

Your Emotional Nature



Part A - Discovery: What Have You Become?

INTRODUCTION

“Some of us became so skilled at shutting down our feelings with drugs or other distractions that...we had lost touch with our emotions. In recovery we learn to identify what we are feeling. Naming our feelings is important, for once we do so, we can begin to deal with them.”

Humans have feelings and lots of them. Some of them are good, some not so good, and some are very nasty. Some people with an addiction tend to be aware of only good feelings. Others probably the majority, tend to be aware of only bad feelings.

In this module we are going to explore a lot of the particular feelings that people with an addiction experience (except anger and resentments, which we cover in other modules). We will also look at the way thoughts affect feelings, and how to control feelings by controlling thoughts. (In these notes the words ‘feeling’ and ‘emotion’ mean the same thing.)

(A) What feelings do you experience most?

“We forgot what it was like before we started using. We forgot how to express ourselves and how to show concern for others. We forgot how to feel.”

Some of you may be very ‘emotional’ in the sense that you feel controlled by your feelings. If you are this type of *addict*, you are probably used to hearing people say things like: “Snap out of it”, “Get a grip”, “Stop being so emotional”, “Grow up”, “Don’t cry”, “Don’t be angry”, “Cut the self-pity”, “Think, think, think”.

Others of you may not be in touch with your feelings, or with some particular feelings. If you are this type of *addict*, you are likely to hear people say “Get a life”, “Loosen up”, “Get in touch with your feelings”, “Get out of your head”, “Stop analysing”, “You think too much”, “Let yourself feel”, “You need to feel your anger”. All of you need to recognise which slogans (or clichés) apply to you, and which don’t!

(B) Which of the above clichés apply to you? Do you think some slogans are used too generally without regard to individual differences?

A Look At Some Feelings: Happiness

Most people want to feel happy. The natural cycle of life is for happiness to occur from time to time. Then it slips away. Then it returns. Most of you want to control this cycle by getting the happiness back and keeping it, on demand. Most of you don't want unhappiness.

For some of you, the happiness you want is through a feeling of power. But when you get power you fear the loss of it. So seeking happiness through power leads to fear and some chose to escape the fear by returning to addiction. You tend more to addictive substances or activities that have a *stimulating* effect on your bodies and minds.

For others the happiness you want is the pleasure of being beyond pain, which is called euphoria. Once you experience this euphoria, any sort of pain and unhappiness in the real world causes you to crave the euphoria. So seeking happiness through euphoria leads to craving and some chose to escape that craving by returning to addiction. You tend more to addictive substances or activities that have a *depressing* effect on you.

(C) Which type of addict are you, or do you combine both?

Pride And Humility

Ever since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, pride has been viewed negatively as a 'bad thing'. Yet we are often told, for example, to be proud of our heritage or our achievements or our football team. Or we are told to take pride in our appearance or in our recovery. The real problem is with *false* pride. A word roughly the same as 'false pride' is 'arrogance', which means believing we are superior to others as human beings. Whenever you see the word 'pride' used in the negative or false sense (as it often is in the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) books), try using the word 'arrogance'.

Arrogance, or false pride, is a real problem for many of you. The 12 Step Fellowships use a great word with a similar meaning: 'grandiosity'. This is where you believe you are more special, than others. Some of you describe your using history (war stories) as horrible, just so you can imply "Look at me now! Aren't I wonderful and special to have got sober and clean after that history?"

A related issue is 'terminal uniqueness'. This is where you believe that your *experience* of the disease of addiction is very different from other *addicts*. You isolate yourself from others in recovery and miss the therapeutic value of fellowship. Another problem with arrogance is that many of you use it to hide your excessive shame. That is, you outwardly pretend that you are better than others because you inwardly fear that you are less than others. You pretend high self-esteem in order to hide low self-esteem.

Humility (or being humble) is having an honest self-awareness of weaknesses *and strengths*. It is not about feeling less worthy than others. Humility leads to spiritual growth. In recovery: “Everywhere we saw failure and misery transformed by humility into priceless assets. We heard story after story of how humility had brought strength out of weakness. In every case, pain had been the price of admission into a new life. But this admission price had purchased more than we expected. It brought a measure of humility, which we soon discovered to be a healer of pain. We began to fear pain less, and desire humility more than ever.”

You are making good progress in personal growth when your feelings of pride and humility become one and the same thing. Then you have an honest self-worth by being aware of your strengths and weaknesses, while accepting that your strengths don’t make you greater than others, and your weaknesses don’t make you lesser than others. This is the spiritual self-acceptance that leads to spiritual self-love.

This idea is expressed in the following comment about the tenth step:

We begin to see ourselves more realistically as a result of working the tenth step. Many of us have remarked on the freedom we experienced through freely admitting our mistakes and releasing ourselves from unrealistic expectations. Where before we went from one extreme to another, either feeling better than everyone else or feeling worthless, we now find the middle ground where true self-worth can flourish...We see ourselves as we really are, accepting our good qualities along with our defects, knowing we can change with the help of a Higher Power. We are becoming what we were meant to be all along: whole human beings.

