

The River: Living with Emotion

Imagine yourself sitting on a stretch of grass on the bank of a wide, deep river. The river is busy with ships of all sizes. Here comes one now, sailing into view, passing in front of you, and vanishing around the next bend. Here's one from the opposite direction, approaching, passing, and fading off into the distance.

All of these ships have names. Here comes one named *Anxiety*. Off to the right, one named *Despair*. A brightly painted one, *Happiness*. A dark red one, *Anger*. A hesitant one by the far shore, *Doubt*. *Guilt*. *Joy*. *Shame*. *Enthusiasm*. They all ply these waters.

You can take a variety of stances with regard to these ships. One option is to stand up, wade out into the middle of the river, and raise your arms to halt any ship you do not wish to come your way. But they loom forward anyway, become huge in your eyes, and bowl you over with their wake. Some ships are slow to leave. You can wade out behind them and push mightily, but your efforts are in vain. It almost seems that your pushing only anchors them more firmly.

Some ships you wish would stay. Joy, for example: A soaring, beautiful tall ship, rigging singing in the breeze. When you spot it you can rush into the water and grab hold of the stern, forbidding it ever to leave your river. It sails on anyway, tearing itself out of your grasp.

There is an alternative.

You can wade back to your patch of grass. Sit down. Relax. Gaze out at the river. Give permission for each of those craft to be there. And watch them as they sail toward you, pass before you, and sail off into the distance. Sometimes the threatening ships come, sometimes the bright ones.

If you are reading these words, you are human, and if you are human you are an emotional being: a being designed to experience the full range of feeling. Some of these emotions are easier to take than others. Some are welcome, some are painful. It is tempting to rush forward and try to control our feelings, to make happiness stay, to chase misery off. We post signs announcing that anger is not allowed, that sadness may kill us if it comes, that guilt is out of bounds. But emotions cannot read, and come anyway.

Are we helpless, then? No. We can exercise, eat properly, work on our negative thinking, build a supportive life for ourselves, and find a vision for our life's purpose – and all of these things will affect the boat traffic on our river. We may never see the last of that barge called *Anxiety*, but it may visit our port less often.

The attempt, however, to control emotions *directly*, to forbid or resist them, is doomed to failure. Worse than failure: our efforts to stave off fear may make us more fearful, our personal ban on dissatisfaction may leave us dissatisfied. Much of our unpleasant emotion may come from the very effort to eliminate it.

In sum: *The more you try to eliminate an emotion, the more you will feel it.*

One day, Carmen experienced a sudden, sharp burst of fear while shopping at the local mall. It was such an unpleasant experience that she resolved to avoid the place until she felt confident that she could shop without disturbance. Months later she felt no more secure. When, one day, she tried to go she felt overpowering anxiety that convinced her to give it more time. But the fear kept growing. To control it she began avoiding grocery stores, then banks, then busy restaurants. Carmen's attempt to avoid experiencing fear resulted in her life being governed by it.

Arthur had been depressed for months, and he was impatient to feel better. One morning upon waking, as he felt the dark shroud encase him once more, he decided that he had had enough. The depression would end. Today. He would not allow himself to feel it. From now on he was going to be his old self. He sternly marched himself about the house, pushing far beyond his carefully-set goals, determined to browbeat himself into becoming as capable and energetic as he used to feel. It worked – for about half an hour. Then he began feeling the depression coming back, deepening like a tide and sweeping up over his head. Now he was depressed again, with the added indignities of failure, resentment, and humiliation.

Kathy was raised to be unfailingly considerate and kind, and never to show anger. Anger was unacceptable even as a feeling, let alone one that could be discussed. She had a strong religious faith that she understood to say that anger was unacceptable, and she stamped it out as best she could. Her friends, though, commented (when they dared) that she seemed always to be angry about something, that she never opened up the way friends do, and that some of her mistakes or slips of the tongue seemed calculated to hurt others. Kathy knew the secret: she was filled with anger, and this made her unacceptable and inadequate, which angered her even more. Her mission to sweep anger from her life had allowed it to take control of her, had caused it to become her dominant emotion.

In each of these cases, the attempt to eliminate an emotion resulted in more of that emotion being experienced. But what's the solution? Should Carmen simply drag herself into the mall and experience horrifying waves of anxiety? Should Arthur give in to his depression and lie, defeated, on the couch? Should Kathy vent her anger loudly in hope of clearing the backlog of a lifetime's fury?

Well, no. None of these strategies would help much. But each person could benefit from recognizing that the attempt to suppress or avoid an emotion typically makes that

emotion stronger in the long run. The solution is to wade back to the riverbank, sit down, and allow the ships on your river to be there. To give up on controlling emotions directly, and to work indirectly instead.

We can work on our thoughts. We can work on our behaviour. We can work on our physical health. Changes in each of these areas have an impact on how we feel. But attempting to establish direct control over our feelings, to force happiness or forbid misery, backfires badly.

Further, we need to recognize that our emotions are not there simply to torment us. Each emotion has a purpose; each can teach us something. We are *designed* to experience the full spectrum of human emotion. It's tempting to say "*I just don't want to be anxious anymore.*" This goal cannot be reached. Less anxious, yes. None, no. Happier, yes. Incessantly, endlessly happy to the exclusion of all other shades from the emotional spectrum, no. All of those boats will remain on your river, visiting at least occasionally. The challenge is to learn to sit on that riverbank, letting them pass by, watching and learning from them all.

