

## Emotions and life as a couple

# Emotions as a precious resource

### Maria and Raimondo Scotto

*The authors of this article, experts in accompanying couples, speak of a journey in six stages, one in which it is possible to learn to treasure emotions and manage inevitable crises arising in everyday family life. By recognizing and managing issues tied to emotions, a couple's relationship can be strengthened and the tenderness between two people can increase as well.*

#### *Gaining new understandings*

A friend recently confided: "I don't remember ever receiving a caress from my parents. I felt loved by them, but they couldn't demonstrate it to me. For them, the fact that they cared for me, supported my studies and looked after my health, was clearly enough [...]."

Yet, as a teen, I would have loved encouragement or a hug [...]. Now that I am married, I feel stuck and my inability to show my wife affection creates conflict [...]. I remember my first gift to her was a book chosen without too much thought. I handed it to her without wrapping it nor without a loving word and that was a tragedy for her. I had not yet understood that a gift has an emotional value. The other must feel valued, thought of, understood... My childhood experiences greatly conditioned me."

Perhaps Servant of God, Igino Giordani (1894 - 1980), had a similar experience. Remembering his mother, he wrote in his diary: "She was somber, she rarely kissed her children, except when we left or returned from long absences. But in her reservedness, she lived for us; she devoured us with her eyes..." Thus, a mother's love was not the issue here. Rather, it was the inability to express emotions and perhaps the belief that it was better not to show emotions so that children - especially boys -- would develop strength in adversity.

How many have had the same experience, creating holes that are difficult to fill! But today, educational styles are fortunately changing, to reveal a progressive and healthy new understanding of the role played by emotions in our lives.

#### *Know oneself*

Emotions, if recognized and managed well, strengthen a couple's relationship and are a resource. Without this, they can become dangerous and condition our behavior in ways that generate aggression, self-centeredness, impulsiveness, etc.

The first step is to get to know ourselves. This is not easy because there is a widespread 'illiteracy' of emotions in society today.

During an argument, it is difficult to ask oneself: "Why did I just have such an intense reaction?". If we really ask such a question, it could allow us to better understand what

emotions lie at the root of some of our behavior and manage them better. We would be better able to avoid getting carried away by our impulsiveness. In the search for such self-awareness, pausing to reflect – even just reading an insightful text or having a conversation with a trusted friend or expert -- can be helpful.

### *Learning to communicate*

The more we know the emotions underlying our behavior, the better we can sense those of our partner as well. The utmost attention should be given to communication both as a couple and a family, bearing in mind that body language is as important as words. Words, in fact, can be ambiguous, while the body a little less because it always transmits something of what you really feel, like sadness, joy, anger, impatience or fear. An Arabic proverb says: "He who cannot understand a glance, cannot understand long explanations."

Take the quarrel that developed between Xavier and Sara. Xavier suddenly announced that he wanted to invite a friend from France to dinner. Sara's facial expression became harsh, though her response was seemingly innocuous. "I'll think about it and let you know," she said. Xavier immediately snapped and left, slamming the door. Sara looked at us perplexed, exclaiming: "Why, what did I say?"

Indeed, her answer was innocuous, but her face expressed something very different. Thus, Xavier went haywire. Couples need to learn to decipher hidden messages. In every communication there are always two parts: one apparent and one hidden. "The essential is invisible to the eye," said the Little Prince, but often to the ears as well. For example, knowing these two people well, the other implied the message may have been: "You are making a decision without taking into account my plans."

Decoding is not always easy because it requires good observational skills and reflection. And asking for clarification may not be useful when we are overwhelmed by an emotional storm. Sometimes, taking a break or a walk before returning to a conversation can be more productive. Conflicts are inevitable but if we can face them peacefully, we will avoid words that leave permanent wounds, wounds that risk tearing down a partner's self-esteem.

### *Reconciling one's own fragility*

Sometimes we fear our own emotions and our fragility, of which we are often ashamed. Andrew was brought up in an atmosphere that emphasized obligations. He grew up believing that play, relaxation, and moments of pleasure were a waste of time. Thus, he was always afraid to express his true desires and did not understand those of his wife either. Their relationship plunged into crisis because he allowed work to absorb all his time. It took the help of an expert for Andrew to understand that he did not know how to enjoy the small things in life and that he was almost afraid to be happy or to give happiness. Gradually he understood that if he was joyful, he helped his wife to be joyful as well. The heavy atmosphere at home, punctuated by his rigid work hours of the past, began to lighten.

Joy is a fundamental emotion for relationships, one to constantly rediscover and highlight, even in the most intense of moments.

### *Communion*

For couples, it is also important to share their emotions. Do not be afraid to say to the other: "I am suffering, I am afraid, help me, give me a hand, I cannot forgive"; or: "I'm happy, I respect you, I value my life with you."

Even if sometimes we do not experience identical emotions when reading the same passage from a book or in the contemplation of a beautiful panorama, sharing will help each get to know the other better and to welcome the other in their diversity and uniqueness. This, too, fosters communion.

Then, when we cannot resolve difficult moments, sharing with another (priest, spiritual companion, expert, etc.) can help guide us through the complex world of our emotions.

### *Jesus, teacher of tenderness*

When a couple come to know one another and patiently manages their emotions, they can almost unknowingly arrive at the threshold of tenderness. Tenderness is not sentimentality. It is entering into the emotions of the other, embracing him or her within us. It is becoming attuned to the needs of those closest to us and having compassion for them. Jesus was a frequent master of tenderness in the Gospel, as when he experienced pity for the crowd or in recounting the parable of the merciful Father. Tenderness is expressed in attentive looks, loving words, reassuring smiles, warm hugs, and kindness. In short, in the daily commitment of making those around us happy.

In Lamberto Lambertini's film, *Fire at My Heart*, the character Nicola says to his nephew Eugenio: "Never deny your kindness. Let it enlighten you. They will tell you kindness is a character defect, because those 'affected' are destined to lose everyday battles... This is true. But ignore them. Kindness is our strength!"

These words are particularly relevant today, when so many couples split not just because of economic problems, poor communication, or sexual dysfunction, but precisely because of a lack of tenderness.