

Conditioned Emotions

In our society there is a common belief we like to call the “Big Lie”—the idea that our society and childhood upbringing do not influence who we are today at the deepest level. Most people don’t deny those things have an impact, but they think the effect is minimal and resist believing that their experiences and other people formed their beliefs. However, the reality is that by the time we reach adulthood, all of us have developed a pattern of how we automatically react to life’s challenges. We have also develop belief systems and attitudes that have been shaped by those around us. Each of us have learned different ways of reacting, which is why when faced with challenging situations some people may react by shutting down, others reach with anger, other with anxiety, and others with excitement. What determines the different reactions is the different ways the individuals view the challenges, based on their conditioning—their learned response.

By reflecting on how much of what we do and think did not originate as our own idea, and letting go of things that do not serve us, we are freed to embrace a new mental state and a life that is more genuine to who we truly are and how we want to live.

Conditioning can be defined in many ways, but ultimately it is the residual effect of all past influences on our life, including, stored emotions and learned reactions.

Learned Reactions

The reason that understanding your conditioning is so powerful is because it is what created your foundation of understanding of life, emotions and behaviors. As a child, you were fully dependent on your parents (or those playing that role) for your survival. In fact, if you look at a young child that is faced with a new situation, they look at their parents to know how they should react and feel. The parent’s expression, such as a smile, a frown or other subtle non-verbal communication, showed the child how to react, offered a reinforcement or served as a reward or punishment. This is referred to as Vicarious Conditioning—the reflex response or emotion we develop by watching how others around us respond to the situation. Keep in mind that this is not limited to children. It happens to us as adults as well.

Conditioned Emotions

Negative emotions can have positive benefits but using them for positive outcomes can backfire when we develop a conditioned pattern. For example, anxiety has both positive and negative qualities. It can motivate people to act or resolve a situation that otherwise may have been brushed under the rug. If we feel anxiety about an exam that anxiety may motivate us to study. If we feel anxious about a presentation that we are doing it may push us to make sure that we are fully prepared for it. However, anxiety can also be problematic when it becomes conditioned. We can end up learning to associate anxiety with action and therefore NEED become anxious in order to feel compelled into action. Sadness is also a mood that can have a positive side, as it allows us to conserve energy when we have been overwhelmed. But, sadness can also get us

attention from others and, therefore, we become conditioned to become sad when we want sympathy or nurturing.

Conditioned Words

Words can have a very powerful conditioned response. It is obvious that you may be automatically reactive when you hear certain 4-letter words, or perhaps a sexist or racist comment. However, you may not notice the subtle words that influence your emotions. For example, if your parents told you “we need to talk” every time you were in trouble than you would naturally learn to react to those words negatively as an adult.

Learned Helplessness

When people are exposed repeatedly to a negative situation that they felt they had no control over, they develop learned helplessness. This can happen when we have a job we hate but have worked at it for years and feel we can’t get out of it. It can happen when we’re in a relationship full of drama but we feel obligated or trapped. It can happen when we experience severe financial difficulty and see no way out.

When we experience learned helplessness we stop looking for a way to change our situation and develop a believe system that “we will not be able to change our future.” Therefore, we may miss opportunities even when people around us show us that there may be a different way because we’ve already been conditioned not to believe it.

Good News!

The good news is that a conditioned emotional response does not define our future. In fact, even something as extreme as a phobia can be changed with what is called “extinction”.

- First, we have to develop an awareness that we are simply reacting to our programming.
- Then, we need to expose ourselves to something that will let our unconscious mind see that there ARE other possibilities. This interrupts the condition response when it occurs.
- Then, we can replace our reaction with the desired response and then take the appropriate steps to implement those possibilities.

This can take time just like your original conditioning. Therefore, be patient with yourself and celebrate the small successes.

Reflection Questions:

How did your parents react to stress? Did they focus on positives or negatives?

How did you get attention as a child? What emotions helped you connect with your parents (or others) the most?

What did you learn about sadness? How was it expressed?

What did you learn to fear? How was fear expressed?

What did you learn about happiness? How was it expressed?

What did you learn about anxiety? How was it expressed?

How did people around you cope with stress and challenging situation?

How did people connect to each other? Arguing, love and affection, emotional disengagement?