

ST. CLARE CENTER

Lecture Series

Managing Anger and Other Emotions

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What are feelings/ emotions?

Our emotions can be understood as physical and mental reactions to what is happening to us at any given moment. We can learn to identify the physical components of that emotion. For example, when we are angry we can notice our muscles getting tighter. Our faces may get red as adrenalin is released into the blood stream. Our breathing increases in volume and frequency. Our vision becomes “tunnel-like” and more focused. There is a sense of high energy and power. These are physical symptoms of anger. Our bodies are giving us a message.

Fear is another high energy emotion which produces strong physical responses. Our central nervous system signals us it is time to either get away from someone or something that has alarmed us. Or we get ready to fight and defend

ourselves. We can train ourselves to recognize these physical reactions so we are not overcome by them. Like anger, fear produces increased energy and tension. Fear also produces an upset stomach and the urge to use the nearest restroom. When there is nothing or little to fear, but we react with fear we experience stress as the body has prepared us for action which is not needed. Sometimes when we are very anxious we feel a heightened alertness and exhaustion at the same time.

Emotions like depression and sadness tend to be low energy feelings that appear to drain off energy and cause us to feel weaker and vulnerable.

Emotions are connected to our thinking. Feelings are not thoughts. When I say “I feel you are not paying attention” I am making an error in the way I am expressing my perception of what is going on. The correct expression of my opinion is, “I believe (or think) you are not paying attention. Most of us confuse our feelings and thoughts at times. Emotions and thoughts are different, but closely associated with each other. Both are part of our human nature and cannot be avoided. How we handle our emotions and thinking are critical survival skills for everybody. They are essential for the alcoholic/addict who often relapses because of the pain produced by our emotions.

While it is correct to identify feeling as the sensory experience

of touch, such as I feel this frying pan and it is hot. In recovery when we say feelings we mean emotions. The emotion “glad” is a general term which includes happiness, serenity, satisfaction and all those pleasant and desirable feelings. Most of the other emotions we identify in treatment and recovery are unpleasant, usually unwanted and difficult to manage for most of us. These are anger, fear, shame, hurt and sadness.

Because emotions are often painful and unpleasant we seek relief from them as a natural reaction. Don't we tend to move toward that which is pleasant, comfortable and satisfying and away from that which is the opposite? This is a natural human trait. We learn that drugs of all kinds are “quick fixes” we turn to when we experience painful emotions and circumstances. Those of us who have difficulty managing our emotions when they get to an unacceptable level know our drugs of choice will give us at least temporary relief from what is happening to us. Suppressing our emotions with mind and mood altering chemicals from alcohol to controlled substances like cocaine to misused prescription medications merely postpones the inevitable return of those emotions. Addicts tend not to be good at managing emotions. We need education and training to overcome this gap in our life coping skills in order to prevent relapse.

Can we shut down our emotions? Yes and no. It is possible

to repress our feelings so they are not obvious to others. Some of us can do this; others cannot. Even if we don't show our feelings the physical reality of them cannot be avoided. Emotions that are not managed will turn to stress and ongoing pain.

Can, or should we let our emotions rise to their full limit? Not a wise course of action either. If we allow ourselves to let our emotions rise to their limit, we would be in unmanageable rage, terror, suicidal depression and other extreme states that are not good for anybody. These emotional states can, and do, occur for most. We need to be on guard and ready to manage our emotions effectively in order to get along with others, stay employed and be effective adults.

Understanding Our Emotions

For those of us in recovery from addiction, we are destined to experience troublesome emotions. These are anger, fear, shame, hurt and sadness. Each of these feelings/emotions has variations and different words to identify them. For instance, we may feel resentful, ticked off, outraged, bothered, annoyed, or furious. These are all "angry words" and describe what level of anger we may be at. Anger management is a set of skills commonly used for those who have temper problems that cause trouble for them and

victimize others. Anger management is ordered by the courts for domestic violence and other offenses, often associated with substance abuse.

Fear is another scary emotion. Other words describing levels of the fear emotion include; anxious, worried, frightened, concerned, terrified, paralyzed, paranoid or threatened.

Shame has its set of variations that have different words associated with it that suggest the presence of shame. These include; guilty, regretful, remorseful, embarrassed or humiliated.

Sad can be expressed by depressed, down, blue, unhappy or miserable.

Hurt is a very painful emotion that can be expressed with words like disappointed, wounded, surprised, betrayed, abandoned or devastated.

Build your own emotions vocabulary to better identify where you are on your own feelings chart.

These different feeling words for our emotions point out they all appear to be on a continuum from just a mild experience of the emotion to its extreme. Going from being concerned to terrified is an example of the fear emotion escalating from an awareness of being afraid or scared to being completely

overcome with fear.

Managing Our Emotions

Here is a way for understanding our emotions that can provide a major key in learning how to manage them effectively.

There is a message behind every emotional experience. Understanding these often hidden messages can change us from believing our emotions are our enemies into knowing our feelings can be our friends leading us away from the pain of our experiences.

