

UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONS



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BASIC EMOTIONS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS:

There are many lists of basic emotions. We have chosen to describe eight that are based on our evolution from animal emotions and are found universally in people around the world. These emotions are paired in a range from mild to intense.

1

Interest–Excitement:



2

Enjoyment–Joy:



3

Surprise–Startle:



4

Distress–Anguish:



5

Anger–Rage:



6

Fear–Terror:



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Shame–Humiliation:



Disgust:



JUDGING EMOTIONS:

Although we often tend to view emotions as good or bad, this is not a helpful judgment. Emotions are neither good nor bad; they simply are part of our functioning as humans. It is true that we recognize some emotions as pleasant and others as unpleasant or painful, but you will find it very useful to focus more on the purposes and meanings of an emotion rather than judging them. This is a step toward accepting them as part of you and part of life.



EMOTIONS HELP US MEET OUR NEEDS:

One major function of emotion is to motivate and initiate behavior that is directed toward specific goals, that is, behavior that can meet our needs. For example, anger directs us to fight when we are provoked, hopefully keeping us safe; fear prompts us to run away or avoid something that is frightening or threatening.

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love directs us to behave in ways that draw us closer to the ones we love, because we need safe relationships. Emotions are not really separate “things”; they are part of bundled experiences that include not only emotions, sensations, thoughts, and physical actions but also our perceptions of what is happening in the present and our predictions of what will happen if we act in a certain way. Emotions are as essential as thinking and behaving to our survival. However, when the ability to regulate and tolerate emotions is disrupted or inadequate, this entire bundled experience becomes difficult to manage.

TWO KINDS OF EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES:

Some feelings or emotions are involuntary reactions to events that happen around you (for example, feeling joy because someone is especially nice to you; anger because someone criticizes you or forgets a date you made; fear because something startles you). Other emotions are primarily a reaction to your own



thoughts, actions, and feelings (for instance, being ashamed of your body because an inner voice tells you that you are ugly; feeling embarrassed that you feel sad; feeling guilty or afraid because you are mad with someone). These “feelings about feelings,” that is, emotions about our inner experience, particularly those that involve variations of shame or pride, are called self-conscious emotions (Tracy, Robins, & Tangney, 2007). They can often be problematic, because they are paired with inner negative judgments about what we experience.

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FEEDBACK LOOPS OF PERCEPTIONS, THOUGHTS, FEELINGS, AND BEHAVIORS:

As noted earlier, our emotions are intimately connected with our thoughts, behaviors, sensations, and the ways in which we perceive the world. These experiences are not actually separate, but rather bundled together, in continuous feedback loops with each other. For example, when people feel afraid, they will tend to view the world through the lens of fear, perceiving many things as threatening, when daily life may not be dangerous in reality. These perceptions are related to fear-related thoughts and beliefs, for example, "That man is frowning; he must be angry with me; anger is dangerous; I must get away." These thoughts and beliefs heighten the perception of danger, which heightens the feelings of fear, which heightens thoughts of danger, and so on. And perceptions, emotions, and thoughts induce decisions to act in certain ways. Eventually, people may become so sensitively conditioned to an emotion such as fear that merely having a physical sensation of fear, such as a sinking feeling in the stomach, may prompt them to believe danger is near and to act in a fearful way.

PROBLEMS WITH EMOTIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH A COMPLEX DISSOCIATIVE DISORDER:

People with a complex dissociative disorder were often confronted with situations that were extremely overwhelming emotionally. Generally young children



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People with a complex dissociative disorder were often confronted as children with situations that evoked extreme and overwhelming emotions. Generally young children learn from their caregivers how to understand and regulate emotions. People with a dissociative disorder often grew up in families in which it was not acceptable to show or discuss certain emotions. In some cases, it was actually dangerous to express feelings, resulting in punishment, ridicule, or complete disregard. Parents or caregivers of people with a complex dissociative

disorder typically had a problem with emotions themselves and were thus unable to teach their children adaptive and healthy skills to deal with emotions. These children learn to avoid or disregard their own feelings. They also have difficulty reflecting, that is, accurately reading other people's emotions and intentions in the present, generally assuming something negative rather than positive.



