

Emotions and the body

Emotions such as joy, sadness, anger and fear are part of being human. Emotions give us information about the world around us, our relationships with other people and ourselves. Emotions always have a reason. Sometimes we are aware of these reasons, sometimes we are not. Some emotions seem harder to tolerate, but no emotion is bad or wrong.

- Joy moves people towards good and important things. Joy helps the body to recover from stress. It encourages you to try new possibilities.
- Fear helps us to cope in threatening situations. Sometimes the feeling of fear may stay even after the threat is over. In such situations, you have to slowly learn out of fear, and convince yourself that you are safe.
- Anger helps to defend yourself, your boundaries and the things that are important to you. A certain amount of healthy anger helps to be brave and firm.
- Grief helps to let go, accept changes in life and move on. Grief also tells you, which things are extremely valuable to you.

Emotions cause changes in both body and mind. Emotions affect the position of our body and our facial expression, and can be heard in the tone of voice. Emotions can also cause our muscles to tense or relax, our heart rate to speed up or slow down, our body temperature to rise or fall, or our hands to shake or sweat. Thoughts and feelings also influence each other. For example, thoughts can either calm or amplify the emotion we are experiencing.

Emotion regulation

Sometimes, earlier in life, we have learned ways to cope with emotions that are not useful. For example, we may have learned to "turn off our emotions" when trying to calm ourselves down. However, bypassing the emotion will sustain related emotional changes in our body for a longer time. Then you will also be left without important information brought by emotions. Suppressing emotions can also increase the experience of loneliness or being an outsider. It is more useful to learn how to regulate emotions.

Emotion regulation includes recognizing emotions, experiencing emotions, and expressing emotions. Emotions can be regulated, for example, by choosing the situations you participate in, or by modifying your own reactions in a given situation. Often the feeling begins to subside within a few minutes, if it is not fed with thoughts that maintain the feeling.

You can practice regulating your emotions, for example, in the following way:

- Notice and name the emotion(s) you are experiencing at a given moment. What is happening in my body and mind right now?

- Identify the underlying needs behind the emotion(s). What is the emotion telling me?
- Think about how you can meet these needs.

Identifying an emotion often requires you to stop. Bodily changes triggered by emotions happen automatically. Noticing these changes can help to identify the emotion.

However, emotions can also lead you astray. Difficult and strong emotions sometimes tell more about past difficult experiences than about the present. Emotions can cause us to react quickly so that we don't have time to think about the consequences of our actions. For example, a given situation that feels threatening causes the heart rate to increase and the breathing to speed up. The purpose of this reaction is to help a person survive a threatening situation. However, the reaction does not necessarily indicate whether the situation is actually threatening, or how threatening the situation truly is. The reaction can arise because we remember a threat experienced earlier in life. In such situations, it is important to calm down before acting on the basis of the emotion. When a strong emotion takes over, you can try to calm yourself down by trying, for example, the following methods:

- Focus your attention on the outside world using your senses. Observe the environment and the objects and things in it.
- Refocus your thoughts. Shift your thoughts, for example to a pleasant memory or an upcoming positive that you are looking forward to.
- Think about what you would say to a good friend who is in the same situation as you are now. How would you comfort or encourage him/her?
- Focus your attention elsewhere by engaging in a physical activity. For example, go for a brisk walk.
- Focus your breathing for a moment. Let it slow down. Calm breathing, especially with long exhalations, is a good way to calm both the body and mind.

Even if the underlying purpose of a certain emotion is unclear, expressing that emotion can help to cope with it. Emotions can be expressed in many different ways. Crying and laughing usually do us good in many ways. It is also good to talk about difficult feelings to someone you can trust. If you find words for your feelings and are able to express them by talking, it is usually easier to get along with other people as well as yourself. You can also express your feelings through movement, listening to music, drawing, painting or writing.

You can also use your body to take care of yourself when you are experiencing difficult emotions. Exercise effectively reduces depression and stress. When the body is strengthened, the mind becomes stronger, too. Emotional regulation works as its best when you have had a sufficient amount of rest, exercise and healthy nutrition.