

# Human Emotions and Their Dysregulation

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“Emotional wisdom involves knowing when to be changed by emotion and knowing when to change emotion.”

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The word emotion comes from the Latin meaning to stimulate or excite. Emotions are states of arousal that provide us with immediate appraisal of our experience and events. Their function is to provide us with a visceral guide to our decision making and behavior—pushing us away from the things we perceive as threatening and impelling us toward the things we perceive as rewarding (Books, 2011). This article discusses the nature of human emotion, its function, its relationship to reason, its organization, and its regulation.

## Emotion & Reason

Emotion and reason are not separate aspects of our functioning, but are highly interdependent and integrated with one another (Damasio, 2005). Emotions assign value to different thoughts, experiences, and events, and reason makes choices based on those valuations. Brooks (2011) provides the metaphor of emotions serving as a kind of GPS guidance system for our brain. Like a GPS, our emotional positioning system senses our current situation and compares it to the vast body of data in its memory. It reaches certain judgments about whether the course we are on will lead to positive or negative outcomes. It then assigns each person, place, or circumstance with an emotion (fear, interest, surprise, etc.) and suggests an approach/avoidance reaction that guides our decision making and behavior.

While emotions direct and influence our decision making and behavior, they can be overridden by reason. Not all emotional responses guide us in the right direction and the rational part of our brains can help get us back on track. However, this is not to say that reason exerts a unilateral control over emotion; instead, there is very much a bi-lateral relationship between these functions where each exercises influence and can prevail over the other (LeDoux, 1996).

The rational and emotional parts of our brain are connected in a complex network of reactions and counteractions where one function continually influences the other. From this perspective, the brain is like a complex ecosystem in which each of these functions competes for influence (Edelman, 1992). The central role of reason is to ensure conscious deliberation and the main role of emotion is to provide a reactive template for our decision making and behavior. We require the active influence of both these functions to be fully informed, and when either one chronically outcompetes the other, we can become compromised in our adaptability and functioning (LeDoux, 1996).

## Primary Emotions

There are two major types of emotion: primary and secondary. Primary emotions are our hard-wired visceral reactions that are part of our core biological makeup. They are connected to

our basic human functioning and survival. Experts do not agree on how many primary emotions exist, but most recognize the following eight emotions and their associated feelings (Spradin, 2003):

- Joy—amusement, bliss, cheerfulness, contentment, delight, eagerness, enjoyment, etc.
- Love—adoration, affection, attraction, caring, lust, passion, warmth, tenderness, etc.
- Interest—absorption, entrancement, fascination, inquisitive, intrusiveness, probing, etc.
- Sorrow—sadness, anguish, dejection, despair, grief, hopeless, hurt, gloom, etc.
- Surprise—startled, astonishment, amazement, stunned, marvel, jolted, overwhelmed, etc.
- Fear—apprehensive, distressed, dread, frightened, horror, panicked, shocked, tense, anxious, etc.
- Disgust—nauseated, offensive, repulsion, distasteful, revolted, displeasing, vile, foul, etc.
- Anger—aggravation, agitation, annoyance, exasperation, frustration, hostility, rage, etc.

Primary emotions can also be categorized as either adaptive or maladaptive. Adaptive primary emotions are informative feelings (such as anger at violation, sorrow at loss, and fear at threat) that have a very clear value to our survival and well-being. They are reactions to immediate circumstances, and when the situation that produced them is dealt with or disappears, these kind of feelings usually fade. Conversely, maladaptive primary emotions are disabling feelings (such as unmanageable rage, debilitating fear, unresolved grief) that lead to prolonged states of distress. These emotions, which are generally based on past learning, often confuse and overwhelm us (Greenberg, 2002).

