

What are Emotions?

An emotion is a mind-body response to the experience of pain or pleasure, to the memory of pain or pleasure, or to the anticipation of pain or pleasure. Some emotional experiences are (1) directly caused by interaction with the environment (e.g., the fear I experience if I see a snake in my path, the startle response upon hearing a loud unexpected noise), and others are (2) conditioned by influences of family, culture or education (e.g., my embarrassment if I walk into a room casually dressed and everyone else is dressed formally, my sadness when I score less than 100% on an exam). The vast majority of emotional experiences are triggered by some combination of (1) and (2).

One of the chief tasks of our cognitive/intellectual faculty is to regulate our emotions, and then channel them into life-affirming directions. Our worldview determines what is most “life-affirming,” after our basic “animal” functions have been satisfied. One thing that separates us from the animals is our “religious” or “moral” or “transcendent” thoughts, and the emotions related to these thoughts (see Jonathan Haidt, The Happiness Hypothesis, and Martin Seligman, Authentic Happiness).

Everyone has “unfinished business” or unprocessed emotions, and one way to allow them to be processed is to develop the practice of sitting still long enough to ...

- allow emotions to come into conscious awareness,
- assign names to them,
- experience them as fully as time, energy and safety allow, and
- “off-load” them in some safe and healthy way (e.g., prayer, journaling, sharing with another person or people, act them out in a dramatic/symbolic manner).

There exists a difference of opinion as to the usefulness or wisdom of intense emotion release, especially with respect to anger; nevertheless, for optimal emotional and spiritual health, we do need to express our emotions outwardly in some safe and non-self-harming manner.

The fifth of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous says, “[We] Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being, the exact nature of our wrongs.” This seems to be a fairly comprehensive model for the “off-loading” of not only our “wrongs” but also our emotions – with God, with ourselves, and with others. Small groups organized according to the support group model are very powerful in facilitating emotional healing and growth. In a chapter entitled “The Therapeutic Factors” in Irvin Yalom’s The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy, he highlights twelve “therapeutic factors” – the qualities a group should have to foster healing and growth – that may be condensed into five categories, as follows.

- the group provides as experience of “home,” love, warmth, safety, acceptance,
- the group offers hope, based on the common struggles (and victories) of each member, e.g., “If he or she can get better, maybe I can, too”,
- the group provides teaching and the live example of positive role models,
- the group draws out each member’s weaknesses and vulnerabilities – they are on display, so to speak, they are no longer hidden, and they must now be dealt with, and

- the group provides abundant opportunities for learning to do good.

A special application of “off-loading” emotions is found in the grieving process, according to general pattern that Elizabeth Kübler-Ross laid out in her work On Death and Dying:

- taking refuge in denial (I’m not yet ready to process my emotions related to this loss),
- expressing anger,
- bargaining (feeling the anxiety that is meant to stir me to action in order to prevent or change the outcome; for a loss that has already taken place, this may include regret or remorse),
- depression (feeling the full weight of, and all the emotions related to, the disorientation brought on by loss – sadness, longing, fear, loneliness, etc.), and finally
- acceptance (allowing oneself to experience and even enjoy positive emotions again, in a new equilibrium).