

Get your past out of your present

One of the greatest failings of conventional medicine – and indeed our cultural education – has been the downplaying of the importance of emotions. Historically this happened around the 17th century with the so-called Age of Enlightenment, when there emerged a particular kind of linear scientific thinking. This more simple cause and effect reasoning was not at all suited to the emotions. So the intellect took over and emotions, which defied measurement and became more repressed up into the Victorian age, didn't really resurface again until the 20th century, when Sigmund Freud argued that many neuroses and health issues had their basis in repressed emotions.

Only recently, through developments in neuroscience, can we measure emotion to an extent, and its effects on both mental and physical health. It is becoming increasingly clear that no thought occurs without an emotion, and that emotions – positive or negative – have a massive effect on our health and the whole way we operate. Our whole basis of memory, which is how we hold the story of our lives, depends on emotion.

Emotions are the basis of the subtlety of human relationships, and relationships are as important to us as water is to fish. We only develop as human beings through relationship and it is developing emotional intelligence that allows us to interact healthily with others, both to get our needs met and to understand the needs of others.

Positive emotions such as love and joy, and the ability to resolve negative emotions, is an essential part of achieving optimum health. Yet the experience of life means that we inevitably accumulate emotional tension and unresolved memories from the past. The more disturbing of these become deep-rooted negative emotional patterns that unconsciously determine how we react to the stresses of life.

The word e-motion comes from the latin – e for exit and motio for movement – so emotion is a natural energy, a dynamic experience, that needs to move through and out of the body. Yet as children, we are often taught not to express our emotions. For example, we might have heard "Boys don't cry" or "Don't be a baby" Or, when we are angry, we are taught it's not appropriate to express it – "Don't you dare raise your voice to me". At some level, most of us are taught that emotions are not okay.

Our task, as healthy adults, is to flush out and let go of the emotional patterns from the past that mess up our lives and no longer serve us. As Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt Therapy, often said: "The only way out is through". It's not easy, and the vast majority of people deny the symptoms or anaesthetise themselves through work, TV, food, alcohol or some kind of drug. By discharging negative emotions attached to past memories, we become more able to respond spontaneously in any given moment, allowing us to be more present in our relationships and to the gifts of the world around us.

Bodies express what minds repress

Emotions literally store in our cellular memory through our lives. They can manifest as physical tension, causing all sorts of health problems including headaches, ulcers, IBS and more serious illnesses from cancer to heart disease.

Extreme emotions affect your heart function, depress the immune system and inhibit digestion. Grief is another example. It depresses immunity and may be one explanation as to why many people who are unable to come to terms with the death of their partner, often die shortly after. Such emotions need to be fully expressed, for both our physical and psychological health, so that we can learn from our experiences and move forward.

We all experience many different emotions but the most common ones are shades of anger, fear or sadness. Sadness is usually associated with regrets, losses and loss of opportunities in the past. Anger is associated with not having your needs met, not being listened to, not being understood. Rage and violent reactions and extreme anger usually originate from a sense, whether real or just perceived, that our survival is literally under threat. Fear often comes from not being able to adapt to the circumstances we are in and is associated with the fear of loss of our sense of self, for example the fear of going mad or dying.

As Franklin D Roosevelt said, during the 1933 recession in America, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself". But what is it to have a healthy emotional response to life's inevitable circumstances?

"Anyone can become angry – that is easy. But to be angry with the right person at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way – this is not easy," said Aristotle. How do you deal with a circumstance where someone accuses you of something you didn't do? Or when your relationship breaks down and ends, or when a loved one dies? How about when you lose your job or run out of money? Emotional health is just as important as physical health and, without it, causes us just as much – if not more – suffering.

The World Health Organisation says mental health problems are the number one challenge for the 21st century. A small survey of the top 100 health scorers in the 100% health survey shows that healthy people both rate emotional health as very important and tend to be emotionally healthy (see below). Having a positive outlook on life makes a big difference. In one study by researchers at the University of Pittsburgh, which followed 100,000 women over eight years, optimists were 30% less likely to die from heart disease and 23% less likely to die from cancer than those women who had a general distrust of people. But where does distrust and unhappiness come from?

Emotional behaviour patterns are learnt

When we react emotionally these reactions are automatic and physical, literally flooding your brain and body with neurotransmitters associated with the stress response. They take over the rational mind, stop you being able to listen and lead to irrational reactions and behaviour. Your heart rate can jump from 70 beats a minute to over 100 in a single heart beat, muscles tense and your breathing changes. Daniel Goleman, author of Emotional Intelligence, calls this 'emotional hijacking'. These emotional reaction patterns that trigger emotional hijacking are learnt in early life and can be changed into more functional responses by coming to an understanding of how our past programmes us to respond automatically to current events.

