

I'm Not Crazy, I'm Just Crying! The Facts About Feelings

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At a recent group discussion I mentioned the five basic feelings we all have hard wired within us - angry, sad, lonely, scared, happy. Then the verbal volleyball match began as people debated about how we need to include this or that derivative of the same basic five. Like saying rage is different from anger, for example. No, it's not. Or grief is different from sadness. No, it's not. Strip away the excess verbiage and we go back to the basic five feelings every single time - angry, sad, lonely, scared, happy.

In another situation, I gave a presentation at a business luncheon and again kept the focus on the basic five feelings - angry, sad, lonely, scared, happy. And again I got the disagreement and/or the "you need to include this one" type remarks from my audience. And once again, the final landing place was with the basic five - angry, sad, lonely, scared, happy. In this instance, there was a brief discussion of the concept of guilt, which is NOT a feeling, but rather a thought. Also, the discussion of ashamed and embarrassed led us to understand that these feelings have to be taught to us by someone else - society, our family, peers, etc. At the end of the day, it all came back to the basic hard wired five - angry, sad, lonely, scared, happy.

Guilt - that's a big one many people will argue is an internally driven feeling when it is definitely not. Moreover, guilt is a thought, not a feeling. Just as with ashamed and embarrassed, we have to be taught to "feel" guilty. And again it's usually by those same groups - society, our families, peers, spouses, bosses, children, etc. I heard someone say recently they feel guilty about feeling happy. See how one is a thought and the other is a feeling? And how unfortunate is it for someone not to think he/she "should" feel happy? I would like nothing better than to spend all of my time feeling happy, but it's not always possible to do that. When I am happy, however, I relish it, savor it, really take the time to enjoy it. I also have learned that I appreciate happy so much more because of the other four feelings. Once I am away from happy, I want nothing better than to return to it. So in working through the other four feelings, I am trying to change any situation in my life whenever possible that takes me away from happy. If it is within my power to change my thoughts and therefore my behavior so that I can get back to happy, I'm all for that.

We know feelings aren't facts, but there are facts about feelings. We know that emotional pain can have physical consequences. For some people, all five feelings can cause physical reactions in the body. The brain sends signals to the body based on emotional thoughts/triggers. For me, the mind and body are always linked. We can be thrown off our daily routine by the impact of our feelings. When that happens, many people will choose the self medicating approach of addictive behaviors in an attempt to avoid or deny the power of feelings. But that creates two problems. The first is no matter what self medicating addictive behavior the person chooses, eventually the behavior causes chaos and disruption in the person's life. The second is that once the addictive behavior is addressed and perhaps removed, guess what? The feelings the person was trying to avoid and deny are still there and still need to be faced and dealt with. If we accept, admit, acknowledge and allow our feelings, they cease to have such

power over us. We can own that feelings come and go many times each day, and we can break them down into digestible portions, taking them one feeling at a time.

For many, anger is a galvanizing emotion, energizing us forward in certain situations. For example, someone might have a career or school aspiration and in seeking feedback is told by someone influential (parent, teacher, peer) that they will never be able to do it. Hurtful and crushing words for sure. I remember in my own history that while this kind of feedback served to prompt my angry feelings, I channeled my angry feelings to motivate me toward achieving that goal that I had been told I would never do. In that instance, there was a motivational aspect to the anger, in terms of proving someone else wrong about my abilities. So often I have clients who come to treatment for anger management. I work with them first on owning their anger and discovering the source. Anger doesn't happen in a vacuum, after all, even if it is with us from birth. Once we retrace the origin of the anger, then we can work on adaptive coping strategies for 'managing' it, while empowering the person with anger to own and respect the feeling itself.

Sometimes when a person giving feedback tells another person they won't be able to achieve something, it's actually coming from their own projection of fear about themselves, in that it might be something they are too scared to try. I see this often with parents and children. A child will tell his/her parent about something he/she wants to try - career, sports, dance, whatever. And the parents project from a personal experience about something they were afraid to try for themselves. The parents also project from a desire to keep the child safe and therefore tell the child it will never happen. That's one example of how fear can emotionally cripple not one person but two. Disappointing and disheartening to say the least. In the best outcome of that difficult example, if the child has enough resilience to keep on striving, they will get angry at the fear based feedback, disregard it, and stride forward anyway. I heard someone share recently that when she finds herself aware of fearful feelings, that makes her all the more determined to push through the feelings and proceed ahead. I admire such courage, so necessary in life.

