

I ^{Don't} ^ Hate Feeling, ^{Anymore!}

Why what's painful gives you access to what matters.

By Carl Patterson, LPC



“Long live the king.”

In June of 1994, *The Lion King* was released and I was a month away from my thirteenth birthday when Mufasa had his paws cruelly pounced on by his wretched brother Scar. Mufasa was mocked by Scar as he disgracefully proclaimed himself the new king right before throwing his brother off the cliff to be trampled to death by stampeding wildebeest.

I cried (sadness).

When I was ten years old I got into a shouting match with my best friend at the time, Tyrone. I don't remember what it was about. If I had to guess it was either about pro wrestling, video games, or Tyrone crossing boundaries with his sense of humor again. Either way, the shouting turned into a double side headlock, which we both probably learned from watching Macho Man Randy Savage or Ricky “The Dragon” Steamboat. We struggled for control in an uncomfortable neck hug and eventually fell to the ground in a stalemate; neither one of us was willing to let go of the other. After about twenty minutes, my

uncle Curtis found us. He stared at what Tyrone and I thought was this fierce battle between former friends, but now foes, bitter enemies. It would probably be more likened to a hugfest by two preteen boys. He laughed. He laughed some more. Then Curtis finally bent down to unhook us from one another. It was over. I walked away. Not before tucking my emotions into place where teens forget, forgive, or frame in order to continue functioning.

I was fuming (anger).

I once again cried (sadness).

I was attempting not to feel when...

- experiencing my first heartbreak (sadness).
- being woken up in the middle of the night by hearing my parents argue (fear).
- getting caught cheating on a math test (shame and guilt).
- grieving my grandmother's passing after her second battle with cancer came to an end (sadness).

Whether “positive” or “negative” emotions, I spent my childhood stifling my emotions. It could've been due to fear, experiences, difficulty identifying emotions, lack of trust, difficulty connecting with self or everything listed and more.

Either way, I tried not to feel.

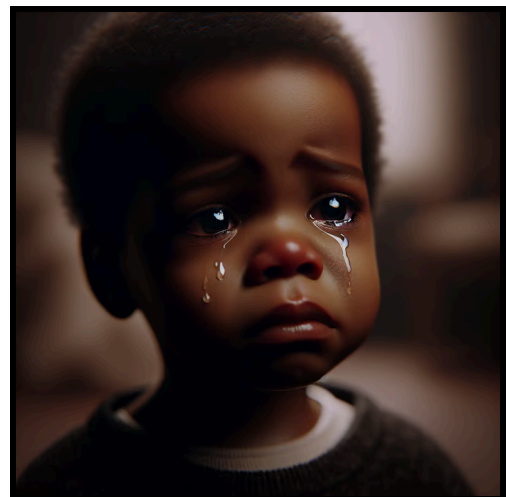
“I had feelings.”

Question: At what age are we taught how to feel our feelings?

You may view that question as either rhetorical or a trick because most or many of us aren't “taught” how to feel our feelings. We are wired to avoid our emotions, not to mindfully embrace them. It is misguided messaging when we are children and told to “stop crying” when we are sad or angry or both that leads to subduing or suppressing emotions as both kids and eventually as adults. Little boys being told it's weak to cry and little girls being told they are too emotional can lead to children having false beliefs about expressing emotions. They may ultimately believe they must emote in a way accepted by their caregivers or adults they share space with or otherwise possibly experience rejection.

Oddly enough in therapy sessions, I often remind my adult clients that they are human and because of this they have feelings that are meant to be felt. Not only are we all allowed to feel but there should be a space created for us to feel. Emotions play a role in different aspects of life related to growth and development, survival, awareness, motivation, decision making and problem solving, and connection and attachment to others. I understand that emotions can frequently feel more of a burden than a blessing but in those moments we should breathe and still explore the benefits of big feelings.

One of my clients once told me, “I had feelings” in the past tense indicating that he made a well thought out decision



that they were no longer needed. We may be able to suppress, or our emotions may be repressed, but we don't remove them. Suppressing emotions is what I like to call, "saving for later." They (unwanted emotions) roll around in the background, some pushed away intentionally, and others unintentionally, until they spill out unexpectedly at a later, more uncontrollable time. When this happens we are often impulsive or act out or behave in ways that are not always helpful. To our defense, we don't really understand how to skillfully feel our feelings.

