

# Becoming whole Integrating feelings and emotions

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*Emotions and feelings are activated in us spontaneously and should not be neglected but emphasized so that we can process and express them according to the values that guide our lives. Today's neuroscience offers us important elements for knowing how to interpret and then manage them. Learning to do so is crucial for our own and others' well-being. The author of this contribution lives in a Focolare community in Welwyn Garden City (UK) and recently completed her master's thesis on emotional self-regulation. She is currently working and studying in London.*

Emotions and feelings are amongst the foundations of our relationships. Without them, our interactions would be nothing more than transactions or factual exchanges of information. However, to integrate emotions and feelings meaningfully with the values that guide our lives, it is advisable to take a closer look at them. Let's start with a personal experience:

The other day, a colleague at work walked past me in the corridor without acknowledging me. I noticed a quick firing of emotions and feelings within me: sadness, confusion and anger. These turned into a series of thoughts: "Did I do anything wrong?", "I bet that he is angry at me for that thing that happened a week ago", "He shouldn't ignore me, that's just rude". As I was sitting in my office, at the mercy of these feelings and thoughts, I realised that emotional self-regulation was needed. I engaged my thinking brain by naming my feelings. After that, I decided to act according to my values and not according to my conflicting feelings. I got up, went down the corridor, into his office, and said to him: "How are you? Did you have a good weekend?" My colleague looked up and told me about his father who had an emergency admission to hospital at the weekend, and about how worried he was.

*Emotions, feelings and moods are not the same thing but the terms are often used interchangeably.*

**Emotions** are prompted by a trigger and activated by neurotransmitters and hormones in the brain. Emotions can be detected (and measured) through physical changes in our body: heart rate, breathing, skin conduction, etc. Emotions literally set something in motion, that's why they are called e-motions<sup>1</sup>. Core emotions with their measurable expressions are similar all over the world, independent of cultural differences. The most common core

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<sup>1</sup> The word derives, via Old French, from Latin ex "out" plus movere "to move".

emotions are often named in literature as: happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, fear and disgust.

*Feelings* can be described as cognitive interpretations of emotions and can differ culturally. Their interpretation and expression are also shaped by personal experiences, beliefs, memories, and thoughts.

*Moods* are emotional states that can last over a long time.

One of the most important things to know about emotions is that there are no bad emotions. Emotions are events in our nervous system that arise mostly without our thinking brain being involved. Emotions and feelings are morally neutral until we make a choice about acting upon or dealing with them. If we become aware and attend to them, they will give us important information about our lives. Vice versa, an unattended emotion or feeling can dominate and manipulate us.

Even though there are no bad emotions, there are unhealthy (maladaptive) ways of expressing them. When emotions are very strong, they can effectively hijack our thinking brain and make us feel out of balance or interact with others in ways we later regret. If this happens, we are, however, not at the mercy of this automatic brain-wiring. There is something we can do about it. Pausing for just a moment, becoming aware of what is happening in our bodies and mind and naming what we feel, activates the prefrontal cortex (the thinking brain) and reduces the activity in the limbic system (the feeling brain). Dr Daniel Siegel, a psychiatrist from the University College of Los Angeles, coined the phrase "Name it to tame it"<sup>2</sup>. This means that naming our emotions decreases their intensity - it puts the "brakes" on our big emotional reactions. It is a skill that can be learnt and improved with practice and supports us at regulating our emotions, using them in a pro-social way in our relationships.

An interesting topic in this regard is the emotion "anger". Most of us know what being angry feels like, and yet we all have very different thoughts on how this emotion is to be viewed and dealt with. Many people grew up thinking that anger is a bad emotion. Those of us who have suffered the consequences of anger expressed destructively by others know about its detrimental effect on mental health and relationships.

Anger is a natural response to threat. It is important when we need to defend ourselves or loved ones against aggressors. It also helps us to affirm healthy boundaries and enables us to stand up for social justice.

Whilst anger is a natural, healthy emotion, the way we express it can be adaptive (healthy) or maladaptive (unhealthy). Like other emotions, anger is morally neutral until we make a specific choice about acting upon or dealing with it. How and when we express anger in daily life situations is mostly learnt, often by having observed it in others. Many people express anger as aggression and rage against others, or as passive aggressive attitudes that can poison relationships. Anger expressed in that way, especially when there is a power

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<sup>2</sup> Siegel, D. J., & Bryson, T. P. (2011). *The whole-brain child*. London: Constable & Robinson.

imbalance (such as in any hierarchical structure) can have devastating effects on the identity of another person.

Anger begins in our brain with the amygdala (= an almond shaped brain structure responsible for processing fear, anger and motivating us to act) sending out an alarm that a threat to our well-being has been identified. Prompted by the amygdala, our nervous system releases chemicals in the brain, which get our body ready to attack or run away. This chain reaction is healthy and necessary when there is a real threat to our safety, and we need to fight the threat or run away. However, if anger is triggered by something that is not a threat to safety, and we act with a fight response, we may engage in behaviours that we deeply regret later. In this case, we can learn to give our prefrontal cortex a chance to discern whether the threat is real or perceived. We do not have to react according to the amygdala's suggestions. Whilst the amygdala makes us aware of threats, the prefrontal cortex handles discernment and responses to threats.

How to deal with anger? It is important not to repress anger, but to become consciously aware of it. We can learn to allow anger to arise and express it in adaptive (pro-social) ways. Some literature distinguishes between "anger" (the emotion) and "rage" (the unhealthy expression of the emotion). This distinction clarifies between an internal state and a specific behaviour that was chosen to express this particular emotion. We have a choice not to express anger as rage or aggression. For some people who have done so for a long time, however, choosing to express anger as something different than rage or aggression, can be a long re-learning process, for which professional support can be helpful. It is, however, possible to unlearn old behaviours and choose different ways of expressing anger.

A tool to learn how to manage anger adaptively, is the so-called 'Anger-Iceberg'. With an iceberg there is a small part visible on the surface and its bigger mass of ice is underneath the water. In this way, some literature calls anger a surface emotion. This means that when we get angry, there may actually be other emotions, feelings, thoughts or experiences underneath the surface, which we find more difficult to allow ourselves to experience or express. This could be, for example, sadness, frustration, helplessness or fear. If we pause, become aware and attend to our anger and to what is below the surface, we will learn important things about ourselves.

## The Anger Iceberg



Graphic design: Elisabeth Öhlböck

To conclude, I would like to list some emotional self-regulation strategies when anger or any other strong emotion arises.

- When a strong emotion arises, pause. Become aware of what is happening.
- Tune into the sensations experienced in your body and give a name to what you are feeling (for example: tension in your chest, a knot in your stomach, feelings of frustration, anxiety, etc). The important thing is not to judge yourself, not to get caught in justifications or harsh self-criticism but to stay with your sensations and feelings.
- Avoid getting entangled in a story. Breathe deeply and slowly. You might notice that your thoughts are slowing down and that the intensity of the emotion lessens.
- Continuing to breathe slowly, staying with the sensations in your body and naming your feelings have the potential to make you freer from learnt or conditioned reactions. You are now better able to discern and choose your response to other people.

Recognising, naming and managing emotions is not only a valuable, but a necessary skill for living well with one another. Maybe for someone who has never thought about this before, discovering what is behind their emotions or reactions can feel daunting or worrisome. We can be courageous, however, because nothing we can do, feel, or think can change God's love for us. This wonderful reassurance allows us to be curious about what is going on inside ourselves and in our relationships. If we choose to embark on the journey of increased self-awareness, we give ourselves the chance to become wholesome people who live affirming, life-giving relationships in accordance with our deepest values.