(D) Are you too proud or too humble, or have you got just the right balance of pride and humility?

Fear And Courage

“We were frightened and ran from the fear. No matter how far we ran, we always carried fear with us.”¹ Fear is another emotion with a lot of negative messages. For some it suggests weakness or distance from God. AA suggests: “The chief activator of our defects has been self-centred fear - primarily fear that we would lose something we already possessed or would fail to get something we demanded”.¹

The lifestyle of active addiction causes loads of fear. Many of you “were forced to survive any way that we could. We manipulated people and tried to control everything around us. We lied, stole, cheated and sold ourselves. We had to have drugs regardless of the cost. Failure and fear began to invade our lives”.¹

Because of these negative messages, many of you hide your fear. You fear showing fear. You are not helped by well-meaning suggestions along the lines of “Don’t be frightened”, or “There’s nothing to be frightened about”. These suggestions make you ashamed of your fear. Better suggestions are “Feel the fear, but do it *anyway*” or “Be comfortable with the fear”.

This is where courage fits in. As they say in AA and NA: “Courage is fear that has said its prayers.” Courage is acting in spite of fears, and this is often easier when you seek God’s help. In summary, it is OK to have the feeling called fear, but it is not OK to let that fear dominate or paralyse you. Nor is it OK for you to pretend you don’t have fear when you do.

(E) What are your fears? Do you feel dominated by them?

Anxiety

Much of what we said about fear could be said about anxiety, for the two feelings are very close. Again there is the negative message that causes some *addicts* to say “I shouldn’t be anxious”. This only makes you more anxious, since you are now anxious about being anxious. Being anxious is being human. The only time we humans are completely free of anxiety is when we are six foot under. This is why the stone six foot above is etched with the words “Rest in peace”! Anxiety is what leads to the excitement of living. Having no anxiety is death.

(F) What about you? Are you comfortable with your anxiety?

Fear Of Failure Or Success

These two are very closely related for *addicts*. Those of you who are frightened of failure avoid starting tasks, because you fear the *consequences* of failure. You expect and fear insults and put-downs. Those of you who are frightened of success sabotage an almost-completed task, because you fear the *consequences* of success. You expect and fear responsibility and commitment.

(G) What have been the consequences of your past successes or failures? What do you fear might happen now if you succeed, or fail?

Guilt

“Our addiction enslaved us. We were prisoners of our own mind and were condemned by our own guilt.”¹ We human beings have moral codes. When we do things against our moral code, we feel the emotion of guilt. This is appropriate. It is part of being human. One of the ways humans rid themselves of guilt is to avoid repeating the bad behaviour, and to apologise or make amends where possible. If you do this, then your guilt has done its job. This is good. You don’t need to keep the guilt. The problem is many of you after doing these things, keep holding onto your guilt.

There are some dangers with guilt feelings and moral codes. One of them is hinted at by the fact that the amends-making steps are towards the end of the 12 Steps. You need to develop some self-acceptance by working Steps 1 to 7 *before* you seek to make amends. Otherwise your motives will be all mixed up. You will be trying to improve your self-acceptance by having those that you wronged forgive you and accept you. This is making your self-acceptance dependent on people outside of you. The guideline is: if you *need* the other person’s forgiveness, then you are not yet ready to make amends.

Another hidden danger of guilt is that some of you can use it, strangely enough, to avoid personal growth in recovery. Your guilt is connected to things you did in the past. You can’t change those things. Focusing all your emotional energy on the things you *cannot* change is a great way to avoid changing the things in the present that you can change, namely yourself here-and-now. You are in a self-sabotaging trap if you say “I just can’t forgive myself for what I did”.

A third problem for *addicts* with moral codes is that sometimes, as children, you did things *before* you properly developed your moral code, as you grew older you looked back on these and felt guilty. What you are doing here is applying an adult moral code to childish behaviour.

(H) Do you use guilt to avoid repeating bad behaviour from the past, or to avoid personal growth? Is all your guilt justified?

Self-Pity And Self-Righteousness

When someone very close to you dies suddenly, you are going to feel sorry for yourself. You are going to feel self-pity. That's OK. On the other hand, when you believe that other people are treating you harshly, one of your responses may be to feel self-pity. The problem with self-pity for *addicts* is not so much the feeling itself, but rather how *often* you grab hold of it, or how *long* you hold onto it.

Self-pity can often be a pathway to victim-hood, which in turn is a form of identity some of you give to yourself in order to avoid self-responsibility. Victim-hood can also be a pathway to superiority-through-martyrdom. It is in these situations that self-pity turns into self-righteousness. Basically, you are self-righteous when you think you are more morally pure than someone else. You are then substituting self-righteousness for self-acceptance.

(I) Do you go into self-pity mode too often or for too long? Do you tend to be self-righteous?

