON EMOTIONS.

[These notes are to collect together my own thoughts]

What are Emotions?

1] *Emotions give life meaning and depth.* Living would be meaningless, and perhaps pointless, if we didn't experience joy, curiosity, serenity etc. Both pleasant and unpleasant emotions give us guidance about making decisions on what actions to take in life. We evolved emotions as a survival tool for both the individual and the species. Some emotions give us information about what is safe and unsafe. Others, such as sexual feelings, are useful in evolutionary terms for ensuring that the species reproduces itself.

2] Emotions in humans are usually a mixture of thoughts [in words or pictures] and feelings [physical sensations and reactions]. If we get a piece of news we interpret that it is good or bad [thought] and the body responds in terms of posture and voice changes etc. [caused by hormones, muscle tension changes etc.] This latter point is reflected in everyday language, by expressions such as he was down in the mouth, she's a real pain in the neck etc. Biochemically all emotions are similar[?]

3] Some scientists believe that the human brain has evolved in a way that reflects our animal ancestry. The oldest part of the brain is the reptilian brain and is mainly concerned with repetitive behaviour and subconscious bodily functions such as breathing and heartbeat. We also have a mammalian brain which is concerned with pleasure/pain which is where emotions are located. Finally we have the neo-cortex. This is the part of the brain concerned with thinking.

4] We use our brain to make choices on which to base our actions all the time. These can be as minor as should I switch channels or as major as what should I do with the rest of my life. It is useful to be aware of whether we are making these choices on feeling or thinking. *The distinction between "I feel x about this" and "I think y about that" is important.* Feelings or emotions are sensations like sadness, happiness or guilt. Working something out in a tidy, careful and thorough way is often in everyday language called rational or logical thinking. There are also other kinds of thinking such as intuition, creativity and day dreaming. Sometimes we can have "thoughts" without deliberately choosing to think about something; ideas, pictures, song lyrics etc. may just pop into our heads.

Generally speaking it is best to listen to your emotions but use another part of your brain to make the final decision about how to act.

Feelings about Feelings.

5] *Despite all the messages we get to the contrary as we grow up, it is OK to feel any emotion. It is not bad to feel certain emotions.* Though it may not be useful to act on them. Often we have mixed emotions i.e. feel more than one thing at a time.

6] We often have emotions about emotions. For example we feel ashamed about feeling frightened or embarrassed about feeling embarrassed. This is because of the messages we get as children that some emotions are not OK. These are often gender specific e.g. boys shouldn't feel scared, girls shouldn't get angry. We also get messages that some emotions are painful. This is probably partly true, but not totally.

For example I can find genuine sadness in myself [not depression a different emotion] both painful and beautiful. I can feel connected with myself or someone I care about in my sadness. If I wasn't connected to them, if they didn't matter to me, I wouldn't be sad. On a more mundane level people often like being frightened as long as they are really safe, hence the market for horror films.

7] *Emotions are often a throwback to the past.* Your boss sends for you at work and immediately emotions come up from being scared of authority figures at school. These emotions maybe conscious or unconscious. In this last case the emotions only come to the surface when triggered by something, i.e. authority figures. *Much of our personalities however are based on the fact that certain of our triggers are stuck down permanently!* We are always a bit anxious, we always talk down to other people etc. This is not to say however that we can't 'unstick' them, i.e. change our personalities and anxieties.

8] *Most things have some emotional significance to us.* As we grow up we are given many messages by our parents, teachers, peers and the culture in general. These messages maybe things that been said to us such as "don't be clever", "all men in suits are out to get you" etc. Other messages we pick up from the media or the world around us e.g. "children are a nuisance" or "you get put down if you don't act tough." Many of these messages are connected to the roles we are supposed to play in society according to our sex, age, race, religion or class. Sometimes they are unique to our own family background.

Even if they are not true, often they continue to play a big part in our lives as adults be it at work, in our relationships or in our beliefs. This is for a number of reasons but one is to do with emotions. Often these messages have strong emotions attached to them, usually fear. This shown by some of the earlier examples I listed, such as a continued belief that "if you're clever you'll get a clout, or people won't like you." Similarly someone may feel uncomfortable when their boss, a man in a suit, is around but can't quite work out why. The answer being old messages from the past. The parts of the brain connected with survival and emotions hear all this and over ride the logical part. We continue to act as if we are still small and in danger even when we are not. Fortunately if we are aware of this we can do something about it.

9] The important thing is that we don't have to act on our feelings unless we want to. The mammalian brain can tell us that we feel angry with a colleague or want to have sex, but we can learn to use the neo-cortex to decide what action we are going to take.

Feelings in the UK.

10] Our culture is confused by emotions. Emotions sell tabloids with headlines about anger, lust and love, but we aren't taught about them in schools. Yet 1 in 5 of the population will at sometime in their lives suffer from clinical depression, and almost 1 in 4 of patient consultations with GPs are for advice on emotional and social problems.

