'Instead of resisting any emotion, the best way to dispel it is to enter it fully, embrace it and see through your resistance'

DEEPAK CHOPRA

Emotional healing

Why it's important to challenge and understand the thoughts we have about certain feelings

Have you ever experienced a moment where you felt truly content and calm? Perhaps you were watching a sunset or looking out at a sunny scene while brewing some fresh coffee. Maybe you'd just finished a run and felt flushed with endorphins. Perhaps it was just after you'd had some exciting news and, for a few moments, the world felt perfect. Perhaps you thought: 'I wish I could hold on to this feeling forever.' It's common to relish positive feelings and to want to hang on to them when they arise. Equally, it's routine to dislike negative emotions and to try to push them away.

Human beings have a natural emotional range, including (but not limited to) anger, sadness, fear, disgust, surprise, happiness, love, awe, excitement and calm. Some of these are primary and occur naturally and directly upon encountering a cue (for example, fear when seeing a snake), while others are secondary and based on cognitive interpretations of cues (such as feeling sad when a friend doesn't pick up a call or reply to a text because you think it means they don't care). All emotions are important, as they act as signals and help you navigate the world. For instance, while anger isn't a pleasant emotion, it acts as a strong signal that something might be wrong within your environment and you might need to protect yourself.

Inherited beliefs
But while there are a vast range of human feelings, it's common to have certain beliefs about their acceptability – or otherwise. Many people, for example, will be familiar with phrases such as 'Boys don't cry' or 'It's not ladylike to scream when angry'. Sometimes, these statements are cultural and familial tropes that get passed down through the generations and become absorbed into a person's emotional functioning, often without conscious awareness.

Most people hold meta-emotional structures, or emotions about emotions, as well as a range of cognitive beliefs associated with them. These meta-emotions, as they are called, can colour and influence a person's emotional management capacities.

Consider the following examples, which are all types of meta-emotions:

- *You should never get angry with someone you love.*
- *You should get over sadness quickly.*
- *It is unacceptable for you to have doubts about your love for a partner.*
- *You should always strive to be happy.*

These beliefs are often related to messaging from family and cultures, as well as other experiences while growing up. As an example, if you were bullied or teased for being sad and crying at school, you might develop the belief that expressing sadness is bad and try to repress it every time you experience this emotion. Over time, this might mean you lose the capacity to recognise when you are sad and instead defensively throw yourself into work or some other kind of distraction.

Challenging expectations
It is common to hold both positive and negative meta-emotions and to characterise some emotions as good and healthy, and others as dangerous or difficult. Most families and broader social groups have an emotional climate, where certain feelings are accepted and allowed while others are discouraged. Equally, there can be different expectations for different family members, based on their role in the family. It might, for example, be acceptable for adults to express anger and disappointment, while children are expected to repress these feelings.

Meta-emotional structures can be problematic as they can lead a person to selectively repress certain feelings and become anxious when they (or the people around them) display them. It can also mean struggling with difficulties in relationships and friendships. For example, if you feel uncomfortable around anxiety, you might rush to problem-solve for an anxious partner to allay your own concerns, leaving them feeling disempowered and unheard. The same can happen

with other emotions. During one therapy session, for example, a client, Abby*, confided: 'I was never allowed to be angry. Each time I was angry, my mother said I should just think of the blessings I have. Now, when I feel angry, I start to feel so guilty and have a panic attack.' The work on managing her panic involved a strong focus on exploring her meta-emotions in order to unpack her beliefs about acceptable emotional expression, allow full recognition and freedom, and to prevent what she had been told were unacceptable emotions express themselves as panic, because they elicited shame and guilt.

Accept the wider view

When working on building healthier regulation skills, psychology emphasises the importance of recognising and accepting all emotion, instead of being guided by meta-emotional beliefs and selectively allowing some feelings and repressing others. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a psychological treatment method commonly used to support people with difficulties such as anxiety and depression. ACT highlights that feelings often classified as challenging, including anxiety and sadness, are normal and part of the human condition, and can become more entrenched and severe if we try to push them away, be that through working too many hours or drinking too much alcohol. The emphasis in ACT (and within many other psychological therapies) is on learning to decouple from the instinctive urge to run away from things that are aversive (including feelings) and beginning to accept a wider range of emotions and move towards things we value.

Strategies to help

Healthy psychological functioning involves being able to recognise a range of feelings, understanding how they manifest cognitively and physically, learning to sit with them, and developing strategies to soothe and express them.

To develop these capacities, you first need to work on improving your insight into your meta-emotions and, where necessary, to amend these structures so they become more accommodating and flexible. To do this, it's helpful to consider a few things. Firstly, they're likely to be unconscious and closely related to the messages you received as a child from family, peers, social groups and even the media. To understand them, it might be helpful to notice the emotions that are accepted or discouraged by the people around you and the ways they afford them expression. You might recognise similarities in your own responses, even if you've not been consciously aware of holding any specific beliefs about emotion.

It can also be useful to consider behaviour. Sometimes it's possible to default to acting in certain ways when you feel threatened or overwhelmed. For example, if you notice that you usually shut down and withdraw when angry instead of expressing how you feel, this could point to a set of beliefs about anger being dangerous or somehow bad.

Giving yourself emotional permission

When attempting to change meta-emotional structures, it's helpful to remind yourself of the utility of all emotions and to notice that each one serves as a marker to yourself as well as to other people. Expressions of exuberant happiness, for example, signal you have cause for celebration and will draw people towards you who share in your joy. Equally, the withdrawal associated with sadness shows others as well as yourself that you need rest and support with daily living as you process the feeling.

Giving yourself explicit permission to feel everything and noting the importance of a wide emotional repertoire is vital. It can be helpful to try to evoke emotions you typically strive to escape and lean into these feelings – so, you could, for example, watch a sentimental movie if sadness is an emotion you find challenging. The next step is to take this approach into the real world and notice and allow each emotion as it arises. It can be psychologically challenging and slow but this work will support you with understanding some of your own patterns and characteristic responses and with developing more healthy patterns that support emotional health.

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FIND YOUR EXPRESSION

Some common meta-emotional beliefs come from families or caregivers. It can be helpful to raise insight into the emotional patterns within our family to help us understand our own meta-emotions. Here are some questions to guide you in your process of discovery

- Which emotions did you commonly see your caregivers demonstrate?
- Were there any emotions that were never expressed?
- Which emotions were expressly supported – for example, were you encouraged to be proud when you achieved your targets?
- Which emotions were expressly discouraged – for example, were you admonished for being angry or sad? Were you punished for being shy?
- How did you learn to deal with the feelings you were not allowed to have?
- What might be some of the healthier ways of expressing the feelings you were not allowed to have?