

# Increasing Brain Power ~ Decreasing Stress

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Teenagers are told, “Don’t show off!” and we wonder why they have low self-esteem. We tell our small children, “Stop crying. Man up!” “Nice girls don’t get angry.” My personal favorite is “anger management.” It’s not anger management; it’s behavior management, aggression management, rage management, but not anger management. With all these confusing messages, it is sad but not surprising to learn that U.S. children, according to UNICEF, are the second least happy children in the world; children in Great Britain being the most unhappy.

## **What has gone wrong, and more importantly, how do we get back on track?**

Part of the problem is that some of our emotions, like anger, fear and loneliness, feel so unpleasant. Nobody wants to spend their day feeling scared and lonely, and we surely don’t want to be around someone who is raging out of control. Fortunately, if we can slow down and listen to them, our emotions will provide us with powerful and useful messages. Fear of getting hit by a car stops us from walking out into the middle of street. After a hurricane, healthy anger provides us with the energy to stay focused on claim forms and claim adjusters. When we listen and hear the messages, we end up having options. Emotions are not good or bad, right or wrong, or positive or negative – it’s the behavior that follows our emotions that gets us into trouble. We can either allow normal, human loneliness to steer us to the phone to make fun plans with family and friends, or to the couch and un-reality TV.

When we are hypersensitive and we over-react to our emotions, when we under-react and we are numb, or when we feel stuck, our emotions leave us feeling bewildered and exhausted. Stressed-out emotions easily morph into intensified secondary emotions and often times destructive behaviors, not the least of which is even more stress. Anger turns into rage and high blood pressure, fear into anxiety and panic, and loneliness and sadness into boredom and bad dates.

## **Mixed Emotions versus Mixed Messages**

Mixed emotions and mixed messages are very different. Mixed emotions are normal and healthy even though they can be uncomfortable, confusing, and challenging. For example, “I love him. He’s so wonderful, he brought me flowers. I hate him, he’s driving me crazy with his dirty socks. And, I’m feeling really scared about a situation at work.” When experiencing several emotions at one time, we need to slow down so

we can identify and listen to each one's message. The goal is to be able to respond in such a way that we can ultimately get our needs met. In this example, reasonable anger and a new plan of action may be appropriate if assurances of neatness are not being addressed. On the other hand, focusing on love and appreciation instead of socks may help relieve accumulated stress from a bad day at the office. We don't know, though, until we stop to think about it.

Mixed messages, unlike mixed emotions, are extremely stressful and destructive. "I love you, come closer, but you can't because I'm intoxicated or otherwise emotionally unavailable" is the classic paradigm of addictions, abuse, and neglect. Mixed messages lead to confusion and chaos for everyone concerned. They involve highly reactive interactions with intensified emotions and unacceptable behaviors that can easily spiral out of control.

We have choices when we can identify our emotions and listen to what they are trying to tell us. We can grieve past losses or process guilt for regrets. We can discern between fear of the future and excitement about the future, and plan accordingly. We can empathize with a loved one. We can care. And we can love again.

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