



Embracing Emotions

As counsellors and psychotherapists, we need to feel confident with emotional content. However, given that we are human too – with our own feelings – this may be challenging, especially when working with issues that trigger strong emotions in us.

Emotions are really important, and need to be recognised and processed. McLaren (2010, p. 29) writes:

Without access to our emotional selves, we grow like trees in the wrong soil, becoming tall but not strong, and old but not mature. We don't grow up as emotive people; we grow as people who learn not to emote. Without our emotions, we can't make decisions; we can't discover our dreams; we can't set proper boundaries or behave skilfully in relationships; we can't identify our hopes or support the hopes of others; and we can't connect to, or even find, our dearest loves.

Emotion, Feeling and Mood

The three concepts of emotion, feeling and mood can be differentiated as follows:

- When something happens and the chemicals in our body react, this is an emotional response.
- We then try to make sense of the emotion, leading it to become a feeling. Feelings can be personal, physical and mental. Rogers (1959, p. 198) describes a feeling as 'an emotionally tinged experience, together with its personal meaning'.
- Mood is a longer-term phenomenon, which happens when feelings and emotions persist.

Functions of Emotions

It is common to hear emotions being labelled as ‘good’ (e.g. happiness, joy, contentment, satisfaction, desire and love) or ‘bad’ (sadness, anger, frustration, fear, jealousy, shame, guilt, anxiety and worry). Yet it is natural for humans to experience all of these emotions at different times, and each may carry important messages and learning for us, for example:

- Fear may serve as a ‘personal trainer’ to us, prompting us to answer the question ‘What action do I need to take?’
- Anger may act as a ‘guard’, asking ‘What must be protected?’ and ‘What must be restored?’
- Sadness may play the role of a ‘healer’, urging us to identify what must be released and what must be refreshed.

It is therefore important to honour all emotions, each of which has a function in our life.

Example: If a child loses their kite, it is tempting to seek to eliminate the sadness by reprimanding them (e.g. ‘Stop crying. Don’t be a big baby!’), distracting them (e.g. ‘Come on, let’s go and get an ice-cream!’) or trying to fill the hole left by the loss (‘We’ll get you another, even better kite’). However, it is most helpful to acknowledge the sadness, perhaps by saying: ‘It’s sad when we lose something we love. That happens sometimes. Would you like a big hug?’

Benefits of Acknowledging Emotions

Facing up to emotions and being willing to experience is effective in helping people to overcome. For example, Kircanski describes a 2012 experiment, in which 88 participants who were afraid of spiders were asked to approach a tarantula spider, during which their physiological reactions were monitored. The participants were divided into four subgroups – a control group (who were asked to do/say nothing) and three other groups, who were asked: (1) to describe what they were feeling; (2) to reassure themselves; or (3) to distract themselves by talking about something else.

The study showed that the participants who described what they were feeling were able to get closer to the spider with less of a physiological response, suggesting that speaking about what we are feeling is beneficial.

Helpful Questions when Experiencing Emotions

It can therefore be helpful to ask yourself and clients:

- Can you describe how you are feeling?
- If that emotion was a friend, how do you think it would be trying to help you?
- Is there a message behind that emotion?
- What are your options now?
- Now you have honoured the emotion, what will you do?

This can allow you to work through the emotion in a healthy way that resolves it and allows you to take action, and so let it go and move forward, rather than harbouring unexplored and unexpressed emotions.

Handling Overwhelming Feelings

If you are feeling overwhelmed by an emotion, do try taking a pause and using the ‘tarantula strategy’: name what you are feeling.

However, it may be necessary sometimes to ‘titrate’ the emotions, if they are too powerful to allow yourself to look at in full immediately. Useful techniques for this include:

- breathing exercises, e.g. breathing out for longer than you breathe in, five times
- the five senses exercise (acknowledging five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste) can help keep you grounded in the here-and-now
- describing your five favourite things
- doing something involving your cognitive skills (e.g. some people find it helpful, when they are angry, to do some maths).

Personal Wellbeing Plans

It can be helpful to anticipate challenging emotions by drawing up a personal wellbeing plan, answering the following questions:

- What can have a negative effect on my mood?
- What are my signs that my mood is changing?
- What activities help me lift my mood?
- What are the top three things I can do that help?

References

Kircanski, K. (2012). 'That Giant Tarantula Is Terrifying, but I'll Touch It' – Expressing Your Emotions Can Reduce Fear [online]. *Association for Psychological Science*. [Viewed 28/4/23]. Available from: <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/releases/that-giant-tarantula-is-terrifying-but-ill-touch-it-expressing-your-emotions-can-reduce-fear.html>

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