

## Challenging Negative Beliefs about Emotion

What holds us back from taking a more helpful approach to emotional life? We may hold negative or distorted beliefs about emotions; assumptions that get in the way. Place a checkmark beside any of the beliefs below that you have been taught to hold.

- \_\_\_\_\_ **It is immature or childish to experience emotion.** Great sadness, anger, joy, love, passion, curiosity, or other emotions are all signs of arrested development. To be mature means to control not only how you express your emotions, but also which emotions you feel. A mature individual is unaffected by the world and is unswayed by emotional considerations. Life should be governed entirely by reason and duty. The individual with this belief may have been punished or scorned when displaying strong emotion as a child. The result is that strong emotion, rather than being a motivator to action or contemplation, instead triggers shame or guilt. *"You're really a child inside."*
- \_\_\_\_\_ **It is unmanly to experience emotion.** Many men are raised with the idea that being male means being a kind of emotionless robot. Boys don't cry, boys don't get excited about art or music, boys don't feel sorry for themselves, boys are in control at all times. If true, then boys lead dull lives, boys are afraid of emotions, boys shut themselves off from a tremendous source of self-knowledge, and boys are going to be vulnerable to all kinds of emotional problems because they don't pay attention to the messages their feelings are giving them. Suggestion: Recognize that boys are human beings too, and have the full range of human emotions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Nice girls only feel certain emotions.** They don't get angry, they don't have ambitions, they don't think of themselves, and they certainly never feel lusty. A woman who holds these ideas will regularly be confronted by the unacceptable emotions she has rejected and, as a result, feel inadequate. Suggestion: Same as for the guys. Women are born with the full range of human emotion. Sooner or later you'll get a taste from every carton in the emotional ice cream store. And that doesn't mean you're not female, or that you can't be "nice."
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Certain emotions are morally wrong.** It is unacceptable to experience certain emotions (such as pride, lust, desire, anger, fear); those who do are inferior, indulgent, or sinful. If experienced, the emotion triggers guilt and shame. The belief may also encourage denial: *"I just never get angry."* Saying this belief is distorted doesn't mean that we should dwell on and exaggerate these emotions. It isn't necessary, for example, to focus on our anger to the exclusion of everything else, and grow it into frothing rage. But we may need to acknowledge that, as humans, we experience these emotions. By admitting to them we may develop the ability to cope with them in a way that harms neither others nor ourselves.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Good mental health means not feeling emotion.** Good mental health may well mean that fear, sadness, or despair do not go on and on endlessly. But the goal is never to remove elements of the emotional guidance system. Rather than shutting off certain emotions, the goal of therapy is often to help us *open up* to the experience of feeling emotion without immediately doing something to stop it. Good mental health means that all emotions (not just happiness) are available to be experienced.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Powerful emotion is dangerous, and may lead to madness.** If you experience enough fear, it will drive you insane. You will explode, “crack up”, or “break down.” This belief is encouraged in families that avoid emotional experience, and is reinforced by television programs and movies that equate powerful emotion with madness. In fact, human beings are designed to experience strong emotion without falling apart. The experience may not always be pleasant, but it is not fatal.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Emotions are always correct.** When you feel something, it must be true. If you feel jealous, your partner must be fooling around on you. If you feel sad, life must be unrelentingly awful. If you are afraid, something terrible must be about to happen. If you feel discouraged, you must be about to fail. Think back, though: How often have you felt fearful and nothing bad happened? Have you ever been angry and it turned out no one meant to hurt you? Our emotions are based in large part on our interpretations of events. If the interpretation is wrong, the emotion will be a misfire too. We’ll feel frightened when we’re safe, jealous when our partner is faithful, doomed when things are getting better. We do sometimes develop intuitions about events; we “get a feeling” that later turns out to be valid. This is a different phenomenon, however – one that can be thrown off by depression (causing you to feel intuitively certain that you’re worthless, or that everyone hates you). Emotions can be mistaken, just like thoughts.

Do any of these beliefs apply especially well to you? Which one(s)?

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What could you tell yourself when this belief arises?

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