INTENSE EMOTIONS ARE OFTEN DISSOCIATED:

People with a dissociative disorder have compartmentalized, intolerable, intense emotions in various parts of their personality. Sometimes parts that function in daily life do not experience much emotion and have learned to avoid feeling much. They may experience feelings as "all or nothing," that is, far too intense or not at all. Some dissociative parts of the personality, living in traumetime, may experience the same emotion no matter the situation, such as fear, rage, shame, sadness, yearning, and even some positive ones just as joy. Other parts have a broader range of feelings. Because emotions are often held in certain parts of the personality, different parts can have highly contradictory perceptions, emotions, and reactions to the same situation.

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As an example, you may be in your therapist's office and hear a door slam in the hallway. You jump and are startled, but the adult part of you is able to think, "It's OK. It's just a door closing." Yet a very frightened part of you becomes more and more upset and freezes or wants to run out of the room, because that part is not yet oriented to the present and still feels in great danger as though the past were the present. Intense fear continues to be dissociated in that part of you, while you may not feel it at all. You, or other parts of you, may be highly critical of the scared part of yourself. You may become so fearful or ashamed of so many emotions, as well as the physical sensations that are a natural part of emotions, that you have learned to avoid (some of) your inner experience at all costs (see chapter 5 on the phobia of inner experience).

NEGATIVE JUDGMENTS OF EMOTIONS AMONG DISSOCIATIVE PARTS:

Dissociative parts of an individual often make negative emotional judgments about each other. For example, one part may feel disgusted because another part feels needy or dependent; or one part feels angry because another part is afraid to try new things. Some parts avoid feeling anything at all and believe emotions are a waste of time. Some people hear these comments in their head or "sense" them in the background. These "feelings about feelings" are often highly problematic, because they generally include harsh, negative judgments about basic emotions, which, in fact, are merely an inevitable part of being human.



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FEAR OF LOSING CONTROL:

The major parts of you that function in daily life may have little idea of why a given feeling occurs, almost as though it comes “out of the blue.” Thus, people with a dissociative disorder may experience anxiety or fear of losing control of their behavior or feelings to other parts of themselves. In addition, emotions can be experienced as so overwhelming that some people describe it as “falling apart,” “exploding,” “crumbling,” or other metaphors for intense loss of control.



DIFFICULTY ATTENDING TO EMOTIONAL SIGNALS IN THE PRESENT:

We all must attend to the signals that emotions give us. Otherwise the emotion is likely to intensify or evolve into something else even more difficult to manage. Many people find it easy to ignore their feelings. But an ignored minor feeling may escalate to an intense one, for example, irritation at someone who is bothering you may build to outright anger if you do not address it. You might then explode in anger with your friend or partner, and the other person will have no idea why, because you never said anything about being irritated. If you had been able to attend to the signal of irritation, you may have been able to speak up respectfully, set good boundaries, and never come to the point of anger.

Most people with a dissociative disorder have not learned to read their emotional signals, only recognizing that they feel globally overwhelmed, or awful, or bad, or tense.

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They are not yet able to distinguish the physical and mental signals associated with specific emotions, and how they might differ from the signals of other emotions. They must first learn to read and interpret their emotional signals and match them to particular emotions. Reading emotions may be complicated by the fact that some parts have an emotion, while others may not experience it. The part that does not experience the emotion may only be aware of a vague unease or restlessness. This is one reason why it is vital to develop more internal awareness about your emotions and dissociative parts of yourself.

TRIGGERS MAY EVOKE OVERWHELMING EMOTIONS:

As we noted earlier in the chapters on triggers, they may instantaneously evoke powerful and overwhelming emotions. Various dissociative parts tend to have their own particular set of emotions related to traumatizing events, and thus they will be triggered to experience those emotions, without regard to the present situation. In fact, such parts often do not even experience much of the present. Thus, while one part oriented more in the present may be feeling fine, another part that is stuck in the past might be quite fearful or angry. The emotions of dissociative parts can intrude into present experience so that a person begins to feel fear, anger, or shame that is not related to the here and now. These feelings, stemming from dissociative parts, can be confusing and frightening, leading the person to try to avoid emotions, as well as situations in which these emotions are reactivated.



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MINDFULNESS EXERCISE:

Emotions can best be understood and dealt with when you are fully engaged in the present moment and able to attend to your inner experience while staying in the here and now. The following exercise is designed to help you practice being present and mindful. It will be most helpful if all parts of you can participate; otherwise your attention is divided rather than concentrated on the present.

You will need a small piece of food that you enjoy, such as a raisin or other piece of fruit, a piece of candy or cookie, cheese or nuts, or a slice of vegetable.