Feelings signal how we are absorbing and understanding our environment or circumstances and they are designed to drive an adaptive behavioral response.

Feelings are NOT Designed to Slow Us Down.

We label emotions positive when they feel rewarding and we label negative emotions when they make us uncomfortable or they feel painful. Positive emotions are often linked to excitement, joy, happiness, attraction, hope, and interest. Often people will view emotions such as fear, anxiety, guilt, shame, disgust, hurt, anger, sadness, and jealousy as negative. Neither of these lists of emotions are all inclusive but whether positive or negative emotions, they often dictate what comes next for us.

Emotions arise in situations we perceive important physically, psychologically, or socially (attachment). Emotions motivate behaviors, but are not designed to slow us down. Positive emotions will increase the likelihood we repeat a behavior by reinforcing the feeling of being rewarded while a negative emotion will increase avoidant behaviors.

For example: you meet a wonderful charismatic attractive person who offers you a compliment (happiness, excitement, attraction), you will lean into building a connection with hopes of having repeated encounters with them. If this same individual makes a derogatory statement or offers an unhealthy experience (anger, sadness, hurt) you will do what you can to avoid re-experiencing that individual. When we are triggered or activated by a negative emotion we often make strong efforts to avoid it by attempting to escape, reduce, right, or control the threat associated with the feeling. There are many times when we may not be consciously aware of our emotional state, but a decision will be made or not made in those moments to protect the system (body) from any unwanted or undesired feelings.

Avoiding is Available but also Temporary

As it turns out, humans are a very adaptive species of primate and there is a growing list of ways to effectively avoid feeling our emotions. Technology is an integral part of our daily lives. Many individuals rollover after hearing their alarm on their phone go off and while still having the phone in their hand they will check their email, text messages, any "likes" or comments on their social media posts, "like" or comment on people's posts they are following, or watch funny or interesting videos. They are still in the prone position in bed. Technology is linked to mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders. Balancing the need for connection and the negative effects of excessive screen time can be challenging. Technology has benefits as well such as productivity, collaboration, and creativity to name a few. Technology also impacts the release of neurochemicals like dopamine, oxytocin, and endorphins, which are all connected to pleasurable feelings and satisfaction. This means technology does become a way to escape or avoid embracing unwanted feelings by countering them with feelings related to positive emotions.

We smoke to relax, video games numb both kids and adults, and porn relieves stress. Some consume alcohol, binge eat, use illegal or legal drugs, or stay as busy as possible whether it is work, hobbies, or

other activities that offer a distraction. When we feel sad, we may talk about it or change the topic. When we become frustrated or angry, which may be covering up hurt, shame, or disappointment, we may yell or scream or express ourselves in inappropriate ways.

We also pay attention to patterns of our triggers which could or could not be related to our core beliefs. We then imagine ways to avoid feelings of discomfort in the future such as not associating with people who activate us, withdrawing or avoiding certain topics of conversation, isolating from friends or lowering risks of heartbreak by staying single, or staying away from environments or circumstances that could be harmful. In essence, we attempt to predict outcomes in advance and avoid them. We even tell fabrications or omit the truth to not have those negative feelings revisit us or lessen the intensity of them.

So, what's wrong with avoiding feelings? I guess this depends on who is answering the question. Nature will push us in a space where we act but not feel, but nurture wants us to shut down certain feelings. Should we give in to our emotional instinct? The instinct that impulsively tells us to escape, defend, act out, or control what is distressing? In my opinion, if you simply obey or give into the feeling, you may be acting based on faulty information and with faulty information you're more likely to make flawed decisions.

Luckily, Victor Frankl wrote: "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom" (Rothstein & Stromme, n.d.).

Translated, this means there is an opportunity that comes between the initial feeling and the reaction that comes next. Do we tend to laugh prior to hearing the joke? Do we throw a punch at someone and then decide we are angry at them? Do we typically eat before the receptors in our brain tells us we are hungry? With learning to manage our emotions they become reliable protectors that allow us to see their worth more than what we perceive as harm.

If we continue to avoid and don't lean into learning how to stay with uncomfortable emotions, there is no opportunity to consider how we will want to act in any given situation. We won't build internal emotional harmony that moves towards meaningful goals in the face of difficult feelings. Initial feelings are based on a rapid response to interpreting a situation which is also not very beneficial. Our assessment of what is happening when it is happening is influenced by many factors beyond the situation itself. We will continue to live our lives organizing our experiences into cognitive schemas also known as beliefs, categories, and expectations. This becomes an internal filter that assesses what is happening in the present.