11] The British have a reputation of being stiff-upper lipped. Though a caricature this probably has some truth in it. Sharing feelings traditionally was generally frowned upon. Not only painful feelings like anger or sadness, often exuberance and joy was seen as somehow not adult.

12] The reference to adulthood is important. Young children accept their feelings until they learn to be ashamed or scared of showing them. If you watch very young children often they will get upset, cry or throw a tantrum and then be OK.

13] This is because *we have confused feeling emotions with recovering from them*. Crying is not sadness. Shouting and stamping is not anger. Trembling is not fear. Emotions as we said earlier are in part physical. We evolved them in our animal past as ways of dealing with the world e.g. the fight or flight response. Intense emotions are supposed to be short term experiences. We feel scared and become aggressive or run away and then calm down. We calm down or recover from the physical side of emotions physically. Tears from crying from sadness for example seem to be a different chemical composition to tears from peeling onions. Perhaps stress hormones are being released. Muscles are probably relaxed by bawling, stamping or shaking.

14] People who learn not to share or express their emotions, often do so at an early age by consciously physically controlling them. This is reflected in everyday language by expressions such as "holding back the tears", "stopping herself from crying", "biting your bottom lip". This then becomes a habit, done all the time without thinking. It may explain a lot of muscular pain in the neck, back etc. We are literally tense all the time, both emotionally and physically. In deed the two are the same thing. Again in English we use the word feelings for both emotions and physical states, "I feel angry", "I feel ill" or "I can feel the crack in the chair leg."

15] The problem with cutting off feelings is that they are often all cut off. So we cut off from not just our anger or sadness but unfortunately also joy, happiness and contentment too. Depending on your definition and starting point for cause and effect, *some types of depression then can be seen as being a result of repressing all feelings and being numb*. Although we often use the word "depression" as being synonymous with sadness, sadness is much more of a dynamic and live feeling. Pain is being experienced not avoided. It can thus be dealt with and moved on from. [Inappropriate coping mechanisms, such as heavy drinking, maybe also be an attempt by individuals to deal with difficult feelings.]

16] Other people have trouble 'controlling' their emotions. This maybe because they have never really been in control, they have just tried to unawaresly repress them all the time until "the final straw" occurs and they just boil over. Alternatively they may have grown up believing that letting your emotions rule you was the only or best way to behave e.g. using aggression to get your own way.

Dealing successfully with Feelings.

17] What then is the best way to deal with emotions? They need to be respected and listened to, but kept in control. This means using the thinking part of the brain to make the final decision about our actions.

18] It also means allowing our emotions space to breath. If you're angry with your boss you may decide not to tell him where to go, but you still need to deal with your anger. This could be by sharing with him or her how you feel. It could be by acknowledging that emotions are physical by going for a run or beating up a representation of your boss like the Japanese are supposed to!

19] Alternatively you may choose to use some kind of relaxation technique. Also remember that our feelings change all the time and that you can observe your own emotions, reassured by this fact. Indeed as feelings follow thoughts, by thinking about positive things positive emotions often follow. Some people use props to help them, such as music etc. Sometimes by just being aware of our feelings we can choose whether we want to continue feeling that way or not.

20] Another approach is to talk through how you feel with a friend, or a therapist may get you to scream abuse at a cushion. [As emotions are physical they often have sounds or words attached to them. We may lose contact with this because as children we are so often told to be quiet one way or another.]

21] As emotions have a thought component to them you may choose to try and see things differently, sometimes called 'reframing'. This works for some people. With others it can be a way of being over rational again and so denying emotions.

22] *It is also worth emphasising that letting your emotions out needs to be a conscious choice.* If you simply give yourself permission to shout, scream or cry when ever you want you will run into problems. You may well get a hostile response from other people. This may be because you are saying something unfair or hostile to them. It maybe because we live in a culture that doesn't understand emotions and so is scared of them. In extreme they may call for the police or an ambulance! [You maybe self-critical too as we all have negative messages chattering away in our heads. Try not to pay them too much attention.]

23] It is also important to respect others as people with rights of their own. Practically and ethically assertiveness is OK, but 'dumping' your feelings on others isn't. Try to own your feelings by using 'I' statements both when speaking out loud and to your self. For example "I was really hurt when you were late again" rather than "You're useless, you always let me down." Not only is the latter statement more likely to lead to an emotional response from the other person, but you maybe disempowering yourself. You are not acknowledging your feelings to yourself. Also by focusing on the other person you may be turning yourself into a victim, as you can't necessarily change their behaviour. You can change your own however, if you focus on what you can do either at a practical or emotional level. [This isn't to say however that sometimes other people's behaviour towards you isn't offensive, prejudiced etc. Sometimes it is useful to choose to deal with a problem by acknowledging this. The key word being 'choice', which is the best model to use at any one time.] You can't have someone else's feelings, though you can have your own feelings which may be the same.

24] Although I've concentrated on emotions and the individual, the issues raised have profound implications for how we structure our families, work places and society in general so that people can feel safe to be emotional, fully alive human beings.

25] Finally changing attitudes to emotions takes time, so be patient and keep trying.

Mark Burns March 1997.

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