Take the food and put it in the palm of your hand or between your finger and thumb. Look at it carefully. Give it your full attention and examine it as though you have never seen anything like it before. Roll it gently between your thumb and forefinger. Explore it with your fingers. Look carefully at the parts that might catch the light, and at all the little grooves and ridges or irregularities. Explore every single nook and cranny of it.

And if, while you are doing this exercise, thoughts enter your mind such as "This is stupid!" or "What on earth is the use of this exercise?" or if other thoughts about another topic come, simply acknowledge them and redirect your attention back to your food. Now smell it, holding it right under your nose, and with each breath you take, notice the smell. Slowly move it towards your mouth. You may feel your mouth beginning to water.



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Put it in your mouth and notice what your mouth feels like, with the food in it. Let it lie on your tongue a little. Then bite down on it deliberately, noticing the taste that is released. Chew on it slowly, notice whether more saliva enters your mouth, and whether the food gradually begins to feel different in your mouth. Chew slowly, savoring each bite. When you are ready to swallow your food, be aware of it going down your throat and into your stomach. Notice that in your mouth the last remnants of the taste of the food may still linger. Each day this week, practice eating something with complete attention: a piece of cheese, an apple, a piece of candy. Practice with a food that you like.

You can expand this exercise to include other routine actions, such as brushing your teeth, shopping, driving, getting dressed, and so forth. The point is to be completely focused on the present experience, even when there does not seem to be any important meaning to it. Such exercises are meant to help you learn to be present and attentive to yourself and your environment in the moment, a necessary skill for reflecting and keeping yourself grounded.



HOMEWORK SHEET 1

IDENTIFYING AND UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONS:

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1

Make sure you can identify in yourself or in others the eight basic emotions listed in the beginning of the chapter. Name one or two emotions below with which you feel comfortable.

2

Name one or two emotions that you never or very rarely experience, or of which you are afraid or ashamed.

3

Describe an impulsive urge to act (do something) that you might experience when you are faced with a difficult emotion. For example, when you feel lonely, you feel the need to make the feeling go away by any means possible, even though you know that the behavior is not good for you in the long run, such as drinking, self-harm, (binge) eating.

4

List one or two healthy ways of coping with the feeling you described in #3 above, even if you have not been able to use them yet.



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5

Name any emotions you might judge as “bad” in yourself or others and state why you think they are negative.

6

Do you find that pleasant feelings such as happiness, pride, fun, or joy are negative for you? If so, describe what is negative for you about those feelings.

7

Name any emotions that some parts of you might experience and other parts do not. Describe your reaction to those emotions. Describe the reactions of other parts of you to those emotions.

8

Please describe as best you can what you are concerned about or fear if you experience a certain emotion that you now avoid.



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HOMEWORK SHEET 2

SENSORY EXPERIENCE OF AN EMOTION:

Choose one emotion and describe how you experience it in as much detail as possible. Feel free to use metaphors, images, and descriptions of sensory experiences. Use the suggestions below as a guide. There are no right or wrong ways to describe your emotion.

- **Sensations that Accompany Emotion:** tingly, tense, warm, cold, shivery, sweaty, dizzy, burning
- Colors, such as ice-blue, red-hot, sunny yellow, dreary grey, pitch-black
- Sensations such as bitter, sweet, sour, rough, soft, hard, smooth
- Shapes such as round, square, twisty, ball, triangle, rope, blob
- Metaphors such as "like a storm"; "like a big black hole in my chest"; "like a tornado"
- **Creative Arts:** painting, drawing, doodling, mandalas, collages
- **Writing:** keep a journal about your feelings or write a story or poetry
- **Music:** make a collection of music that expresses your emotion
- **Movement:** explore finding a particular posture or movement that symbolizes your emotion

As you reflect on the sensory experiences above, explore how you might be able to change them to feel better. For example, if you experience an emotion as a hard black ball in the pit of your stomach, ask yourself what the ball wants to do or what it needs. Does it want to be thrown? To change color? Does it want warmth? To be held in your hands? To dissolve into light? Does it have something to say? Does it want to uncurl and stretch out? Does it prompt a movement in your body, a change in posture? Be creative and trust yourself, and get help if you feel stuck in your exploration. Also make sure you are staying within what is tolerable as you explore. If you have trouble doing so, stop and ask for help from your therapist.