

Emotions as Problems

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The way we deal with emotion is the most frequent source of difficulty in our relations with others. Although each of us continually experiences feelings about others and about ourselves, most of us have not yet learned to accept and use our emotions constructively. Not only are we uncomfortable when others express strong feelings, but most of us do not even recognize, much less accept, any of our own feelings.

We know, intellectually, that it is natural to have feelings. We know that the capacity to feel is as much a part of being a person as is the capacity to think and reason. We are not aware of incompleteness in the one who seems only to think about life and does not seem to feel: to care about, enjoy, or be angered and hurt by what goes on around him. We know all this, and yet we feel that feelings are disruptive, the source of obstacles and problems in living and working with others.

It is not the feelings that are the source of difficulty in our relations with others, but the way we deal with them, our failure to use them.

Because of our negative attitude toward emotions and our fear and discomfort with our feelings, we spend much effort trying, in one way or another, to deny or ignore them. Look around you and observe how you and others deal with feelings. Make your own observations and see if they support or contradict the point that our usual response is some variation of "Don't feel that way."

To the person expressing disappointment, discouragement, or depression we say things like, "Cheer up." "Don't let it get you down." "There's no use crying over spilt milk." "Things will get better." In short, "Don't feel that way." We advise the sorrowing or hurting people, "Don't cry. Put your mind on something pleasant." We tell the angry person, "Simmer down. There's no point in getting angry. Let's be objective." To the person expressing joy and satisfaction in something he has done we caution, "Better watch out. Pride goeth before a fall." In our various group meetings we tell each other, "Let's keep feelings out of this. Let's be rational."

Another sign of the difficulty we all experience with feelings is that the more distant and remote the feelings, the more comfortably we discuss them. Try to pay attention to yourself and others when talking about feelings and ask,

“How distant are these feelings?” I predict that you will find relatively few discussions of feelings that someone is having “right now” in comparison with the number of discussions about feelings they had in the past toward somebody else. Do you find that you talk more easily about feelings toward persons who are present? As you observe yourself and others discussing feelings, see whether the following scale roughly represents what you find.

Most Distant: Least Difficult to Discuss

I tell you how one person felt toward another, neither person being present, e.g., “Joe was angry with Jim.”

I tell you my past feelings about somebody not present, e.g., “I was angry with her.”

I tell you my present feelings about somebody not present, e.g., “I am angry with her.”

I tell you my past feelings about you, e.g., “I was angry with you last month when you....” I tell you my present feelings about you, e.g., “I am angry with you.”

Here and Now: Most Difficult to Discuss

In general, the closer the feelings are to the here-and-now (to you and me in this present moment), the more difficult they are to discuss openly. The scale above implies many more subdivisions than shown. For example, it implies that I am more comfortable telling you that I was angry with you a year ago than that I was angry with you last week. The former topic is much more distant. Likewise, I can more easily tell you of last week’s anger than of my annoyance with you yesterday.

This scale doesn’t mean that people do not get angry in the present or even that they do not act angry, only that to discuss one’s present anger openly is more difficult than to discuss one’s past anger.

Why are we uncomfortable in dealing with feelings, both our own and others’? What is it that leads us to try to deny or ignore present feelings? Why do we look upon emotions as problems? I believe that the problem is that we recognize that we have less control over what we will feel than over what we will do.

I see myself as in control of my own actions. If I wish to run, I do so. When I wish to stop running, I stop. I can even decide to take longer series of actions, such as deciding to take a trip to the coast for the weekend, and then carry out my intention.

With somewhat less certainty, I see myself as usually able to control my thoughts. If I wish to plan a trip to the coast, I can think about that. If I wish to think about last week's trip, I do so. When I am unable to stop thinking of something it is usually because some strong feeling has been aroused.

My feelings, by contrast, seem to have a life of their own. I cannot start and stop them as I can my actions. My wish to feel happy does not lead me to feel happy. I can't decide to feel love for a person and then feel it. I cannot keep myself from feeling fear just by deciding not to be afraid, although I can carry out an intention not to show my fear, not to run away. I have less control over what I will feel than over what I will do.

Feelings are spontaneous responses to factors over which we have little direct control. To control the arousal of our feelings, we attempt to arrange the environment so that it will evoke the feelings we desire and not those we wish to avoid. Much of the interaction between persons can be viewed as an effort by each to control which feelings will be aroused. That is, I try to get you to act in ways that will elicit feelings in me that I desire and not those I dislike. You, in turn, attempt to get me to act in ways that will have a similar effect on your feelings. Thus, each of us tries to control the relationship (and the other's behavior) as a way of controlling his own feelings.

Others seem to have more control over what we will feel than we ourselves have. People usually say, "You made me angry," rather than, "I've become angry." One popular song declared, "You made me love you. I didn't want to do it." Maybe our discomfort with our own feelings springs from a belief (a recognition?) that to feel something toward another is to surrender some of our control of self to him. Certainly, if we believe that the other "made" us angry or "made us love him," he has some control over us.

Paradoxically, however, if we hold the other responsible for our anger, we probably expect that he should stop his annoying behavior because we feel angry. Our anger, then, is not just a felt inner state, but is felt as a claim against the other. Likewise, if we feel that the other "make" us love him, we will probably expect him to return our affection. Note your own tendency, when somebody expresses affection for you, to feel that you should reciprocate: a "you're nice too" effect.

I believe much of our discomfort with our own and others' feelings arises because interpersonal feelings precipitate a struggle for control between persons. Which of us will yield and thus give up our own identity? Do I have control over you because I can make you angry? Do you have control over me because you get angry or hurt when I act in a certain way? You and I must come to some shared understanding of the meaning of your feelings of anger, and my feelings of being hurt, of your feelings of affection, of my feelings of inadequacy around you. Are the feelings each of us has about the other really claims on the other, obligations to be and act in a certain way? Or are our feelings phenomena to be accepted and then understood? Your anger might tell us something about you and about me, if we can understand it.

To interact with another is to risk having feelings aroused by him and to risk arousing feelings in him. You and he cannot turn on and turn off your feelings toward each other merely by wishing or deciding to. Unless you avoid each other totally, you must each share some of yourself with the other. To feel something toward another, whether anger, disgust, fear, interest, or enjoyment, is to become interrelated, to lose some of our control over our own life. Thus, feelings seem to threaten our voluntary, planful control over our own affairs.

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