

## How To Deal With Our Emotions

You are not a Vulcan.

You are a human. You have a mind capable of logic and rational thought. You also possess a body that feels. Emotions are as principle to you and your being as your eyes, your hands, your feet, or your skin.

And, try as we might or think as we do - that life would be better, easier if we didn't have all these gooey feelings gumming up our insides - we do. So, since emotions seem to be a fundamental aspect of what we are, I thought now might be a good time to learn a bit more about them.

### **Our Emotional Education**

Our emotional development starts three weeks after mommy and daddy made us.

This is when our brains start to form. Then, at about three months in utero, we start processing information. This is the genesis of our emotional lives. Long before we have our own lungs to breathe, our own mouths to eat, or our own eyes to see - we have our emotions.

Emotions are the names we give to the ways we feel. Inputs from the outside world are collected, filtered through our senses, and processed through our brains. The physiological changes we experience during this bio-computing - we name happy, sad, angry, etc.

Our propensity to identify with, or frequently experience, any particular emotion is partly atavistic, based on our genetic make-up. Some of us are more pre-disposed to feeling certain ways than others. It's a feature of our design. The foundations of which were laid long before we ever said hello to this sweet, sweet world.

We also establish our basic ways of handling the information we receive from our senses in the womb. These are our adaptations. And, I'm guessing this is also why parents are especially fond of saying their baby has so much "personality." Because, by the time a child is born, he or she's already got an emotional operating system (EOS).

Living, especially in those early years of brain development, is essentially an exercise in updating your EOS. It's taking in new experiences (inputs through the senses) and learning how to deal with them (adapting). For most of us, this peaks from ages three to eight when we grow out of, or through, our initial, and often inadequate, reactions to sensory information.

### **Firing and Wiring**

Remember too, all this is happening inside our brains. We're talking about physical processes here. So, when we pick up inputs from our senses, they get coded into neurons. These neurons activate (fire), launch down a specific pathway, and trigger others of their kind encoded for how we feel (wiring).

The thing is - when it comes to neural relationships - repetition equals strength. Every time a neuron travels to go hang out with its friends, it takes the same path. It's like erosion. The pathways in your mind are rivers. Each time a neuron rafts down a particular river, that river's

smoother and more carved out. Eventually, after years and years, these neural rivers beget canyons. These canyons become our “automatic” reactions.

It’s why old habits die hard. It’s why we are prone to repeating mistakes. It’s the physical explanation for why it’s so easy to get stuck repeating patterns in life. We perceive “A” with our senses. Neuron “B” fires and activates our reaction “C.” It’s almost as if “A” *causes* “C.”

But it doesn’t. It just seems to. And that’s important. It means we are capable of changing how we process and deal with our emotions. It means, with a little bit of consciousness, we can temper our maladaptive reactions and forge better, healthier responses.

### **Continuing Education - Mary’s Method**

With the help of registered play therapist, owner of Red Tent Counseling, and all around lovely woman, Mary Morgan, I put together a six-step plan to help us improve our emotional lives...

Press Pause - We’re changing a reaction to a response. We’re forcing a neuron, who is perfectly happy on the whitewater of your brain-canyons it knows so well (reaction), to pick a new route and destination (response). It’s not easy. But it’s also not impossible. The first step is noticing.

EX-it - Exhale and Externalize. Once you’re aware of what you’re feeling, let out a long exhale. Emotions change our body chemistry. The ones we don’t like or aren’t good at dealing with make us tense and rigid. A drawn out, emphatic exhale helps loosen us up physically. As does naming whatever it is you’re feeling. After your exhale, say, out loud, what emotion you’re dealing with. Keeping things in leads to denial, repression, and explosions. None of which are good.

Unpack and Rearrange - Usually we don’t deal with *an* emotion. We deal with emotions, plural. It’s important to sort through and sift out what you are actually experiencing. Chances are, what we feel is much more of a mixed drink than a single-malt.

Put Five On It - Remember your mid-90s hip-hop. The next step is to take five deep breaths. Inhale for five seconds. Exhale for five seconds. Do that five times. Next, drink five ounces of water. Remember, our emotions are physiological responses to our sensory inputs. Drinking water and breathing deeply are two simple, healthy, and quick ways to change our body chemistry.

Bask In The Goodness - Now it’s time to change our inputs. Put on music you like to dance to. Go for a walk. Exercise. Talk to an encouraging friend. Play outside. Read something inspirational. Coach yourself up. The important thing is taking proactive steps and changing your stimuli.

Self-talk Swear Jar - Have you caught *Luke Cage* yet? Well, you should. Especially if you’re into superheroes. Anyway, in the show there’s a barbershop. And in the barbershop there’s a swear jar. If anyone says a bad word in Pop’s shop then they need to pony up some cash. We’re going to borrow this principle. For every negative thing you say to yourself, it’ll cost you five positive ones.

## Now For Some Practice

Let's say, for whatever reason, you woke up late. On your drive into work someone cuts you off. What's worse - the culprit then speeds through the yellow light at the next intersection, leaving you screwed. Now you're stuck at a red light, with no chance of making it to work on time, and fuming. What should you do?

(Hint: Run the red light, give chase, force them off the road, and get into a fight is not the answer.)

1 - Press Pause - You need to move from an unhealthy reaction to a healthy response. So, as soon as you can, you need to notice and become aware of your reaction to the situation.

2 - EX-it - Take a long, slow exhale and externalize. Say, out loud, what it is you're feeling and why. "I'm angry because that car cut me off and I'm late for work."

3 - Unpack and Rearrange - Anger is the name you gave to your feelings when you externalized them in the step above, right? But, according to Mary, "Anger is a blanket. It comes with buddies." Chances are, what you're calling anger is more of a catch-all for a cocktail of emotions. Are you *worried* about the consequences of being late to work? Are you *jealous* of the cars who made it through before the light changed? Are you *frustrated* by how inconsiderate the offending driver is? Are you *disappointed* with yourself for running late in the first place? So on and so forth.

4 - Put Five On It - Take five deep breathes. Inhale for five seconds. Exhale for five seconds. Now, drink five ounces of water.

5 - Bask In The Goodness - Time for proactive steps. You're in the car, so getting up and moving around probably won't work, but calling a friend might. You could also put on music you like. You could listen to a podcast that makes you laugh or feel inspired. You can also directly address, and do something, about one of the blanketed secondary emotions in your unpacked anger - your worry about being late for work. You can call them and let them know.

6 - Self-Talk Swear Jar - Lastly, over the course of your remaining drive, if you catch yourself perseverating, stuck in a negative loop, it's going to cost you. Every negative thought locked on repeat in your brain means you owe your swear jar five positive ones. So, if it's "I'm so gonna get fired. I can't believe that asshole cut me off..." then you're on the hook for 10 positive thoughts. "Well, at least I didn't get into an accident. I've got a phone I can use to call work. I'm lucky enough to have a car. I've got enough money to be able to put gas in the tank. I've got a stereo that works and music I like. Now I've got more time to listen to said jams. Wow, it's a pretty morning. I'm grateful to have enough to eat. The breeze and sunshine sure do feel nice. Happy hour with my friends tonight is gonna be a blast."

We're human. Emotions are real. They're a part of our anatomy. We have no power to decide *if* we feel them, but we do have the power to decide what we do *when* we feel them. You are no more a slave to your emotions than you are to your teeth. Continue your emotional education. Use Mary's Method. Live long and prosper.

