

## 5. Feelings

*People feel disturbed not by things, but by the views they take of them.  
Epictetus (stoic philosopher and former slave)*

Feelings refer to the experiential, receptive aspect of an affect (e.g. feeling hurt, happy, confused, nervous etc.). The capacity to feel is one of the main distinctions between the animate (people, animals) and inanimate (computers, robots, cars). This is what it means to be alive! A common view is that feelings are spontaneous and irrational, and that we are at their mercy, but in fact we can, at least to some degree, be in charge of our feelings. There are four stages in this process (reflecting four already covered areas):

- Notice what you feel (Self-awareness)
- Accept what you feel (Relating to oneself)
- Evaluate your feeling (Self-evaluation)
- Affect the way you feel (Personal change)

### Notice

We have a natural tendency to ignore or block our awareness of feelings that may not be pleasant. This indeed may be justified in some situations (e.g. in an emergency), at least temporarily. Generally, though, it is a good idea to be aware of what you feel for several reasons:

- Feelings are trying to tell us something that may be important.
- Ignoring feelings doesn't make them disappear. Their influence just becomes unconscious. So, for example, you may start avoiding certain situations, thinking in a certain way, or develop some body symptoms, and you won't even know why.
- Deadening unpleasant feelings deadens pleasant ones too. So by doing so you reduce your capacity to feel at all.
- We can't do anything about our feelings if we are not aware of them! Awareness is the first step of being more in charge. For example, feeling hurt is often behind our angry reactions. If we want to have a choice rather than acting automatically, we need to acknowledge that underlying feeling first.

The good news is that you don't need to do anything special to be aware of your feelings – just stop for a moment and pay attention. Still, we do sometimes hide what we really feel not only from others but also from ourselves. In this case feelings become out of our reach and as a consequence, we can't do much about them. This exercise can help uncover such hidden feelings:

Revealing hidden feelings consists of these steps:

1. Recognise that there is a hidden feeling – if you are unhappy with your reaction (you feel that you have overreacted, under-reacted or reacted badly) there may be a hidden feeling behind it.
2. Rewind the event and try to identify what you felt, perhaps only briefly, just before your reaction. You don't need to deal with the situation now, so you can allow yourself to experience what you really felt. If it doesn't work, write about the event (before you reacted) and monitor what you feel while writing.
3. Once your feeling is out you may experience a shift in your body (e.g. tension release); the initial reaction may disappear or be replaced with another one (e.g. anger may be replaced with crying). If this happens, acknowledge it and relax. It may be unpleasant or intense, but should not last long. Just pay attention to what it makes you think about, and possible links to some other past experiences.

## Accept

The next step of being in charge of your feelings is to accept them. You may fear that if you acknowledge your feelings they may overwhelm you, but in fact the opposite is the case. Fighting an already existing feeling can wedge it in even more firmly. If you accept it, you might temporarily have an impression of a more intense sensation but this should not last long, your inner struggle will be reduced, and you will increase control over your reactions.

## Evaluate

In order to see if our feeling is valid or not, sometimes we need to first figure out why we feel (or felt) a particular way, what has caused our feeling. The following exercise can help find out:

**Systematic elimination:** recall the situation in which you noticed that feeling for the first time. Exclude, one by one, elements from the situation (e.g. individuals, objects, events, your expectations). When the feeling also subsides or disappears, this indicates that it was triggered by the last excluded element. For example, to find out why you felt nervous at a party, go back in your mind to the event, and allow yourself to experience the same feeling. Then imagine that one person is not there. Still nervous? Keep excluding! If you stop being nervous after excluding something or somebody you have found the reason.

Once you know to what your feeling responds, you can check if it is accurate. The purpose of feelings is to register the effects that something or somebody has and motivate us to act accordingly, but they are not always valid. This is because our feelings are not completely independent; they may be affected by:

- **Associations, previous experiences:** for example, you may have had a bad break-up with somebody who has green eyes; later on, you meet somebody else with green eyes and have a 'bad feeling' even if you don't actually know that person.
- **Interpretations:** you may either laugh or feel hurt by what your friend has said, depending on whether you think that he was serious or joking.
- **Assumptions, expectations:** you get upset for a train being late because you expected that it would arrive on time

To evaluate if your feeling is accurate, consider if it really reflects the immediate situation or it is more a result of your associations, interpretations or expectations.

## Affect the way you feel

### Indirect ways of affecting a feeling

If you recognise that your feeling is influenced by the above mental processes, you can change it by dealing with them:

1. If your feeling is influenced by associations (past experiences) try to put them aside and look at the immediate situation afresh.
2. If your feeling is influenced by your interpretations and / or expectations, consider whether or not they are justified. By modifying your thoughts you can change the way you feel (e.g. interpret the trigger in a less upsetting manner: 'He didn't mean to hurt me'; 'It is ok to have different views on this issue.').

### A direct way of affecting a feeling

What if our bothersome feelings are justified? What if they are not a result of misleading associations or inadequate interpretations and expectations? This is entirely possible. To use the above example, your friend perhaps did intend to hurt you. In this case, the best we can do is to accept the feeling and allow a natural healing process to take place. A negative feeling will not become a positive one, but in time it will become more distant. Still, sometimes we may be stuck with our feeling and want to do something about it. This exercise can help in such situations:

**Focusing on feeling:** if you are not already experiencing a feeling you want to affect, think about a situation that is linked to it. When the feeling

emerges, forget about the situation and focus on the feeling itself. What does it look like? Give your feeling a shape and colour. Where is it within your body? Is it in your tummy, in your chest, in your throat, in your head? Is that part of your body tense? If it is, relax it. Does your feeling move when you relax? If it does, let it go or come out (if it moves to another part of the body repeat the above). If it doesn't, see if you can do something with it (e.g. try gently to change its shape or colour, or try to make it move, but don't force anything).