

Why There Is No Such Thing as “Unhealthy” Emotions

By Bernita Tuinenga – Executive Director of Volunteers in Service

“The more you hide your feelings, the more they show.

The more

you deny your feelings, the more they grow.” – Anonymous

When I first started exploring personal development and digging down past my defenses and conditioning to find a more authentic version of myself, I thought the aim was to “fix myself” so I could be “happy”.

Not having any clue about what “happiness” really meant at that time (or what I wanted it to mean to me), I remember going into my first therapy session thinking that, if the therapy was a success, when I finished I just wouldn’t experience uncomfortable or challenging feelings anymore.

Little did I realize then that an important part of my journey would be learning to accept that those feelings, as uncomfortable as they might be, are in integral part of the human experience. Over the past few years, I’ve learned that so-called “unhealthy” feelings like anger, envy, and frustration are not only natural experiences but they can actually be helpful.

What makes or breaks our relationships and experience of life isn’t whether or not we feel these emotions, but how we respond to them.

To feel or not to feel?

Early on in my self-discovery journey, I became confused. I was reading a lot of self-help and New Age wisdom that talked about letting go of feelings like anger, jealousy and bitterness in order to reach a state of enlightenment. At the time, the way I interpreted this was that it was wrong to experience these emotions and that, if I wanted to be a healthy person, I needed to reach a point where I didn’t feel them anymore.

At the same time, I found that I couldn’t stop myself feeling what I was feeling, and my therapist was encouraging me to focus on accepting these feelings rather than trying to get rid of them.

I felt stuck. I wondered whether there was something wrong with me and I wasn’t quite getting it. After all, I was still experiencing anger, I still felt jealous of other people, and I still got frustrated.

The reality of “unhealthy” feelings

What I also realized, however, was that there was wisdom in these experiences. When I questioned my philosophy, I realized that, for me, these feelings were full of information about my values, needs, and desires.

I also didn’t find that I was consumed by these feelings: in fact, I noticed that when I was willing to accept and make peace with my experience, these feelings were transitory. It was only when I tried to push them away that I started to suffer. Over time, I realized that feeling these feelings wasn’t the issue. It was my resistance to feeling them that was ultimately stressful.

The truth is that we can’t stop ourselves feeling certain things or get rid of certain emotions. What we can control, however, is what we do next.

My experience has left me concerned with our tendency as a society to label certain feelings as “healthy” and “unhealthy”. Feelings are just feelings, and the danger with labeling them is that we start to reject our own natural internal process.

When we push down or reject the emotions we think we “shouldn’t” feel, they don’t go away. In fact, they get stronger.

All feelings are helpful, it’s how we respond to them that matters

In certain situations, anger is a just and healthy response to feeling threatened, attacked, or wronged (or seeing this behavior inflicted upon others). Other times, we might experience anger because of false beliefs we have about ourselves or the world, or because someone behaves in a way that reminds us of past hurt.

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Whatever the root cause of the anger, exploring the “why” behind the feeling helps us gain a deeper understanding about ourselves. Then, we can make a more informed decision about how we want to respond to that feeling of anger: do we lash out, blame, judge, and shame, or do we use the feeling as an opportunity to learn more about ourselves, our beliefs?

As a coach, I notice that many of my clients struggle with this concept of healthy and unhealthy feelings. When I hear someone say “I know it’s wrong to feel that way...”, my experience has led me to ask “Why is it wrong?” and explore the beliefs underneath that statement. Without exception, when people start learning to accept these feelings, rather than labeling them, the feelings become less intense.

The most helpful and self-compassionate response to uncomfortable feelings that I’ve found is to return to that question of “why”. Today, I invite you to experiment with this approach and, in the face of challenging emotions, to ask yourself: Why am I so afraid of this? What do I fear? What does that tell me about my needs right now?

We don’t get to control how we feel, but we do get to choose how we respond: will it be from a place of self-compassion or self-criticism? From self-discovery or self-rejection? It’s our decision, each time. How do you want to respond to challenging feelings in the future? Leave a comment and let us know.