Anger: What is our anger telling us? I believe my anger is telling me something is happening in my world I don't like or want. In other words, I am frustrated about something. Frustration is another of those angry words. When I am angry I don't like the way things are going "out there in the world." It can also mean I am frustrated at what is going on in my inner world too. I may be in conflict with myself over an issue I don't know to resolve.

The question to ask ourselves when we master the skill of identifying our anger is, **"What is going on here I don't like or want?"** From there we can apply the Serenity Prayer and choose to either accept what is happening or find a way to

change it to relieve the frustration. People who seem to be chronically angry may have life-long unresolved issues they need to address.

Fear: What is our fear, including anxiety telling us? I believe my fear is telling me I sense or experience a threat to my wellbeing. The key word is threat. The threat may be as clear as an onrushing car that seems to be out of control, or as vague as a sense something unknown may affect my health. There are all sort of real and imagined threats in our lives, and we have an ancient reaction to dangers of all kinds. This, too, is part of who we are as human beings. Life will continue to produce threats of all kinds that trigger our fears. It is what we do about our fear that is the question. The first fear question is **“What is the threat to my safety, comfort or wellbeing?”** Note: it may be that the threat is connected to another person, our family or other important person or group. Even if the threat is directed to others it is still a threat to me too if I care about the person or persons being threatened.

When our bodies tell us there is a threat facing us, we can ask this question of ourselves: **“Is this threat likely to happen to me (or somebody I care about) or, is it only possible something can happen to me or them?”** If it is only a slim possibility a threatened harm will actually happen to me, I may be wise not to obsess about it and let it go unless it really is something I need to take care of.

Can you think of examples of this in your own life when you felt threatened, over-reacted and nothing happened? Did your reaction match the identified threat? The emotion of fear may give you accurate messages you need to be aware indicating a danger or problem. On the other hand, state of anxiety or a panic attack may be a self-inflicted over reaction to a perceived threat. Finding out how much of a threat is at hand can be overcome with better inventory skills. It is possible determine accurately what is a legitimate threat to our safety and what needs to be done to protect ourselves. It is also possible to downgrade a perceived threat to an awareness that unwanted things can happen to us and others without us becoming pathologically upset and stuck. Persistent anxiety and panic may call for professional help to solve the puzzle of what our fearful threats are and how to cope with them.

Hurt: Hurt is an emotional reaction when somebody lets us down. It is when somebody we have trusted or we expected to have their loyalty and caring and they do not meet our expectations that we feel hurt. Hurt seems to be telling us, I trusted somebody, some group, some family members or anybody I felt really cared about and he/she/they did something/said something that let me down, hurt my feelings and disappointed me. The key question I need to ask when I feel hurt is, **“Who did or said something that causes me to feel betrayed?”**

We need to be very attentive to our hurt feelings because they often turn to anger, a desire to punish or get even and can lead to even more damaged relationships. Many addicts have relapsed when they felt rejected, abandoned or hurt by someone they trusted. Trust is a major issue for most alcoholics and other addicts, and we are not alone in this. The loss of trust is painful for anybody. Addicts frequently damage their trusting relationships with family and others.

Shame: Shame is telling us we have done something that has offended our values. The question we ask ourselves is, **“What have I done or said that is triggering this feeling of guilt and shame?”** Remember that addicts almost always fall into a shame-based sense of self from what we do and don’t to as a result of being impaired by our drugs of choice. Many of us have shame from other sources too. We may feel like failures because we have not achieved what was expected of us. Shame tells us we are not who or what we should be, and therefore don’t deserve anything but punishment and rejection. Successful recovery requires improved self-esteem. Shame gets in the way of self-esteem.

Sad: Sad is telling us that something has been lost and we are grieving over it. The question is, **“What is missing in my life that is causing this sense of loss?”** What is lost may be a person, a dream, a job or anything of importance. Sad is a natural emotion that affects us all. Like all the painful

emotions, sadness has a message and a clue and can lead us to what we need to do to relieve the pain.

We can learn to understand our emotions and deal wisely and lovingly with them. Feelings can be friends. It seems pain can be a motivator for us. Pain tells us we need to do something about our circumstances. Pain can be the first step towards solutions. Painful emotions are part of life and cannot be avoided in the human condition. Our emotions get our attention when our best thinking does not produce obvious answers.

We no longer need drugs to take away our emotions without paying attention to what they can tell us. We can learn the messages they are sending to us. We can keep our emotions at the level they do us some good, or we can let them run wild and feel more pain than we need to.

Start today. Let your body tell you what you are feeling. Identify the emotions you feel, knowing they seldom come one at a time, but may come in a group or come and go like ghosts. Discover their messages to you. Apply the strategies for keeping your feelings at a manageable level, enlisting the help of sponsors, counselors and knowledgeable friends to sort out the puzzles. Above all know, the emotional pain subsides with right actions and wiser thinking.

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