

The Function of Emotions

What good are emotions? Why do we have emotions? Until we begin to understand the functions of emotions, why we have them, what their effect is on others, we cannot expect ourselves to change them.

DBT looks at three major functions of emotions:

1. Emotions Communicate to and Influence Others.
2. Emotions Organize and Motivate Action
3. Emotions Can be Self-Validating

Part 1: Emotions Communicate to and Influence Others.

We communicate our emotions to other with verbal and non-verbal (facial expressions, body gestures or postures) language. Some expressions of emotion have an automatic effect on others. When there is a difference in what a person communicates non-verbally versus verbally, the other person will usually respond to the non-verbal expression.

For many years I showed little or no expression on my face while feeling very intense feelings, and I got little response from others. Other people have talked about showing very strong emotions on their face, while expressing less strong emotions with their voice. People responded to the facial expressions.

DBT teaches that one of the main problems experienced by people with Borderline Personality Disorder is that their non-verbal emotional expressions do not match their inside feelings. So we are often misread. People misunderstand what we are feeling.

Exercises

- Can you give some examples of situations where your expressions of emotion were misread?
- Can you also think of some times when you misread the emotions of someone else? Maybe their face looked one way, while they meant to express something else.
- Give some examples of how your emotions have influenced others.
- Give some examples of how others' emotions have influenced you.

I will give an example of my own. When I walked into my class after hearing that my father was critically ill, I felt very sad and my face looked sad. People asked me what was wrong, and when I told them, they offered sympathy and comfort.

One of the people I teach with is often very depressed, and it shows in her body posture and facial expression. I try to reassure her and encourage her.

Sometimes this strategy has backfired, and my expression of emotions gave me something I

didn't want. A friend suggested an outing, and I got very excited and kept telling her how happy I was to go. In the end, she did not go. I was very disappointed. After thinking for awhile, I realize it was not my fault that she decided not to go. I can't make things like that happen. I can only be responsible for myself.

What does expression of these emotions do for you? How do they influence others? What do they communicate?

- fear
- anger
- sadness
- disappointment
- joy
- guilt and shame
- surprise
- love

Part 2: Emotions Organize and Motivate Action

Emotions prepare for and motivate action. There is an action urge connected to specific emotions that is hard-wired. (See the diagram on [Emotion Regulation Handout 3](#)) "Hard-wired" means it is an automatic, built-in part of our behavior. For example, if you see your two-year old child in the middle of the street and a car coming, you will feel an emotion, fear, and this emotion will prompt you to run to save your child. You don't stop to think about it. You just do it. Your emotion has motivated your behavior without you having to take the time to think.

Emotions can also help us overcome obstacles in our environment. An example given in the book is the anxiety someone feels when they are about to take a test. This anxiety, though it's uncomfortable, helps to motivate you to study so you will do well on the test.

Anger may motivate and help people who are protesting injustices. The anger may override the fear they might feel in a demonstration or protest.

Guilt may keep someone who is dieting stick to her diet. (This is not saying that you should feel guilty, just that it is the emotion that prompts some people to carry through with a diet or some other difficult project.)

Exercises

See if you can come up with a couple of examples where your emotion prompted you to take action before you thought about it.

See if you can come up with a situation where an emotion helps you overcome an obstacle in your environment (in the community, at home, at school), where it makes it easier for you to get something done, for example. It may not be a pleasant emotion (we have mentioned here guilt, anger, fear), but it does help you get the job done.

During the week, notice when your emotions motivate your action, save you time, or help you get something done.

Part 3: Emotions can be self-validating

Emotions can give us information about a situation or event. They can signal to us that something is going on.

Sometimes signals about a situation will be picked up unconsciously, and then we may have an emotional reaction, but not be sure what set off the reaction. Feeling "something doesn't feel right about this" or "I had a feeling something was going to happen and it did" are some of the signals we might get.

Think of some times when your feel for a situation turned out to be right. Is there some time when you felt anxiety or apprehension that turned out to be justified? Or that you had a good feeling about someone that turned out to be right?

When dealing with our feelings this way is carried to extremes, though, we may think of the emotion as fact. "I love him, so he's a good person." If I feel stupid, I am stupid." While our emotions are always valid, it doesn't necessarily make them facts.

This is difficult for people with Borderline Personality Disorder and others, because one of our biggest issues is that we have been in invalidating environments -- so much that we don't trust our emotions.

If our emotions are minimized or invalidated, it's hard to get our needs taken seriously. So we may increase the intensity of our emotions in order to get our needs met. And then if we decrease the intensity of our emotions, we may find again that we are not taken seriously.

Think of some times when emotions are self-validating. For example: I am going to a party, but I feel uneasy about it, as if something is going to happen. At the party, a friend and I have an argument and I leave. My feeling about something happening is right.

I am at work, and there seems to be a lot of tension. I sense that something is up. At lunch, my co-workers hold a surprise birthday party for me. Again my emotion is validated.

I am home alone and feeling very lonely. I am getting more and more anxious and angry. I call friends and try to get someone to come and stay with me. No one will come. So this intense negative emotion also validates my feeling that I am lonely and no one cares.

Think of some examples of your own. Remember that we are not evaluating or judging anyone's feelings or behavior. We are just trying to look at how emotions function.

Exercise: Emotion Diary (p. 163)

Fill out an emotion diary for several days. For each day choose your strongest emotion, or the one that lasted the longest, or was the most difficult or painful. Describe the prompting event, the event that caused or triggered the emotion. And describe the emotion's function:

- to communicate to others
- to motivate action
- to communicate to yourself

And remember, DO NOT JUDGE YOURSELF!!