

Recognizing and communicating our feelings

Authentic encounters

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What is the role of emotions in our life and our communication with others? To what extent does cultural and family background affect our ways of expressing ourselves and how to ensure healthy interactions? While it is impossible here to go into depth in a brief article, the authors offer a few useful parameters. Nancy O'Donnell holds a doctorate in clinical psychology with specialization in addiction disorders and sexual abuse. Cintia Miranda Vieira, also a psychologist, is an expert in accompanying families and in conflict mediation.

The value of emotions

Emotions are important. They engage us in ways that allow us to appreciate reality in detail. They color our experiences, making them pleasant or unpleasant, rich or poor. They impact our memory, favor learning, and cause some experiences to become indelibly imprinted within ourselves. Emotions also influence our behavior by acting as a powerful means of communication in the dynamics of our inner life.

We are not always aware enough of the essential role that emotions play in our lives. But what would life be like without a sense of wonder before a beautiful landscape or a majestic mountain? Or without fear to warn us of danger? Emotions help us understand if an experience is to repeat or instead avoid in the future, to be vigilant or to flee. Emotional messages move faster than thoughts and this is very important in certain situations. Often a person's earliest memories are linked to strongly emotional experiences, and when this memory returns, the emotion of that moment is again experienced, too.

Thus, emotions must always be kept in mind as an integral part of the human person. Today, through studies and research, it is possible to recognize the link between emotions and the body. Important studies show that people experience emotions at the bodily level identically, regardless of cultural diversity¹. Basic emotions and others more complex, more difficult to manifest with facial expression alone, are identifiable.

Emotions and communication

The most significant function of emotions is that of communication, first and foremost for the person themselves. Awareness of what you are feeling and being able to give a name to the emotion is considered an element of emotional maturity. The ability to express one's emotions so others can understand what we are feeling is an acquired skill which, if lacking,

causes misunderstandings, sometimes even serious ones. In fact, only seven percent of communication is verbal, while 55 percent is through body language and 38 percent through voice tone (the paraverbal aspect).

The fact that emotions communicate information to the people around us makes this topic more complex, partly because expression of a particular emotion is not always understood or interpreted by others – due to a multitude of possible factors – in the way one would have intended. As mentioned, studies show that the impact of emotions on the body is similar in all human beings, but it is not possible to say the same for the behavior that follows the experienced emotion. All people experience anger, fear, joy, and surprise. But the expression of one's emotions and emotional life in each culture can be diverse. It can also be diverse among persons from the same culture because expression also reflects history and education received within families.

In reality, there is no right or wrong way to live our emotional lives. What is important, however, is not to ignore what you experience. It is important to know how to give a name to your feelings and to know how to manage the expression of emotions so as to communicate and relate with others well and effectively.

Knowing how to give a name

When faced with a sense of discomfort at the bodily level following a certain life experience, it is important to stop and ask yourself: What am I feeling right now? Identify what you feel and give it a name: anger, sadness ... Then you can go more in depth with another question: What does this emotional state tell me, what is its message? Each emotion contains, in fact, a hidden message that says so much about who experiences it. Deciphering these messages that it brings us and being able to choose then how to act is an effective way of living the emotional world. It is important, in this regard, to remember that we are not emotion, but we experience that emotion.

Knowing how to manage emotional impact

We know that the effect of emotions is felt at a bodily level. Powerful emotions make it necessary to use techniques to regulate one's body, such as breathing techniques. But also a walk in a green space or an open conversation with a friend are handy possibilities for finding inner serenity and enabling one to respond. These are simple things that can be helpful to people anywhere in the world.

Meeting the other where they are

Regarding the role of emotions in communication, consider how we talk with someone to clarify a certain situation or offer feedback relative to our feelings. Or perhaps we want to try communicating our needs to another, or simply clarify our own inner feelings in order to establish a deeper rapport. The ability to communicate to the other, who is different from me, my own inner reality with the aim of establishing constructive dialogue is of great importance. This is where each one can be him or herself in diversity, and this happens when there is clarity in the communication of each one's inner world.

In a situation where the emotional reaction of another person is hard to understand, it is possible and desirable to offer the simple possibility of a dialogue. First, however, we need to understand who we have before us. It is good to be aware if the other is a person of our

culture or a different culture and know that each person, regardless of culture, will have his or her own way of reacting to their emotions. In some cultures, it is not permissible to display emotions such as anger. Or in some families it may have been forbidden to show sadness and so on. If we are aware of this, we can choose the way of dialogue instead of trying to interpret what another is feeling: “It seems to me that you are uncomfortable, that you are not well. Is my impression correct?” Or “Is there anything I can do for you?”, or “What did you mean by your actions just now?”

Therefore, we can choose a path of dialogue and attempt to understand a person who is different from ourselves. It is the primary path towards building solid, respectful relationships. We need to understand, however, that despite our own desires in this regard, not everyone is ready to say what they feel on a more profound level. This is either because they do not know how, or out of human respect. But being aware that each person has his or her own way of identifying emotions, managing them and reacting to them, is important in avoiding hasty interpretations that can be sources of misunderstandings.

Emotions have always been a part of our existence as human beings, although they are still undervalued and little explored. Thus, we have much to learn. But doing so can help us have more serene lives and experience authentic encounters when relating to other people.

¹ For further information, see: <https://www.pnas.org/doi/pdf/10.1073/pnas.1321664111>