All of that to say avoiding can possibly help in the short-term and bring relief but will not work over the long-term. We shouldn't avoid emotions but we also shouldn't try to control them. The goal is to partner and manage them by changing our perspectives on their value.

Emotions are the equivalent to dashboard warning lights on a vehicle. You don't have to drive your car assuming something is wrong or not wrong with its functionality. Your vehicle's proverbial brain will identify if there is an impending problem by providing insight with a warning light presenting itself on your dashboard letting you know the possible concern. Think of your body as a vehicle and your emotions as the warning lights. When an emotion, whether positive or negative, cultivates a feeling it is providing insight to either an impending problem or recognizing a valuable experience. We wouldn't want to drive around without the availability of warning lights on our dashboard and we shouldn't want to suppress our emotions. Without knowing there is a concern with your vehicle you could possibly get stuck or

stranded or put into a challenging position that is unexpected. Suppressing your emotions or “saving it for later” could leave you in an unexpected physical, psychological, or social situation with unpredictable outcomes.

Having the ability to feel what is painful will give us access to what matters. Your feelings will signal what is important to you. If our emotional or physical safety is threatened we will feel fear. We will feel angry when we are being mistreated or harmed. When we harm or mistreat someone we will feel guilty. When we lose something or someone significant to us we will experience sadness. If we suppress and/or avoid it, we are going to miss out on something meaningful that needs attending to. We have to have the courage to take on what is uncomfortable in order to unpack what is important.

I Don't Hate Feeling, Anymore!



Why don't I hate feeling anymore? *Simple!* Feeling my emotions enables my ability to make wise choices and to turn what I once considered a burden, into a benefit. My willingness to feel enables new learning opportunities to better understand my system (body) and its functioning. What we avoid, we can't learn from. I now have the ability to access my values at a deeper emotional level which allows me to identify how I want to respond (whether verbal or behavioral). I decreased my reactivity regarding criticizing or complaining by recognizing and utilizing self-awareness. I'd rather choose an action versus increasing the likelihood of regret or resentment. Learning emotional management is a skill that is developed and allows one to overcome

our nature and nurture wiring. Having our thinking mind and our emotional mind aligned and working together enforces harmony and the unification of oneself.

Feeling, understanding, and unifying our emotions opens the pathway to healthy and meaningful relationships, motivation to accomplish purposeful goals, and the desire to explore and embrace the many possibilities of life from a vantage point of peace and willingness.

Tips to Learn How to Feel Your Feelings:

Learning how to feel your feelings is a skill. You can practice by utilizing the mindful techniques listed below by processing through journaling or communication with individuals or a group of people.

Step 1: Name your Feelings

- As soon as you become aware of a feeling, pause, notice the tone of the emotion whether positive or negative. Give the emotion a name (ex. anger, sadness, happiness, etc.).

Step 2: Recognize the Feeling

- Where in your body do you feel the emotion (chest? arms? stomach? etc.)? Allow for the feelings to resonate without trying to control, reduce, or escape them. This may require courage if the feelings are difficult. Be curious about the feelings and give permission for your body to feel. Give yourself time (3-5 minutes) to accept what you're feeling. Reject any desire to avoid.

Step 3: Investigate the Cause

- Shift your attention towards identifying why this emotion has resumed its role. For example: if you're feeling the intensity of happiness, why? If you're angry, why? Do your best to not get stuck or over analyze. Focus internally and simply ask yourself, what is at the heart or root of your pain or joy?

Step 4: Bring Compassion and Understanding

- Do not be critical of your feelings. Now that you have identified the cause through investigating, cultivate compassion by taking a caring stance. If you're struggling with this step, consider how you would show up for a family member or close friend in need who was experiencing what you are experiencing at that moment. Repeat positive affirmations and validations through internal dialogue to negative emotions. Offer encouragement and reassurance to positive emotions. We all need a sense of safety, connection, and belonging. In this moment you're unifying the emotion with your sense of self.

Step 5 (optional but recommended): Process through Journaling or Communicating

- Journaling and/or communicating is a healthy way of processing the big feelings you're having. This offers an extra opportunity to find added relief and to connect with oneself.

Rothstein, L., & Stromme, D. (n.d.). Space between stimulus and response.

<https://extension.umn.edu/two-you-video-series/space-between-stimulus-and-response>