“Negative” Emotions

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**Are some emotions bad?**

Many of our emotions have been labeled by our culture as “negative” -- bad to have. These include jealousy, anger, grief, sadness, and others.

Clearly most of these involve some sort of pain – but pain is itself not a bad thing. Pain tells us that something is wrong and needs to be changed. Pain helps us prevent serious injury. Pain, physical or mental, is as essential a form of feedback regarding our choices as is satisfaction or happiness. “Painful” and “negative” are really not synonymous.

Also, a flip side of this cultural labeling is that other emotions are labeled as “positive” or “good “ emotions. These include love, happiness, passion, and others. But these emotions are not always good – one may love putting others down, or be happy when others fail/ come to harm, or have a passion for waging war.  **Labeling emotions as being only good or only bad, only positive or only negative, is inaccurate and unhelpful.**

Not the least of what is unhelpful is that this disguises the true vale of “negative” emotions. Emotions exist to help us, not harm us. We need both the information (what type of emotion am I feeling) and the energy that emotions bring in order to address the issues that they call to attention in our conscious thinking.

**My belief is that emotions are messages and motivation our unconscious thinking makes us consciously aware of because there is something going on which we need to consciously address.**

Let’s look at that: Our unconscious thinking handles the vast majority of the daily decisions we make all on its own, without any need for us to pay conscious attention to these choices. At one time in our lives most of these choices were conscious ones – how do I sit up? How do I walk, or talk, or make my hands make a gesture? As we got to the point where we “no longer have to think about these” they became unconscious and automatic. We call this learning.

The same holds true for us learning to recognize certain other patterns like the following: this is a situation where I was in danger, this was one where I chose to do something wrong, this was one where I did something I valued, etc. Forming the information form these experiences into patterns then allows us to recognize that a similar situation may be occurring. That allows us to better anticipate and deal with the new situations. And, over time and with many repetitions, these patterns also become part of our unconscious thinking.

The net result is that our unconscious, which can attend to many more details simultaneously than our conscious thoughts are able to, very rapidly can recognize the elements that may indicate a pattern is present. If the pattern is a true repetition, or otherwise “complete” then the unconscious may react immediately. We may act as if we are in danger but not feel afraid, or act as if someone has violated an agreement but not feel angry. However, if our unconscious is not absolutely certain it is interpreting things correctly, or recognizes the pattern mat be influenced by the context (or other associational information), or if the response to the pattern requires us to make conscious deliberations or conscious choices, then the unconscious cannot (and should not) act alone. **In such instances our unconscious needs to make our conscious mind aware of the situation, and it does so by sending to consciousness an emotion.**

Emotions then – all emotions – provide valuable information which we need to pay attention to and respond to. Each separate emotion gives us different information, and thus, when accepted, steers us towards what we need to attend to next to assess and handle the situation.

As an example of this, guilt is an emotion that says that I have deliberately or inadvertently made a choice which is against my principles of what I consider right behavior. (This may or may not be in accord with what society believes to be right behavior.) Feeling guilty is a message for me to consciously look at the situation to see if I have indeed done that., and, if so, then focuses me on what things to focus on to deal with it.

Why is this necessary? **Because even though the feeling is a true response to our unconscious awareness,** **the reason for the feeling may be faulty.** The best example I can think of for this is that of going to a scary movie. We feel genuinely scared – our unconscious is identifying correctly the pattern elements – but consciously we know that the feeling is not based on reality, so that we do not have to CONTINUE feeling scared. (Small children, who have less ability to determine what is real from what is not, do continue to be scared.)

So let’s go back to the example of guilt. If we determine that it is rational for us to feel guilty, then by labeling the feeling as guilt we know what to do in order to deal with the situation at hand. For guilt, almost always this has the following steps: 1) we admit we are responsible/accountable, 2) we attempt to correct the situation to its pre-bad choice condition as much as is possible, 3) we accept reasonable consequences, 4) we accept an additional penalty if that will help us better recognize the true importance or intensity of this kind of choice, and 5) we promise and take steps not to make the same choice again.

Once these steps are taken the feeling of guilt goes away – or, better stated, it is transformed into something else, usually remorse or sadness. But not always --sometimes the emotion we feel after dealing with guilt is joy, or relief. In fact it can be pretty much any other PASSIVE emotion.

**Active and passive emotions**

What do I mean when I say a “passive” emotion? While “good” or “bad” may be unhelpful if applied to emotions, emotions can be categorized in another way: as active or passive. Anger, grief, fear, and guilt are **active emotions – they require us to do something about them now, in the short term.** If they become chronic they become unhelpful – this is where grudges, feuds, hopelessness, phobias, self-sabotage, and other such behaviors evolve from.

Other emotions tend to be passive – sorrow, remorse, forbearance (as acceptance of things that cannot at this time be changed), caution, and the like. **These can exist as chronic states.** For example, I can feel sorrow about my mother’s death for the rest of my life – it doesn’t require me to DO anything about it, it just is. Her

Other emotions lie somewhere in-between – irritation, doubts, moral discomfort, silliness, etc. These are acceptable for a longer period of time than anger, guilt and the rest, but usually not helpful if left to go on indefinitely.

For further information about specific emotions see my other articles.

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