A model of emotion: Three stages or five?

Cognitive therapy often uses this model of human experience:

Situation ⇒ Interpretation ⇒ Response

Something happens, you figure out what you think it means, then you react. The "response" stage includes both emotion and behavior: how you feel and what you do.

But it doesn't stop there. We also impose meaning on our responses. We behave a certain way and evaluate our behavior. We feel certain emotions and decide what that means about us. So we could say:

Situation ⇒ Interpretation ⇒ Response ⇒ Interpretation ⇒ Response

Something happens, you figure out what you think it means, you react, you think about your reaction, then you react to your own reaction.

Imagine a situation: a prankster at an office party flourishes what looks like a gun but turns out to be a lighter. You initially interpret the object to be a gun and react with extreme fear. Then you evaluate your reaction. Imagine saying to yourself "*What a coward. I should have known anything Dave does is a joke. I'd never survive a real crisis.*" You might then react with embarrassment or humiliation, perhaps avoiding future office events or endlessly dwelling on your reaction. The fear you felt was fleeting; your reaction to it may become the real problem.

This secondary reaction is the source of many problems. A man recently recovered from depression learns that a friend has been fired. He thinks about the difficulty this will cause her and feels sad. Situation, interpretation, response: all perfectly normal. But because he has been depressed he is on the alert for sadness. He interprets his sadness as a sign of a coming relapse, and all that it would mean for him to go through another episode of depression so soon after the last one. This line of thinking causes him to become hugely discouraged. The problem is not his reaction to a friend's situation, but what he thinks his reaction *means*.

What are emotions for?

Emotions developed as a kind of behavioral guidance system. We experience an emotion, and this brings with it a motivation – almost a temptation – to engage in a certain kind of behavior. We can refer to this motivation as an “action tendency.” In other words:

Emotion ⇔ Action

Different emotions are associated with different action tendencies:

- Happiness may bring a motivation to repeat the experience.
- Fear brings a motivation to avoid the situation.
- Anger motivates us to attack.
- Sadness or discouragement encourage us to withdraw.

Each emotion has a purpose; each prods us in a particular direction. Our ancestors who were prodded in the right direction survived and had offspring. Those who weren't tended not to survive to reproduce. In a primitive environment, the resulting constellation of emotional responses, or action tendencies, is likely to keep us as safe and effective as possible.

The problem is this: *You don't live in a primitive environment.* You live in a modern civilization. The emotions you experience were never designed for this world. As a result, they may prod you in directions that aren't helpful. Erupting into rage when someone cuts you off on the freeway isn't going to make you safer. Running away from your tax form won't help get it done. The responses you are programmed to make to the emotions you feel are sometimes inappropriate. They may take you *into* danger, not out of it. They may harm your relations with others, not help them. They may lead you deeper into emotional trouble, not out.

So how can we cope with having an outmoded emotional system? One strategy is to ignore your emotions altogether. Pretend they don't exist. Base all your behavior on logic and the requirements of the outside world. Your tax form arrived, so do your taxes. Your boss asks you to work overtime, so work overtime. Your spouse wants you to like the opera, so say you like it. Unfortunately, this solution isn't very satisfying, and most people can't sustain it for a lifetime.

Another strategy is to shut the emotions off. If uncomfortable emotions can be compared to a blaring fire alarm, then try to snip the wires to stop the noise. You might use alcohol, or drugs, or even therapy to quiet the din. But if there really is a fire, you will have missed your signal to cope in another way. Sometimes our anger, or sadness, or anxiety, or, yes, depression can be a vital message: *“There’s a problem in your life. Do something about it!”*

Our emotions are part of us. They are important. If we don’t listen to their sometimes convoluted messages, our life fades to gray. We may need to work at understanding our emotions, obeying some impulses and intervening with others, learning how to work *with*, rather than against, our hopes and fears. But if we can’t obey our every emotion (*“you’re angry and want to hit him, so hit him”*), and if we can’t ignore them, then what other options are there?

Perhaps for some of our emotions we need a new model, something like this one:

Emotion ⇨ Evaluation ⇨ Action

We find ourselves in a situation and we experience an emotion. If it’s an emotion that normally prods us in the right direction, we might just give in to the action tendency. This is the essence of spontaneity, and should not be stamped out. If, however, it’s an emotion that often leads us astray, then

- 1) acting on it may bring trouble, and
- 2) ignoring it may cause us to miss an important message.

So instead, we can use the emotion as a cue to ask ourselves *“Hmm, what’s going on here?”* We can look carefully at the action tendency the emotion is leading us toward and decide whether it’s such a good idea. *“I feel like lying in bed all day. Will that help me feel better in the long run?”* If yes, then go ahead. If not, then do some problem-solving and come up with an alternative. *“Lying in bed usually doesn’t help, so even though I don’t feel like it I’ll get up and go for my morning walk. Then I’ll plan what comes next.”*

This approach avoids the obey-or-ignore problem, and allows us to learn even from emotions that threaten to lead us astray.