

Emotional Dysregulation or Regulation? Understanding it Comes First!

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What is Emotion?

As human beings, we all have emotions/feelings. The only difference is that some people are aware of it, and some people are not. Although there is no consensus on the definition of emotion among scientists, people widely agree that emotion has a solid biological basis. When we have an intense feeling, we usually experience some body sensations. For example, when many people feel anxious, they have heart racing, shortness of breath, shaking, sweaty, etc. Also, emotion is a way for human beings to understand the implication of what happened to them. For example, fear usually means there is a danger. On the other hand, happiness usually comes after something good occurs.

Many people confuse emotions with thoughts; For example, is the statement “I feel like things will get much worse” a thought or an emotion? Some people would say it is an emotion, because of the words “I feel like.” But it is a thought; it is a thought that person has about what will happen in the future. Emotions are usually expressed as single words, such as happy, angry, anxious, etc. Thoughts are frequently stated as a sentence regardless of the word they use, such as “I feel like my boss hates me.”

What is the Use of Emotions?

Over the past hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, emotions have helped human beings survive and thrive. Here is how. First, emotions are signals; they function as traffic lights. They tell people what is good and what is wrong. For example, disgust protects people from approaching something dangerous or dirty, such as poisonous food and polluted water. It doesn't confine to the physical world; if you feel disgusted by some people's behaviours, it usually signals that those behaviours are despicable, such as dishonesty and manipulation. Second, emotions motivate people to do things. For example, if you feel anxious about a new project at work, you work harder. If you are fearful of walking late at night downtown alone, you avoid doing so. If you enjoy talking with someone, you are willing to hang out with that person more often. Those two functions are so critical to human beings' evolution and daily life. Imagine that if our ancestors were not fearful of dangerous animals (e.g., snakes, tigers) at all, they probably would have been killed by them. If people don't feel anxious when taking on a new task, they probably don't care that much and are likely to fail.

What is Behind Emotions?

Based on emotion-focused theory developed by Dr. Leslie Greenberg, NEEDS is the underlying drive for emotions. In other words, emotions are the signals of our needs. When people's needs are met or unmet, people experience emotions. Some of the needs include basic biological needs, respect, relationships, security/attachment, and self-fulfillment. For example, when your partner blames you, you may feel sad because the needs of security and respect are not met. But, on the other hand, when you get promoted at work, you feel delighted, because the needs of being recognized and achieving are met. Therefore, when it comes to understanding emotions, it is critical to understand the underlying needs and what are met or unmet to make you feel that way.

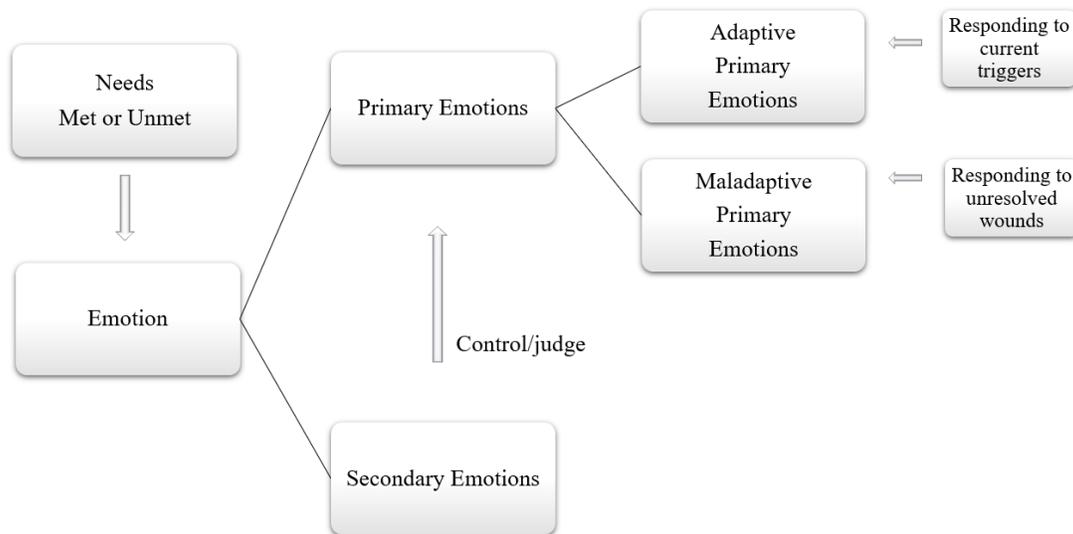
Negative Emotions Are Not Necessarily “Bad”

If emotions speak about our needs, the first thing we need to do when having feelings is to understand them, rather than getting rid of them, particularly when it comes to so-called “negative” emotions. For example, you feel angry after finding out that one of your colleagues lied to you and caused big trouble. This anger is not problematic, because that colleague was not honest, and it broke your trust and caused actual problems at work. It would be concerning if you feel happy about that. That anger becomes problematic only when it lasts too long or drives you to do some destructive behaviours. Another example is loss, when you lose the new phone you just bought last week, it is normal to feel sad, because you lost something important. Negative emotions are not necessarily problematic, they can signal that something legitimately bad happened to you, and if you feel positive about it, that would be concerning.

