Urgent and Enduring Emotional States

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**Urgent vs Enduring Emotions**

Some emotions empower us to do something immediately – they carry an imperative for action, an urgency. Something must be done NOW, and your body is flooded with the appropriate chemicals to take action immediately. Fear, guilt and anger are good examples of these kinds of emotions. I call this category of emotional states **Urgent Emotions.**

Other emotions act more like labels or commentaries. These do not carry that same sense of urgency. So instead of fear we might feel apprehension, instead of guilt we might feel remorse, instead of anger we might feel frustration or impatience. These are not necessarily passive states – we may still take some action because of them – nor are they states of resignation/acceptance, but **they do not require something be done immediately** (or sometimes ever). They also do not come to us with the same physical reactions – our bodies are not simultaneously physically “empowered” or chemically induced towards action. I call this category of emotional states **Enduring Emotions**.

**Hybrid States**

We sometimes create other states that combine these.

In the first instance are Urgent Emotions that cannot be dealt with immediately **due to causes beyond our control**, and thus are transformed into chronic states of physical and mental stress. Fear can transform into terror or chronic anxiety. Guilt can transform into self-loathing. Anger can transform into rage. We continue to be empowered chemically and mentally to act, but cannot.

In the second case are Urgent Emotions that are **suppressed** (they can be dealt with but **the person chooses** **not to**), and thus are transformed into chronic states of emotional deadness. We have to fight against ourselves, to use MORE energy to offset the energy to act, which can lead to mental and physical fatigue or a sense of being constantly over-energized without any outwardly obvious reason to be so.

In this case fear can transform into apathy towards risk, guilt can transform into disconnection, isolation, or passive sociopathy,, and anger can transform into bitterness, lack of empathy, or callousness. (NOTE: In the case of suppression there is no direct link between the originating state and where it leads, so the results are highly variable and individualistic. The examples above are only common manifestations, not definitive ones.) The key here is a LACK of action where it would be expected.

In the third case an Enduring Emotion is inappropriately elevated to act as an Urgent one. Typically we characterize this as “over-reacting.” The person acts when we would expect them to be inactive. If the emotional state is apprehension, elevating it to fear creates rashness or panic. Remorse transforms into obsequiousness or chronic guilt and acts of self-blame (“I am always at fault for whatever bad happens.”) Frustration becomes ascerbity, cynicism, sarcasm, chronic criticism or passive-aggressiveness. The person seems to go out of their way to be aqctive when the situation does not seem to require it.

It may be becoming clear to you that all the states in these hybrid cases are characterized by chronic action that never alters the underlying emotional state – in the first case the fear, guilt, or anger never goes away rather than leading to the actions necessary for the emotion to be resolved and go away. In the second case the enduring emotion gets an immediate but inappropriate acting out that seems to make the emotion go away but actually doesn’t. Acting out in anger doesn’t eliminate the causes of frustration, panic doesn’t eliminate apprehension, acting out self-blame doesn’t cure remorse.

Let’s discuss this a little more before we talk about the last case.

Urgent Emotions have specific “solutions” that cause the emotion to go away or transform into an Enduring Emotion

Part of the reason Urgent Emotions empower us for immediate action is that immediate action can resolve the situation that is causing the emotion. In a fear situation, I can run away, fight the fear-inducing thing, or otherwise directly address the immediate situation. In a situation involving guilt I can admit my guilt and take active steps to deal with it (see my paper on guilt for full details). In anger I can take direct immediate steps to clarify and address whatever went wrong and caused the unexpected result. Immediate action with these emotions is the best approach for keeping me physically and socially safe. Immediate action is the response that is most healthy.

Enduring Emotions are valuable because they do endure.

Enduring Emotions, on the other hand, are not resolved by the same actions that work for Urgent Emotions. For example, running away “solves” apprehension, but adds on an unhelpful cost – timidity, cowardice, over-protectiveness, etc. – all of which are not healthy functioning. It is the same for the other options. I may get a temporary relief, but the emotion always returns. To use a quote, “Wherever you go there you are.”

Enduring Emotions serve their purpose precisely because they DO NOT go away. It can be healthy to continue to feel remorse about some guilty act that you did. It is appropriate to continue to feel sadness/sorrow about a long-ago loss (but not to have continuing grief about it). These emotional states get called up when we need to recall the results of past events, so that we can consider these in our current decisions. Otherwise we would live and NOT learn.

Mislabeling emotions

An option in the first two cases is to mislabel the emotion we are feeling. Many emotions we feel have very similar physiological responses associated with them. Part of our childhood learning is learning what to label our emotions. This means we also have the ability to mislabel them, intentionally or on purpose. It is common in childhood abuse that children label what they feel as shame and guilt, when the appropriate feelings might be anger and disgust. Many adults also mislabel anger as guilt or shame, believing that anger is bad, wrong, or a sign of being morally imperfect. Many emotions get mislabeled as love.

The advantage of mislabeling is that you don’t have to deal with the actual emotion, but instead can deal with one that seems safer, more acceptable, or that rationally justifies you not taking the appropriate actions that would resolve the emotion. Misdirection is a powerful strategy, and this is just one example of it.

