Overly Prolonged Emotional States

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**Why do I have feelings that just don’t ever go away?**

Sometimes people find themselves “trapped” in an emotional state or feeling that they think ought to go away but somehow doesn’t. This article will give some suggestions as to what might be going on, and what to do about it.

**Normal processing of feelings and emotions**

Usually our emotional processing goes something like the following: we have a sudden intense feeling about something, and that feeling usually is one of what I call the “active” emotions – anger, guilt, shame, fear, jealousy, joy, happiness, love, grief, etc. These feelings come with a lot of energy (releases of body chemicals such as adrenaline). The purpose, I believe, of the feeling is to focus our conscious attention on a situation that needs us to either consciously determine that something is happening that needs our immediately attending to, or that requires us to make conscious choices about how to respond to, or both those things. The energy is to provide us the motivation and power to do just that; it also forces our consciousness to pay attention to this message from our unconscious -- it’s hard to ignore a strong feeling!

Usually the two “tasks” above are precisely what we do next: we consciously decide if the feeling is really justified and accurate to the situation, and if so then we make choices or take action to deal with what is going on. When we do that the feeling either goes away or transforms into what I call a “passive” emotion/feeling, something like remorse, nostalgia, satisfaction, contentment, caution, self-humor, abashment, or the like. These passive emotions never go away completely, but are also not constantly present. They come and go as occasional transient thoughts or awarenesses, and are rarely long-lasting unless we choose consciously to have them be so. Typically these do not come with the sharp intensity of the active emotions, since they most often do not require us consciously to take immediate action. (More on passive emotions in a later article.)

Unfortunately, sometimes the active emotions do not go away, but stay with us chronically. When this happens it almost always has bad results. These emotions often also transform, but now we end up with rage, bitterness, obsession, hopelessness, dependency and victimhood, phobias, paranoia about relationship fidelity, whining, unremitting pleasure-seeking, and other such feelings and behaviors. Typically when we label emotions as negative we are actually referring to these secondary emotional states, not the anger, jealousy, fear, etc. that they initially started out to be.

**Three main reasons for feelings going on too long**

I believe there are three main reasons why this occurs. The first is that of denying or attempting to suppress the feeling. The second is that of not following through with the “tasks” the feeling presents us: verifying if it is based on reality and making conscious choices to deal with it if it is. The third is that of mislabeling the feeling – thinking it is, for example, shame or guilt when it really is about anger. Let’s look at each of these in more detail.

**Attempting to ignore, deny, or suppress a feeling**

Emotions do not go away if the reason for them remains unchanged. Our unconscious will automatically send us these messages/requests for conscious involvement when the criteria for this are perceived: conscious verification and/or action are needed. Moreover, a blanket statement of “this isn’t correct” doesn’t work – the unconscious wants to know what specifically it got wrong, so that it can adjust the unconscious pattern to not be falsely triggered next time. It wants specifics – because if the pattern isn’t changed it is caught in the loop of continuing to automatically send the feeling message/request again and again.

Moreover, if the feeling message isn’t getting through or being dealt with in a timely manner, the unconscious usually will increase the intensity of the energy that comes with the message. If it thinks you’re not hearing it, it talks louder and more insistently. Remember, it is trying to help you deal with a situation it identifies as requiring immediate and urgent conscious attention. Its goal is your safety and well-being. It won’t just “go away” as long as what triggered it remains basically unchanged.

Of course if the thing that triggers it IS going to change soon, then ignoring, denying, or suppressing the emotion is an effective strategy. And one most people use – for example saying to oneself “Yes, this is a scary situation but it will all be over soon.”

However, just as with the example above, it is best to communicate this to your unconscious.

**Failing to follow through with the tasks the feeling needs for resolution**

If you do not follow through with the necessary tasks needed to resolve the situation the unconscious is concerned about, the unconscious will keep sending you the feeling, because that is simply what it is supposed to do. As long as there is “unfinished business” and the situation is largely unchanged the feelings will continue to be sent out. You may be successful in temporarily diverting conscious attention away to other things, or to blotting out or masking the feelings temporarily, but you won’t be able to stop them from coming.

**Mislabeling one feeling as another feeling**

The final case is of a different nature. We identify what a feeling is partly based on what we are told it should be, partly based on what we learned it should be, partly based on what we expect it should be, and partly based on the context it arises in.

Because of all these influences we may misidentify the feeling we are having as another feeling. For example, victims of childhood sex abuse often have feelings of shame and guilt. Most of the time these are mislabeled feelings – the shame and guilt belong to the perpetrator, not the victim. The victim should more rightly feel anger.

If the feeling is mislabeled the “remedies” or mechanism for resolving things simply will not work – and we will not understand why. No matter how often a person tries to do what is right to resolve guilt – admit having made a bad choice, try to make amends, accept the consequences, accept any penalty, and vow not to do it again – the feeling never goes away, and always stays powerful and active. This is crazy-making, because the person is “doing everything right” but getting no relief. And the reason there is no relief is that they aren’t really guilty – the feeling is actually something else.

**Conclusions**

Any time emotions do not go away but stay powerful and active it is important to assess why this is so and not just take this as your burden or your fate. Check first to see if the problem is that you are trying to not feel the feeling – perhaps because it is painful, because you are “not supposed to feel that” or because you were taught that feelings are unhelpful and to be avoided or ignored.

If you are accepting the feeling, then check to see if you are addressing all the steps needed to resolve it . Any step left undone can cause the feeling to remain unresolved.

Finally, if you accept the feeling and believe you have done everything you should to make it go away but it still doesn’t, look carefully as to whether you have somehow come to mislabel the feeling as a different feeling instead. If you call a feeling anger when it is really fear, or love when it is really jealousy, or sadness when it is really shame, you are likely to have a feeling that it seems that nothing you do can stop.

And if you have trouble sorting all of this out, ask for help. Often someone outside of yourself can supply a different perspective that can help you look at the problem with fresh eyes and opened understanding.

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