

## **SECTION II. MANAGING FEELINGS**

### **Chapter 1. The Wisdom Of Vulnerability**

It is natural to avoid pain, because it is, well, painful! When we experience emotional pain, it is natural to try to eliminate that pain from the mind so that we can feel happy and pain free. None of us enjoy feeling sad, guilty, anxious or fearful, angry, etc. Who wants to feel vulnerable? We typically seek out positive feelings, wanting to feel happy, excited, joyful, humorous, content, serene, and untroubled. In our zeal to create positive feelings while minimizing negative feelings, it is easy to perceive negative feelings as enemies to be neutralized as quickly as possible. By suppressing negative feelings, we can banish them from our conscious mind, and thereby regain a more positive emotional state, at least temporarily. But that's the rub: temporarily. By suppressing negative feelings, we add to a natural divide in the mind, conscious versus unconscious. If the mind were simply a bottomless pit, we could discard negative feelings like garbage, dropping them far enough below consciousness that their stinking fumes never touched us again. Unfortunately, the mind is not a bottomless pit, feelings do not disappear forever, and the problems which generated such feelings are not solved by suppressing them from consciousness. Feelings resurface when they are triggered, or when the problems that generated them reappear. Eventually they must be dealt with. Otherwise, the unconscious mind resembles a toxic waste dump whose fumes repeatedly poison our well being. And the poisonous unconscious cloud grows as we discard and accumulate more garbage, creating an increasing emotional stench and threat below the surface, until these feelings are addressed and resolved.

Examined from another angle, our mind wants to resolve and eliminate pain, BOTH at the moment, AND permanently. The problem is that these two goals often require opposite approaches. On the one hand, we want to eliminate pain at the moment, and suppression as well as other numbing techniques (e.g., distraction, substance abuse) is often quite effective for immediate pain relief. However, permanent pain relief requires an understanding of the problem which creates the pain, and a strategy for resolving that problem, both of which require us to experience and explore our painful feelings, as well as the thoughts, memories, and events associated with these feelings. In other words, temporary pain is required to prevent more permanent pain.

Furthermore, emotional pain can even be considered our FRIEND, in the sense that it provides abundant feedback regarding the nature of our problems, which can potentially lead to solutions for such problems. Just as the painful burning of our hand when it is accidentally placed on a hot burner helps us quickly pull our hand away to prevent more severe injury, listening to our feelings helps us understand the nature of our emotional problems and the solutions needed to allow us to feel better in the long run. Feeling and exploring our sadness helps us understand the nature of our losses, and what needs to be done in order to grieve or replace these losses. Listening to our fear and anxiety allows us to understand external and internal dangers and threats, real and imagined, that need to be examined, as well as obstacles to be courageously overcome in our lives. As John

Bradshaw noted in *Homecoming* (1990), "To put it very simply, our emotions are our most fundamental *powers*. We have them in order to guard our basic needs. When one of our needs is being threatened, our emotional energy signals us." Negative feelings are the source of useful feedback, as well as the source of significant pain in our lives. By developing a healthy balance of approaching and containing such emotional pain, we can achieve a healthy balance minimizing both temporary and permanent pain, rather than sacrificing one for the other.

Thus, we must become aware of and understand negative emotions if we are to reduce and learn from them. Let's examine a few more specific examples. If you find yourself repeatedly on the verge of tears without knowing why, it helps to become aware of the sad feeling before it gives way to tears, and to realize that the sadness comes when triggered by memories of outings with your wife and children before last year's divorce. You can then take steps to increase contact with the kids if possible, to grieve the loss of your wife more freely, and to put more energy into changing any behaviors that contribute to your repeated difficulties in relationships. If you find yourself having panic attacks and wondering why, it may help to become aware of your anxiety when it first arises, before it escalates into panic. You may then find, for example, that you become anxious when you wonder what you will do if you fail the comprehensive exam that will determine whether you remain in graduate school. You may then cancel your outing for tomorrow night in favor of studying. Etc. While suppressing emotions out of consciousness may provide immediate relief, the future consequences may prove to be more negative. Suppression leads to an accumulation of negative emotions, which not only penetrate consciousness occasionally, but can escalate to overwhelming proportions, resulting in "emotional breakdowns" (unplanned cathartic but embarrassing and self-defeating release of emotions), or the use of more extreme defenses in order to further numb and suppress (e.g., substance abuse). An awareness of the presence, timing and triggers for such vulnerable feelings can lead to an understanding of their sources, and to solutions which decrease the frequency or intensity of such negative affect.