As an example, cast your mind back to your early childhood. How did you see anger expressed in your childhood? Did you ever see your mother or father shouting, or did they give you the silent treatment? What did you learn from this? If you had a raging, shouting parent, you've probably learnt to shut down as you had to do when you were a frightened and vulnerable child. Perhaps you said that you'd never be like that when you grew up, and swore that you would certainly never, ever treat your children in that way. Yet, in a moment of weakness or frustration, you might have reacted in just the same way they did, and felt really guilty afterwards. It can take a lot of energy to be different to how we were brought up, for we had years of 'emotional education' – both positive and negative – from our parents as well as our school teachers.

A softer emotion than anger is sadness. Think back to how your parents dealt with sadness or grief. For example, if there was a death in the family, how did your parents react? Sadness is an appropriate reaction, but left unexpressed, leads to depression.

Depression can also arise from suppressed anger. "Don't get sad, get mad" the saying goes. If you are depressed, is there something you are angry about but have been unable to express or do something about? Do you think either of your parents were depressed and, if so, how has this affected you? Are you either always trying to be positive about everything or do you have an underlying sense of hopelessness, or perhaps you flip-flop between the two?

Do you fear that any love relationships are doomed, a minefield that could explode at any time or are best avoided completely? What lessons did you learn about love and relationships when you were growing up? If you always fear being abandoned or not finding a loving relationship, that may very well stem from early memories of feeling abandoned or unwanted as a child.

The kind of relationship your parents had with each other will also have had a massive impact on how you deal with relationships. Here's an exercise that can help you see how we inherit these negative emotional patterns from our parents.

EXERCISE – Identifying your negative emotional patterns of behaviour

Write down at least five of your negative emotional patterns – ideally those that cause, or have caused you, the most emotional distress.

Here are some examples:

Fear of being abandoned (leads to being needy)

Fear of being smothered in a relationship (leads to avoiding committed relationships)

Feeling put down/criticised (leads to avoiding risks)

Feeling never good enough (leads to having to achieve or prove yourself, or having to please)

Feeling controlled (leads to having to control others)

Feeling ashamed or guilty

Fear of being wrong (leads to having to be right)

Fear of failure, or not making it in the world (leads to constant striving and over-achieving)

Now take a few moments to relax and take your mind back to a time in your childhood. Close your eyes and picture yourself as a child of around eight years old. You might even have a photo lying around that could help you access that stage. Standing next to yourself as a child, imagine your parents, or the people who brought you up, just as they were when you were growing up.

Next to them, how do you feel? Are you given the sense that you were good enough, that you were okay as you are? Can you start to get the sense of how your whole mood, your attitude to others, indeed your overall perspective of the world might have been affected by these powerful figures? Remember, you depended on them for love and approval.

Now write down five or more negative patterns of your mother, and your father. Look for the ones that had the most impact on you.

For example: over-critical, uncaring, cold/distant, angry, passive, smothering, over-protective, hopeless.

Do any of the patterns you identified for yourself exist also in either of your parents? Or do you have the opposite pattern of behaviour? In many cases we compensate with the exact opposite. For example, your parent is aggressive, and you are passive, or they are critical and you are always nice.

Transferring the past to our present

The real destructive power of the past can often come about, because, despite our best intentions, we keep recreating history by subconsciously setting up situations that feel familiar. It's horrifying and strangely comforting at the same time. For example, if we had a critical parent we attract a critical partner or boss. Or if one of your parents was always blaming the other one for his or her problems, perhaps you have inherited the victim role. It's never your fault and you always have someone else to blame. That's the power these negative patterns can have. Psychologists call it transference, whereby we bring our internalised parents, along with their and our shared emotional baggage from the past, into our present lives.

So, what do you do when you become aware of how learnt negative emotional patterns are messing up your life and your health? In the same way we need to learn about optimum nutrition and how to choose the right foods and drinks to be healthy, we also need to learn about how to discharge and let go of negative emotions and emotional patterns. As vital as this skill is, unfortunately it isn't taught in school and it isn't part of our culture to learn these things. The first step is simply to acknowledge how you feel in the moment.

It's okay to feel

Sadness, anger and fear, and all the shades in between, are perfectly normal reactions when things happen in our lives that don't match our expectations. We all have the need for expressing, venting and releasing feelings in healthy appropriate conscious ways, thus avoiding getting stuck in negative emotional patterns. How you

consciously experience your emotions makes all the difference. Here is a simple way to do this:

When you do feel an emotion and need to express it, take a breath and say clearly "I am feeling xyz (eg angry, frustrated, sad) and that's okay."

Take another breath and say this again two more times until you sense a different feeling. In some circumstances it may be better to say this just to yourself, not out loud. Whichever way you do it, you are allowing the feeling, and yourself, to simply be without judgement.

Often, what happens is that our rational mind is hijacked by a strong emotional reaction that has more charge because it plugs into some of our old history. Have you ever noticed how something that really makes you react strongly goes over the head of someone else? Your boss doesn't say "Good morning" as he passes by, and you feel hurt. Jackie, however, working next to you says, "Oh, never mind, he's probably just got his head in the clouds." This is a good indicator that your reaction is but a tip of the iceberg of a more deep rooted negative emotional pattern, in this case one of feeling easily rejected.

