

Myths and Truths About Emotion

Many people struggle with feelings which are overwhelming and sometimes cause them to react impulsively. Others react by withdrawing or shutting down. This reactivity can lead to problems worse than the original cause. People often seek professional help when they come to recognize that their method for managing their emotional life isn't working. At that point they want to know, how can I do this differently?

Learning more effective ways to manage difficult emotions takes work, but it *is* possible and well worth it. In order to begin this process, it can be helpful to identify some key concepts and refute some myths about emotion.

Myth #1

I choose what I feel.

We do not choose what we feel. Our feelings are a fundamental expression of who we are. They let us know our deepest longings, loves, joys and preferences. Our feelings are there for us to discover, but not a choice we make. What we *can* choose is how we respond to our emotions. This affects many things, including how we feel. There is a significant difference between learning to recognize and manage how we react to our emotions and believing that we choose how we feel.

Myth #2

Emotional strength means pushing away unwanted emotions.

In many ways, myth #2, follows logically from myth #1. If we believe that we choose what we feel, it makes sense that pushing away an unwelcome emotion will put us back in control. But since we don't choose what we feel, our efforts to disregard or shut off our emotional experience backfires, sometimes with disastrous results. Strength comes from paying closer attention to what we feel. When we cut ourselves off from understanding our emotional experience, we lose the most vital information about our lives making it near impossible to really get what we want.

Myth #3

You only feel one emotion at a time.

There is a common misconception that if we're really honest with ourselves, we only feel one way about something or someone important. You can almost imagine a friend pressing for an answer to the question "Ok, but how do you *really* feel about it?" It's as if only one emotion is

true and must be understood as the correct one, making the others false or wrong. This myth attempts to give us a way to avoid ambivalence (which is uncomfortable) and focus on shutting down or acting out the one emotion deemed *real*.

Myth #4

If I feel it, I have to act on it.

This myth contributes to our efforts to shut down the emotions we don't like. If we feel somehow compelled, through a false notion of honesty or authenticity, to act on any emotion we acknowledge, then we'd best ignore or cut off emotions we don't like. But having a feeling does not necessitate action. We can't choose what we feel, but we most certainly *can* choose what we do with what we feel. Learning to feel an emotion without doing anything about it, no matter how strong, is the cornerstone of healthy emotional management, and indeed, to real psychological and spiritual health.

Truths About Emotion

The myths listed above outline some common misconceptions about our emotional lives. What follows are truths which counter those myths and articulate an alternate conception of emotional strength and resilience.

Truth #1

When we acknowledge how we feel, we create opportunities to choose how to respond to our emotions.

Recognizing our emotional responses and waiting before we react to them gives us freedom. Our emotions are then no longer our enemies to be controlled and defeated, but rather, necessary allies guiding us in making truly wise decisions. By taking our emotions into account, we are much better able to live in accordance with our values.

Truth #2

Emotional awareness is the necessary precursor to emotional resilience.

There are any number of ways we try to deny our emotional experience: numbing our feelings through addictions, repressing them, rationalizing them away, etc. Certain defensive strategies even masquerade as emotional strength, like focusing on something more pleasant or exciting.

But real strength and resilience requires the first step of knowing what we're feeling. This is the exact opposite of avoiding our emotions. How can we expect to make good decisions if we don't know what we feel?

Truth #3

We often feel many emotions simultaneously.

While we may come to discover that one emotional experience is at the root of what we're feeling, it is important for us to cultivate openness to our own experience by welcoming multiplicity. When we pay attention to the many emotions we're having, sometimes in direct conflict with each other, we make room for discernment. Emotions often have a layered quality. For example, we might be worried about something, but believe we shouldn't be worried, and so feel angry with ourselves, or even ashamed. All of those emotions may be present at the same time.

Truth #4

Emotional strength is built through feeling our emotions without automatically doing anything about them.

Feeling our emotions without reactivity is like doing emotional crunches. They're hard work, you have to keep doing them, and they will make you stronger. When you're learning to feel your emotions without reacting to them, it can be disorienting at first, but with practice, the disorientation passes, and you come to discover that the intensity of the emotion itself diminishes as well. And just like with crunches, you can't stop practicing and expect to maintain your emotional strength.