Stated differently, feelings alert us to the threats and blockages of our basic needs, desires and expectations. Further examination may suggest that our desires and expectations are inappropriate and need to be adjusted. Alternatively, we may determine that they are reasonable, and that these threats and blocks need to be addressed and neutralized. Feelings also supply energy to, and motivation for responses to such threats, sometimes appropriately, other times excessively. Either way, feelings alert us to the need to examine a situation or relationship, to determine an appropriate and adaptive response.

Thus, while emotional pain is our enemy, it is likewise our friend. In a way, it is our immediate enemy and our long term friend, as negative emotions are painful at the moment, though an awareness and understanding of such emotions can lead to steps which reduce our pain in the future. This reduction of pain may take place via emotional catharsis, going towards pain and expressing it, e.g. by grieving a loss, thereby draining the pain from your psyche. Or, your understanding of the origins of a painful feeling may lead to behaviors which prevent or reduce its frequency in the

future. In this regard, pain can be seen as a friend which guides us toward constructive behavior.

Like a good general in wartime, we need a pair of opposite skills, being able to retreat, contain, distract ourselves, and suppress or minimize our experience of bothersome emotions when we are overwhelmed, while remaining capable of advancing when we're feeling stronger, by approaching, understanding, expressing, and resolving negative feelings. As with many dimensions in psychology, it is important to develop skills on both ends of a continuum, so that we have the power to choose the appropriate skill for a given situation, rather than being reduced to a one size fits all approach to coping. In this case, the ability to experience and express feelings, and the ability to control and shut down feelings, are opposing skills which are each quite useful, if used in proper proportions, dictated by our current situation.

Each specific emotion tells us something about our situation. Let's look at each of the half dozen most troublesome, uncomfortable feelings. First, we'll examine the benefit of the healthy form of each feeling. Later, we'll contrast this with the self-sabotaging, extreme form of each feeling, which we might call its characterological form (when such a feeling is produced excessively internally, perhaps relied upon excessively as a defense, becoming an entrenched and toxic component of our character or personality). Guilt may tell us that our behavior has violated our moral values, and guide us toward alternative behaviors that are more consistent with our conscience. Anger may stem from an injustice that needs to be addressed and rectified. Anxiety typically signals some kind of threat that must be addressed and resolved. Sadness reflects some type of loss, which must be grieved, reversed, or replaced. Frustration indicates a violation of our expectations, which must be fulfilled if possible, but reduced if not. Shame, in its healthy form, humility, lets us know if we have become too egotistical, exceeding our reasonable limits for pleasure seeking and self gratification. Emotions signal the presence of noxious dilemmas in our lives that need to be addressed. Like the physical pain that escalates as you get too close to a bonfire, emotional pain alerts you to the need for action to protect yourself. Yes, it is a symptom, a symptom of a problem that requires your attention for your ultimate well-being, not just a noisy signal to be ignored in order to regain immediate comfort.

Yet at other times, feelings can be characterological, i.e., they reflect more of your character than your situation. Anger and guilt are good examples, as they are opposite emotions that involve either exporting or importing responsibility. As we shall see, anger is always a secondary emotion, which utilizes blame as a means of converting vulnerable feelings into the stronger, more defended emotion of anger. While all of us do so sometimes, some of us consistently defend ourselves with anger, even when we ourselves are to blame for our own dilemma. In this case, anger is more about our defensive character structure, than it is about some injustice to be addressed. Likewise, with guilt, some people have an exaggerated need to please, or a habitual tendency to criticize themselves, to the point that they take far more responsibility for others' negative feelings or difficulties than is reasonable. This is codependent, characterological guilt, in contrast to moral guilt. Accordingly, we need to be on the lookout for times when our feelings are not simply a signal of a dilemma

to be addressed, but rather, a reflection of our own twisted character, which itself needs to be addressed. The chart below suggests a healthy and unhealthy variant for each of a half dozen most difficult emotions.

<u>Emotion</u>	<u>Healthy Form</u>	<u>Unhealthy Form</u>
Guilt	Moral Guilt	Codependent Guilt
Shame	Humility	Humiliation; Toxic Shame
Sadness	Grief	Chronic Depression
Anxiety	Awareness of Threat	Chronic Worry or Panic
Frustration	Blocked Expectations	Excessive Need for Control
Anger	Response to Injustice	Characterological Anger

We will examine the healthy and unhealthy forms of each of these emotions in the chapters to come.