Negative emotions can become problematic when you are judging and controlling them. From Dr. Leslie Greenberg's emotion-focused theory, there are two layers of emotions: primary emotions and secondary emotions. Primary emotions are what we feel about what happened in the current context; secondary emotions are what we feel about having primary emotions. For example, if you lost the new phone you bought last week, it is normal to feel sad (primary emotion). But many people would also feel angry (secondary emotion) at feeling sad, because they think they should get over it as it already happened; feeling sad is useless and is a sign of weakness.

Another example is that many people may feel angry (primary emotion) after their manipulating boss imposed some challenging tasks on them; they may soon feel sad (secondary emotion) about their anger because they are helpless and can't do anything about it. As shown in those examples, the same emotion can be either primary or secondary; it depends on why it occurred in the first place. There is also a difference between adaptive and maladaptive emotions. All secondary emotions are considered maladaptive, resulting from trying to control or judge primary emotions. But not all primary emotions are adaptive. A good example of unhealthy primary emotion is that you feel extra sad after a break-up. It reminds you of a previous bad break-up you never really let go of, and you think that means you cannot maintain a romantic relationship. In this example, the sadness not only comes from the recent break-up but also from

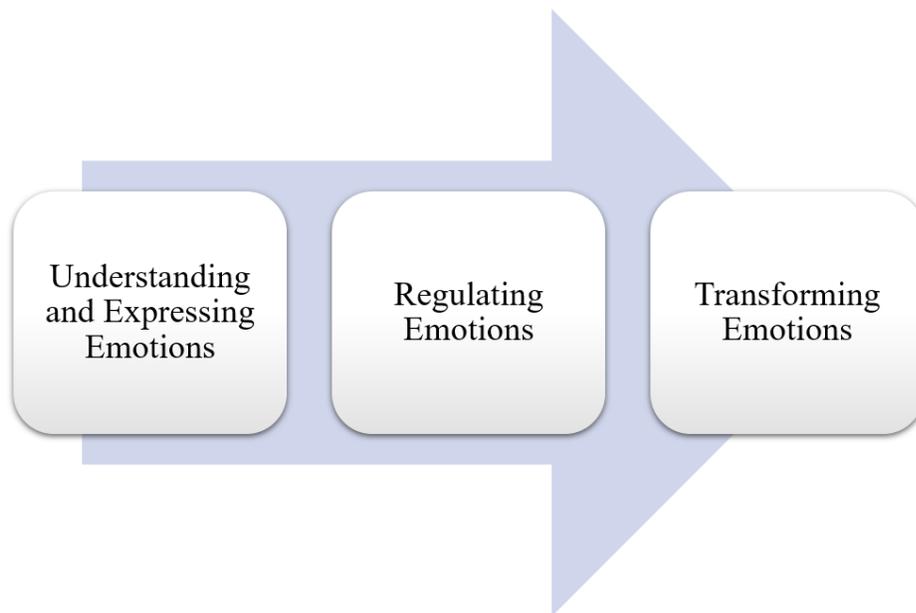
previous ones. In other words, when your feelings are related to past unresolved life experiences, even if it is a primary emotion, it is likely to be maladaptive.



Understanding Emotions
Made by Dr. Houyuan Luo based on Dr. Leslie Greenberg's EFT Theory

How should I Deal with Emotions?

You may hear about emotion regulation frequently these days, but the idea of emotion regulation gives the impression that all negative emotions need to be regulated immediately. That is not the case; as mentioned above, when you have a negative emotion, the first step is to understand its underlying meaning, namely, what that emotion is about, and what needs are not met. After you fully understand your own feelings, that is the stage of emotion regulation and transformation.



How to Deal with Emotions?

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Ways to understand your emotions include knowing the origin and development of emotions, having a better awareness of yourself, observing and reflecting on your mental experiences, expressing emotions using words or other media, talking with other people, reading self-help books/listen to self-help podcasts/watch self-help videos, writing reflection journals, talking with professionals, etc.

In terms of regulating emotions, you can be compassionate toward yourself, interact with kind and understanding people, learn calming/grounding techniques (e.g., relaxation), do meditation/mindfulness exercises, soothe yourself, talk with professionals, and so on.

Ways to transform emotions include everything from understanding and regulating emotions; the unique part is to do something to have unmet needs met. For example, if you feel angry because your colleagues don't respect you, be assertive and let them know you should be respected. If you feel anxious about an upcoming job task, put more effort into it (although not overkilling it) and solve the problem. If you feel sad about breaking up with someone you love, grieving with all methods you can, don't run away from sadness.

Why Are Some People Always Calm?

You may notice that some people are always calm with everything, which you wish you could be like that too. Let's first exclude the situation that some people are just not showing the emotional side of themselves to others. If a person, as observed by others, is calm with everything. There are two possibilities: first, that person is enlightened; second, that person is repressing negative

emotions. The first type of people is beyond the scope of this article. The second way of handling negative emotions is not uncommon; repression of negative emotions can definitely work for many people. There are two severe problems with repression: one is that it usually works on a short-term basis, and the other is that it often comes at the price of not having positive emotions too. Negative emotions won't indeed disappear without any cost simply because people ignore them.

“You cannot leave a place until you have arrived at it.”

----Dr. Leslie Greenberg

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