Fear is also useful in terms of the fight or flight syndrome. If a dangerous person is chasing me, then I hope to use my fearful feelings to motivate my body forward and hopefully remove myself from the dangerous situation as quickly as possible. This is a useful way that the feeling triggers the action, keeping the mind/body connection. Unfortunately, sometimes fear can paralyze us and keep us stuck, sometimes physically and sometimes emotionally. If a person has a history of being 'wrong,' or of trying things that led to negative consequences, the person might choose to be 'frozen' by fear. There is an expression in recovery that says "when in doubt, do nothing." I agree with this to a point, but there is another expression also from recovery that the word fear can stand for either of two acronyms: "forget everything and run" or "face everything and recover." In my life today, I choose the latter, and I work with clients on empowering them to do the same.

Let's look at lonely next. Ever been in a crowded room and felt lonely? Me too. Ever been completely by yourself and felt happy, satisfied, content? Again, me too. The great

mistake people make with the word lonely is they misuse it for the word alone. I will hear people say they would rather stay in a bad relationship with someone (work, romance, friendship) than end the relationship because they are afraid of being alone. Being alone is a state of being - it's not a feeling. Sometimes people assume if they are alone they will be lonely. The truth is alone does not automatically equal lonely. In fact, quite often one has nothing to do with the other. Again, alone is a state of being, not a feeling. And feeling lonely can happen when we are surrounded by people - at a party, on a busy street, in the midst of a business meeting, anywhere at all.

So many times, lonely goes hand in hand with sadness. Sometimes one causes the other, sometimes not. Sometimes when we are sad, we might cry. For myself, I cry at sad times and happy times. Sometimes I cry when I am angry. For me, when tears come from anger, it is because I know I am not being valued, validated, accepted, acknowledged. Whatever other person I am dealing with is sending me signals that they are misunderstanding, misinterpreting and just plain not hearing me! So the anger I am feeling in that moment when the tears come is from the frustration of the futility of the situation. Then lonely and sad come, because I am aware of needing something from that situation that I will probably not get. In the past this may have included losing a promotion, leaving a job, or ending a friendship or romantic relationship or severing a connection with a family member. These experiences provided positive life lessons, information that helped me move forward to better situations with people who validate, value, accept and just plain hear me. Then the sad and lonely are left behind and I am aware of the presence of happy feelings - always the ultimate goal.

An interesting and somewhat scary side note - frequently if and when I might be crying someone might ask me if I have considered medication for depression. Hence, the title of this article. Why is there an assumption that if a person is having a tearful moment there must be a mental health issue? I beg to differ. As a clinician, of course I don't rule out that possibility, but what's 'wrong' with a person having a feeling and having the expression of that feeling include tears? As I said above, if I'm sad, I might cry. And in certain instances explained above, when I'm angry because of being treated unfairly, I might cry too. And how about if we remember for a minute that depression is what happens when we don't believe we are validated or 'allowed' to express our feelings? Given the choice between depression and tears, I'm going for crying every time.

Finally we come to happy. Of course we want to believe happiness exists for us. I know it does for me. Other words come to mind as companions of happy - content, joy, elation, peaceful. When those feelings come, I am thrilled (there's another good word to describe happy) to feel them and revel (yet another descriptive happy word) in them while they are with me. When they are gone, I am aware of the presence of one or more of the other four. And then I know how wonderful happy is, and how much I value it simply because of a life lived with the other four. I say often that without pain, we cannot really appreciate joy. Do I want to be always with emotional pain? Of course not. But sweeter is the joyful experience for me because of its contrast to sorrow.

Happy is so special and so simple. Happy is not about money, or possessions, or even people, though people can be an integral part of happy. Happy is unique to each person. And it comes from within us, from the place where we admit our feelings matter. Part of happy is owning and acknowledging the other four feelings. Happy is the safety we create in our own lives to be comfortable with all five feelings. Happy is knowing our value and worth. Happy is making choices from a place of strength. Happy is when we live in the present and when we are actively participating in every moment of our lives, instead of being on automatic pilot. Happy is a life in balance.

Feelings deserve validation. Having feelings is a natural part of being human. When we allow ourselves to be human by allowing ourselves to have feelings, we give ourselves the opportunity for a fuller and richer life experience. As the expression goes, “when we let ourselves feel the feelings, then we can deal with the feelings and ultimately heal the feelings.” Words to live by.