So, are feelings justified or not? Do you have a right to your feelings? If you falsely believe that someone is against you, and scheming to harm you, is your anger justified? Some feelings are clearly more rationally based than others, and it is obviously helpful to base our feelings upon reasonable interpretations of the realities around us. Certainly you have a right to your feelings, just as you have a right, or should we say the power, to base your feelings upon distortions or even delusions. But is it wise? Some feelings are clearly more justified by reason than others. So let's distinguish between the right, the power, and the wisdom to have feelings, even when those feelings are based on distorted perceptions. If I falsely perceive that you were talking about me behind my back, do I have a right to be angry? Certainly I have the power or ability to become angry. And certainly it is not wise to become angry about a false fantasy of injustice. But do I have a right to my feelings? What does this mean? A constitutional right? The real issue here is not the right to feel, but rather, our need to be validated for our feelings. We like to be understood and supported emotionally, even if our feelings are falsely generated. If my wife got custody in a divorce hearing because of my alcoholism, I surely need to address my drinking, but at the moment, I want my friends and family to understand and validate my grief and anger, even if the anger is based on misplaced blame. We appreciate it if someone acknowledges, understands, and validates our feelings before they try to get us to revise such feelings. Otherwise, we tend to become defensive and resistant to their interventions. Thus, it helps to be supportive in response to others' feelings, even if you are trying to change their perception in order to help them reduce bothersome feelings. So I would say that the issue of whether we have a right to our feelings is a red herring. You have the power to believe and feel anything you want, but it is wise to base feelings on reality not distortions, even though we all like to feel validated for our feelings, at least initially, before our misperceptions are pointed out.

It is also helpful to OWN your feelings. It is difficult to adjust the frequency or intensity of negative feelings before you own and take responsibility for them. People don't MAKE you feel anything! They may INVITE you to feel something by

engaging in a provocative behavior, but YOU CHOOSE how to respond, from a variety of potential responses, either impulsively, or deliberately. This is a particularly important issue with anger, which always involves blame. To reduce the anger, one must first address the underlying thought/attribution process of blaming. If I tell you that you are a bastard and you punch me in the nose, you are likely to go to jail, because the court will likely consider you responsible for your behavior. I did not make you angry, and I certainly didn't make you hit me. I tried to provoke you, and succeeded, and you chose aggression as a response. Alternatively, you could have considered me to be a provocative fool and walked away, or questioned my motives for being so nasty. While most of us would nonetheless become somewhat angry in such a situation, neither the anger nor the aggression is mandatory, particularly if we are mindful of the social and emotional process that is unfolding at the moment. The irony is that anger is a secondary, defensive emotion that is intended to make oneself feel stronger, and often does so at the moment, until you are punched back, or find yourself helpless to reduce your anger and aggression until the jerks stop pissing you off. By taking ownership of your emotions as well as your behaviors, you take responsibility, which allows you to address each step of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mix that results in regrettable responses.

There is a certain wisdom in vulnerability in relationships as well. One cannot be emotionally intimate without being vulnerable. Allowing oneself to love requires allowing oneself to risk being hurt. We all want safe love, but we must risk safety in order to obtain love, or risk lack of love and loneliness if we demand too much safety. Sharing negative feelings with a partner or friend helps develop emotional connectedness. Indeed, emotional intimacy could be defined as shared vulnerability. Without risking vulnerability, we remain armored, safe at the moment perhaps, but distant and disconnected. As with other psychological dimensions, it pays to develop skills at both ends and all the way through the safety/vulnerability dimension, so we can adapt to the situation or relationship by choosing the right mix of safety and vulnerability at any given time. One would not want to be permanently vulnerable, nor irreversibly safe, armored and untouchable. There are times to be vulnerable, and times to protect oneself, and the ability to do each, at the time of your choosing, depending on your needs at the moment, is adaptive.

In this second section, we will address a variety of so called negative feelings. We will examine their value as feedback mechanisms to be utilized for our welfare, while also exploring strategies to manage their more malignant permutations. We will also present a chapter on positive psychology, on ways to produce positive, healthy psychological practices, as an antidote to an excessive focus upon eliminating psychopathology. Along the way, we will visit applications of mindfulness, a longstanding Eastern meditative practice which encourages us to not only be in the moment, but to also approach rather than avoid our mental states, to embrace and “radically accept” them. For sometimes, the cure is worse than the disease, and the solution becomes the new problem. Avoidance becomes mental enemy number one, despite, or actually because of, its value in temporarily reducing emotional distress.

