

6. Emotions



Anyone can become angry - that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way - this is not easy.

Aristotle (Ancient Greek philosopher)

Taking charge of emotional reactions

In the introduction to this group, we pointed out that your feelings and emotional reactions are not the same. Understanding this difference can help you gain greater control over your reactions. Let's say you react with anger whenever you feel hurt. If you realise that these two are not the same, you won't need to react automatically any more. You can decouple them and then choose to react differently. This technique can help you do that:

Choosing your reaction: pick a situation in which you overreacted or reacted inappropriately and try these steps:

- Think about how you would like to react in such a situation (instead of screaming and shouting, perhaps breathing out your emotions or responding assertively).
- Go back to that situation in your imagination, notice and acknowledge your feelings, but react in a way you want.
- Repeat this in your mind till the new way of responding becomes spontaneous, and then try it in the real world.

Choosing our reactions may not always be enough though. Emotional reactions carry energy, so we also need to know how we can channel (direct) that energy. To this, we will turn next.

Channelling emotional reactions

Both pleasant and unpleasant reactions may be unhelpful if their energy is not appropriately channelled (e.g. laughing may be pleasant, but is not always appropriate). So, let's consider what we can do with that surge of energy that characterises most emotions.

Suppression or blocking emotional reactions can be useful if a situation or leaving an impression have priority over your inner state (an emergency and a job interview may be respective examples). However, suppression can have psychological and somatic consequences^[1] and should be only temporary. This is how even emotions suppressed long ago can be unblocked:

Unblocking emotions: try this technique first with mild negative emotions or positive ones such as joy or pride (they are often suppressed too). Make sure that you will not be disturbed. Start writing about a situation in which your emotion was suppressed. As you are now in a safe space, your emotion will start spontaneously 'spilling out'. Allow it to pass through without judgement or interference – just breathe it out. If this process brings up some memories, register but don't dwell on them. After a while, your emotional reaction should subside (or perhaps reveal an underlying feeling). When this happens and the deeper feelings are addressed (see Revealing hidden feelings), decide on your response to the trigger situation if you think it still requires any response at all.

Displacement refers to substituting the *object* of an emotion for another (e.g. you are angry with your boss, and you lash out at your colleague, family member or an object – ever kicked a wastebasket?). This allows us to avoid possible consequences of our reaction *as well as* suppression. However, you may end up treating somebody unfairly or, if you unconsciously displace fear, developing phobias, so be aware when displacement takes place.

Transformation means substituting one emotion for another. Basic emotions seem to be mutually exclusive (you can't react with fear and anger at the same time). However, one can be transformed into another. For example, you get panicky in a stadium full of people, but you start cheering your team and that reaction disappears! Similarly, couples angry with each other turn it sometimes into passion. So, if you are not happy with an emotion that is welling up, try to channel it into another one.

Discharge means simply releasing your emotional energy. This is important for emotional balance, but it is not always appropriate (e.g. at a business meeting) and it does not always work. For example, research suggests that just giving vent to anger does 'little or nothing to dispel it'.^[ii] Also, the more you do this, the more easily it is set off. So, it is always better to check if an event really warrants an emotional discharge.

Reinforcement means intensifying emotional reactions by making a loop between mutually supportive thoughts, mental images and emotions. Reinforcement can be useful when the additional energy it brings is channelled into an action (e.g. in sports and other physically or mentally demanding activities). However, it can be dangerous if a loop is formed between negative thoughts and emotions. For example, your anger can generate thoughts that justify it, but then these thoughts make you even angrier until you lose it. To prevent this, rather than asking yourself if getting angry is justified (anger always thinks it is justified), ask yourself if there is a point to it, if getting angry will do any good.

Diffusion is often helpful and can be achieved in many ways: remove the trigger if you can, acknowledge your reaction ("I am getting angry"), re-evaluate the situation ("she didn't mean it"), or change your view ("it's their problem, not mine"). Humour (laughing it off), a cooling-off activity (e.g. going for a walk), distractions (watching a short video) can also work. All of the above can be used to try to defuse the reactions of others too, but this can backfire if not carried out sensitively.

Now we can turn to what to do in emotionally charged situations.

Managing Emotions in the Situation

In the past, our emotional reactions were the only way of showing to others how we were feeling or our strength. Nowadays, however, they are often not the best way to do so. Unless you need extra energy (in which case reinforcement may be useful), it is better to separate our emotional reactions from dealing with the situation. There are a number of reasons for that:

- Your reactions are unlikely to resolve anything, but if they take over, you may do or say something that you will regret later.
- When you are dealing with your emotions and the situation at the same time, you are dividing your attention and energy, which is unlikely to produce good results.
- They impair your cognitive, assessment and decision-making abilities (try to do maths when emotional and you will see how much more difficult it is than normally).
- Reacting emotionally in the situation makes you feel better only if it elicits a desired response, but this is rarely the case – in fact, it is likely to make you feel even worse afterwards.

There are two ways of separating the situation and your emotions:

- *You can deal with the situation first and then allow your emotional reactions.* For example, in an emergency you may have to suppress your emotional reactions temporarily in order to help those in danger. In this case, it is important to remember to attend to those suppressed emotions afterwards.
- *You can deal with your emotional reactions first and then deal with the situation/others.* So, if somebody has upset you, you may first diffuse your reactions by going for a walk, for example, or you may discharge these reactions by having a good cry, or expressing them in writing. Then, you can calmly address the issue with the person involved.

Which way is better depends on the circumstances, but both allow you to manage the situation effectively *as well as* attend to your emotions (the latter being necessary to process what happened and move on).

Ultimately, this is what we want – to be able to do both.

[i] See, for example, Pennebaker, J. W. (1988). 'Confiding Traumatic Experiences and Health' in Fisher, S. and Reason, J. (eds) *Handbook of Life Stress Cognition and Health*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, p.670-671.

[ii] Goleman, D. (1995) *Emotional Intelligence*. London: Bloomsbury, 1996, p.64.