While you may not be able to recognise in that moment how you are feeling and what drives that feeling, or express it in a conscious and appropriate way, here is a simple exercise to help you link how you feel today with deep-rooted emotional patterns in childhood.

Tracking emotional patterns

Anger

How do you express your anger?

When was the last time you felt angry?

How did it make you feel, physically?

Were you overtly angry or did you cover it up?

Now cut back to your childhood. Think of a time your mother or father was angry with you. How did you react?

Bring to mind your first memory of feeling angry.

How did they react?

Feeling 'not good enough'

When was the last time you felt put down?

How did it make you feel, physically?

How did you react?

Now go back to a scene in childhood when you felt put down? Perhaps being told off. How did you react?

You can do the same process with other emotions and negative emotional patterns.

Action plan for letting go and learning from the past

So how do you give yourself the equivalent of a psychological detox, releasing stored up patterns of negative emotions that keep you blocked, unhappy, over-reactive and generally low?

Here are a few simple exercises and options that can really help you let go of emotional baggage.

Breathing out the emotion

Bring to mind an emotionally charged situation that is still causing you some distress or unease.

Identify a place in your body where you feel the emotion this memory evokes.

Put your hand there.

As you breathe in, imagine white light pouring into that area. As you breathe out, imagine the old pain of that memory leaving.

Breathe in warmth and light, and breathe out the negative emotions. With each breath you feel lighter and clearer until you feel a physical sense of relief in that place in your body.

Writing down the emotion

Take a piece of paper and, without any censorship whatsoever, write down as quickly as you can one of these emotional scenes from your past that keeps having an impact upon your present. Put your real feelings in there, how you felt as a child, how you feel affected now. Make it emotional, specific and powerful. When you are finished take the piece of paper and burn it with the sense of the power of that negative pattern going up in the smoke.

This kind of writing exercise is very good for discharging negative emotions you have in unresolved relationships, perhaps an ex-partner or parent, and helps you move on. Make a list of people you still feel pissed off with or haven't forgiven. Choose one. Write a letter expressing all your negative feelings about their behaviour/ attitudes, holding nothing back, telling them that you won't accept their negative projections. But remember, don't send it!

Next, write a letter expressing everything you appreciate about them, all you have learnt from them. Really open your heart and forgive them. This simple exercise will make you clearer and more able to meet them, if you wish to, or move on, without always carrying the weight of the past with you.

Journaling

Another writing method is journaling. The best time to do this, and have the least noise from your very own inbuilt critic, is first thing in the morning.

Get a couple of pieces of paper and just put down in writing whatever comes up. We are not talking fine literature here, but the chance to 'take an emotional dump' as a colleague of mine once so evocatively put it. You may find yourself repeating sentences, using colourful language, appreciating the trees around you or pouring scorn down on someone or something. It doesn't matter what emerges, just go with it. Have your hand write faster than you can think, don't worry about spelling and grammar. If you are writing about a past situation and get stuck, start each sentence with the phrase "I remember..." and allow whatever comes. It doesn't even matter if it feels made up – it's your emotional truth.

Moving it out of your body

A great way to discharge negative emotions is through movement itself. As you know from a good walk or a run, you come back refreshed. The effect is doubled if you use that exercise to discharge negative emotions. If you are emotionally upset go for a jog, swim or walk and imagine with each step or stroke letting go of the emotion you are feeling.

Read these books

Gabrielle Roth's Maps to Ecstasy: Healing Power of Movement is very helpful in moving through and letting go of negative emotions. So too is Tim Laurence's You Can Change Your Life. Also excellent for understanding the effect of our family conditioning is Oliver James' They F*** You Up. If you are drawn to journaling, a very good book is The Artist's Way by Julia Cameron.

Emotional therapy

A good psychotherapist can help you let go of negative emotional patterns and develop healthier ways of being. To find someone in your area, contact the UK Council for Psychotherapy (www.ukcp.org.uk). I have been particularly impressed by psychotherapists and counsellors trained at the Psychosynthesis and Education Trust (www.psychosynthesis.edu). They also run an excellent two-weekend workshop called Essentials that enables you to look at your life, how you would like it to be and what needs to change.

The Hoffman Process

A highly effective course that keeps getting excellent reviews, is an eight-day residential course called the Hoffman Process. It thoroughly 'undoes' negative patterns of behaviour we inherit from childhood, resulting in a profound transformation in relating and relationships, and the sense of who we are. It crosses the fine line between psychology (healing the psyche) and spirituality: getting you back in touch with the higher 'self' or soul. Since 1967, more than 70,000 people worldwide have used the techniques of Hoffman to achieve personal strength, clarity and freedom from destructive emotional patterns. Participants have reported benefits such as much better relationships with family members and being able to communicate more effectively at home and at work. See www.hoffmaninstitute.co.uk or www.hoffmaninstitute.org for the US.

Adapted extract from Ten Secrets of 1005 healthy People (piatkus) by Patrick Holford