In accord with our previous discussion, mislabeling an emotion acts to keep the emotion from doing what it is intended to. That perpetuates Active Emotions and focuses on unproductive active responses to Enduring Emotions.

When we mislabel an emotion the active things we do to resolve the situation causing the emotion will be the wrong ones, and so, **although correct for the identified emotion**, they will not work. Typically we will continue to do “the right things” to deal with the emotion again and again, but the situation will never resolve. This creates confusion, and usually results in a belief that “I’m just not doing the steps for resolving this right [even though I actually am]” or “I’m just not doing it hard enough” or “God or the universe is just not going to ever let this go away for me like it should or like it does for other people – I must be terribly flawed or bad.” Our instincts on what to do to deal with the emotion and our efforts made to do those things are all correct – but the emotion doesn’t go away. We rarely recognize that in such circumstances the most likely reason is that we have mislabeled the emotion itself.

Back now to the final hybrid case.

Trying to change Enduring Emotions into active ones

In the fourth and final case we have chronic or Enduring Emotions which we attempt to refuse to allow to endure. We try to take an urgent, energetic action when that is not in fact called for or helpful in the way most helpful to us. As stated earlier, there is healthy value in retaining remorse or sorrow, or similar such Enduring Emotions. These often serve as valuable guides for our future actions. We ignore them or act to eliminate them at our peril. Perhaps the clearest example of this is remorse: we recognize that people who do not feel remorse for the things they have been guilty of in the past are not healthy people and often make poor decisions in the present. (And this is despite the fact that they may have dealt with the original GUILT issues.)

Even forgiven people need to feel remorse. So also with other enduring emotional states. It’s useful to have learned to be apprehensive or cautious under certain situations. It’s valuable to recognize when you are getting frustrated so you can prevent the later need to become angry, fearful, or in grief.

This is especially important because Urgent Emotions often are extremely urgent. At such times our unconscious is likely to take control, because it is reactive and can act much faster than our conscious thinking does. Our unconscious thinking is more patterned and less nuanced, is more single-answer than alternate choices driven, and is much more rigid. If we regard an Enduring Emotion as an urgent one, we are more likely to react instinctively than we are to process and balance the feeling against our conscious reasoning, and more likely to have that reaction be more rigid, stronger, and less “thoughtful” than the situation calls for.

Another valuable benefit of Enduring Emotions is that they can help us to anticipate that our situation may be heading us towards an Urgent Emotion, so we can forestall that from developing and deal with things in a way that better balances our conscious thinking and our unconscious thinking. Typically this will produce better, healthier, results. In these situations

Hybrid States aren’t necessarily bad

It would be easy to conclude that the hybrid states are always bad choices in how to handle emotions. This isn’t true. There are many sets of circumstances that arise in which dealing directly with an Active Emotion is LESS healthy than suppressing, or mislabeling it. Likewise there are situations in which making an Enduring Emotion active is also the healthiest option. The rule of thumb here is that if the situation is sufficiently unhealthy itself, then a normally healthy response may result in more harm than good.

Getting back to healthy functioning

That said, when the unhealthy situation changes, the emotion needs to change as well. Active Emotions that became enduring need to revert back to active so that they can be resolved. Enduring emotions that became active need to revert back to being enduring not expected and acting upon to “go away.”

What often prevents us from getting the emotion back into its original form is habituation – we lose conscious control over our choices about the emotional state and continue to automatically react using the unconscious pattern we have learned. This occurs when the situation and its response lasted so long that we “didn’t have to [consciously] think “ about what our response would be, or when the situation continued to be perceived as so traumatic that our unconscious got used to taking over (because the unconscious response was so much faster than the thinking one and the perception was that there was too much danger to allow for the slower conscious thinking response).

If you find yourself acting out of some emotional state that seems unhelpful or unhealthy, feels wrong or “off” after you’ve made the choice or action, or the feeling underlying the action doesn’t seem to go away whatever you do to reasonably get rid of it (e.g. “I always feel gulty/angry/etc.) the most likely cause is that a strategy of converting an Active Emotion to an Enduring One (or a re-labeling of the emotion) which was temporarily helpful has now become stuck and under unconscious control.

What is to be done?

What do you do if that’s the case? Going back to the situation that started the process to rationally analyze it is helpful – what was the emotion that rationally should have been triggered, and why was the choice different than that? If the triggering incident isn’t clear, looking at what triggers the unhelpful emotional state **now** can provide good clues. Getting professional help is a good strategy here as well, because most people aren’t skilled at knowing how to stop and retrain their unconscious thinking and choosing.

Final thoughts

Emotions are tremendously useful in keeping us healthy. Learning and habituation are similarly invaluable to us. The world is, however, not always a healthy place, and so we have to adapt, to cope, and to do the best we can. Sometimes that causes our separately very helpful systems to end up in combinations that become unhealthy – lasting longer than they should or shorter than they should, or just causing us to try to be healthy in ways that actually don’t help.

The good news is that all of these have fairly straightforward solutions, even if enacting those solutions often can take longer and be harder than we might like.

But the results are well worth it.

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