### **Secondary Emotions**

In addition to primary emotions, there are also a host of other reactions called secondary emotions. Secondary emotions are called secondary because they follow primary emotions and are typically in response to or in defense against primary feelings. Unlike primary emotions, these emotions are learned and come to us through a filter of thought processes that shaped by our growing up and family-of-origin experiences. These feelings can obscure what we are feeling at the more primary level. These emotions often arise from attempts to judge and control primary responses (Greenberg, 2002). Some of the more debilitating secondary emotions are as follows:

- Shame about feeling sorrow and anger
- Anxiety about feeling fear and anger
- Depression about feeling sorrow
- Embarrassment about feeling joy and love
- Obsessiveness about feeling interest

- Anger about feeling angry or afraid
- Guilt about feeling sexual

The biggest problem with secondary emotions is that they are often maladaptive. While primary feelings can be either adaptive or maladaptive, secondary feelings usually get us into trouble when they become part of our established patterns for dealing with stress. Very often they are more about our own internal beliefs about how we are supposed to feel rather than how we actually feel. Spradlin (2003) makes this point with the following example:

A little boy who scrapes his knee doesn't know what the pain means to the degree that a grown person might. His crying may be activated by fear of being seriously injured. If he's then told, "Boys don't cry," he receives a cultural message about what is expected of him as a male. This message can become over-generalized. Later in life, when the boy becomes a man, he may feel sadness in situations where he is faced with loss or pain. But because of his cultural training, the man tries to cut off his emotions, or may tell himself that he's just being too sensitive. He doesn't validate his primary emotion, and then begins to feel shame about having been too sensitive. The shame in this case becomes the secondary emotion, and isn't helpful in adapting to his current situation. (p. 27-28)

### **Emotional Dysregulation**

Both maladaptive primary and secondary emotions are recognizable because they make us feel bad. However, they differ from one another in that secondary emotions are often more global and nonspecific. Secondary emotions signal that something is wrong, but we typically don't know why. We may just feel inexplicably angry, or despondent, and wonder why we have reacted that way. Secondary reactions could be part of the symptoms of anxiety, such as feeling tense, apprehensive, or a sense of dread. They can also be connected to anger, such as feeling hostile, spiteful, or resentful; but they are not the primary emotions of guilt, fear, anger, or sorrow that are part of our core biological makeup (Greenberg, 2001).

Chronic difficulties in managing emotions are the result of too much emotional vulnerability and inadequate emotional regulation. Emotional vulnerability is characterized by a combination of: (1) high sensitivity to emotional stimuli, (2) intense responses to emotional stimuli, and (3) a slow return to a state of equilibrium once emotional arousal occurs. Emotional regulation is the capacity to exhibit or inhibit spontaneous visceral arousal in a given situation. When emotional sensitivity is too acute and/or when regulation is insufficient, emotional dysregulation takes place. Emotional dysregulation is essentially a state of arousal in which maladaptive primary and secondary emotions have taken over the experience of the person.

Being able to obtain and sustain effective emotional regulation involves exercising a combination of cognitively and emotionally based strategies. While both strategies employ somewhat different means to achieve emotional regulation, both can be very effective in helping people better manage their feelings.

Emotionally based methods are primarily concerned with employing emotions to achieve regulation, and emphasize the development of such skills as being able to identify and label emotions, practicing self-acceptance, establishing a working distance from problem emotions, increasing positive emotions, and reducing vulnerability to negative emotions (Greenberg, 2002). Cognitively based methods take a different approach in that they primarily rely on thoughts to achieve better regulation. These methods stress the development of such skills as identifying emotional triggers, exercising mindfulness, challenging self-talk, and increasing emotional resilience through relaxation (Dimeff & Linehan, 2001; Spradin, 2003). Both methods emphasize the importance of engaging in active self-soothing and distraction, as well as improving interpersonal effectiveness and intimacy, but again they approach regulation from either an emotive or cognitive starting point.

Regardless of the starting point, the methods from each approach are clearly effective; but as previously pointed out, they are often effective differentially—the cognitive approach working better for some people and the emotive approach working better for others. Why? It goes back to that complex wiring in our brains where, despite the overlap between reason and emotion, one of these functions is usually more fully developed than the other. Consequently, we are typically more adept at employing one of these functions over the other to regulate our feelings. In sum, our own amalgamation of emotional and cognitive capabilities will determine what methods we use to achieve more adaptive emotional regulation.

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