Jealousy And Envy

Once again the problem lies not in having the feeling of jealousy or envy, but in what you do with the feeling. It is possible to do very positive things with jealousy or envy. In fact we can draw some distinction between these words. "Jealousy" says "That man should not be what he is, or have what he has". "Envy" says "I wish I could be like that man, or have what he has". Thus jealousy sometimes descends into hate, revenge, and bringing others down. Envy sometimes ascends into striving by personal effort to become like another person or to have what that person has. As the AA Big Book says: "If you have decided you want what we have and are willing to go to any length to get it - then you are ready to take certain steps." That is good envy!

(J) Do you have good envy or bad jealousy?

Worry

One of the ways that some people with an addiction avoid living in the here-and-now is to worry about the future. You don't just plan for the future or set realistic goals. You create a terrible fantasy of the future and then live there, rather than live here-and-now. As with so many feelings when taken to an imbalanced extreme, this is a way of avoiding living *responsibly* today.

(K) Do you worry too much? Is it a way that you avoid living in the present moment?

Inadequacy And Inferiority

These feelings are generalised confusions between feelings on the one hand, and facts and attitudes on the other. Some of you may feel inadequate to a task and/or inferior to someone else because you have experienced so many negative messages during your earlier life. You have generalised from these specific experiences, and you now feed everything through a thought framework - an *attitude* - that says "I am inadequate at whatever I do. I am inferior to everyone else". Such *addicts* are living in a fantasy, a world that is contrary to fact. (In Part B we look at facts, feelings and attitudes.)

Once again we need to be careful of how some *addicts* may use feelings of inadequacy or inferiority. By convincing yourself you are inadequate and inferior, some of you can avoid the responsibility that goes with being adequate and equal. You can be plain lazy.

(L) Are you really inadequate? Are you just plain lazy?

Your Emotional Nature



Part B - Recovery: What Are You Going To Do About It?

Now that you have explored some aspects of your emotional nature, what are you going to do about it? In a nutshell, your job is to control your feelings rather than let them control you. Your emotional nature should not control the whole of you. Now the way to control your feelings is to learn to recognise, own and express them. Let's look at each of these in turn.

Recognising Feelings (As Distinct From Facts And Attitudes).

One of the difficulties with feelings is separating them from facts and attitudes. People who view a present authority figure as their demanding and cruel father, they have a resulting feeling of dread and hate towards the authority figure. They do not recognise that the authority figure is not their father. They are viewing the authority figure through an attitude that they have built up over the years that says "all authority figures are like my father".

People with an addiction need to recognise what is, and what is not, a feeling. Facts concern what *is*. Feelings can be emotional responses to what *is*. Attitudes are fixed ways of thinking about what *is*. Feelings can also be emotional responses to facts when those facts are *filtered* through attitudes. Are you confused? That doesn't matter. Let's move on *anyway* so that you can gradually emerge from this confusion. Perhaps a story will help.

Ben is on a bush walk sees a snake becomes frightened. He looks for another track.

Let's see what is going on underneath the surface of this story. The snake is there. That is the fact. Ben feels fear. That is the *feeling*. Ben has a belief that snakes are dangerous. That is an *attitude*. The fact that the snake is on the track is pretty clear. Ben is not wrong about that. Ben is also not wrong about having the feeling of fear. There is nothing wrong with simply having any feeling. But let's look at Ben's attitude about snakes. It is here that Ben could be wrong. (We could say that Ben gets right off the track here!)

A lot of the 'bad press' about feelings has really got very little to do with feelings at all. The feelings are neither right nor wrong, neither good nor bad. The problem, if there is a problem, lies in the attitudes. Wrapped up in these attitudes are all sorts of prejudices, pre-judgments, belief systems that may very well be wrong rather than right, or bad rather than good.

If you have feelings that bother you or interfere too much with the sort of life that you want to live, then what you need to do is examine the *attitudes* underneath the feelings. You need to decide whether the cost of the feeling is worth the effort of doing the work to examine and change the underlying attitudes. The cost may not be worth it. Ben may decide that taking another bush track is easier than learning all there is to know about snakes.

Ben walks on another track he sees a uniformed park ranger and becomes angry. He backs away and finds another track.

The park ranger is there that's a *fact*, Ben feels anger that's a *feeling*. He has a belief that authority figures are arrogant, egotistical, pushy and judgmental. That is an *attitude*.

The fact that the park ranger is on the track is pretty clear. Ben is not wrong about that. Ben is also not wrong about having the feeling of anger. There is nothing wrong with simply having any feeling. But let's look at Ben's attitude about authority figures. It is here that Ben could be wrong.

Once again we would not get very far by saying to Ben that he should not get angry. Instead Ben may need to examine his attitude about authority figures. This would include examining the prejudices, pre-judgments and belief systems that are wrapped up in that attitude. This need would depend on the cost to Ben's life generally (as opposed to when bush walking) of having his present attitude.

Owning

What we are concerned with here is the fact that your feelings are *within you*. They are not *out there*. No person or situation *out there* is responsible for your feelings. For example, your grief response may be an entirely appropriate response to a loved one's death, but it is still *your* response. And because it is *your response*, it is *your responsibility*. In recovery what you need to do is to take responsibility for your own feelings. Don't give away ownership of your feelings. You should not give the power of your feelings over to persons, places and things outside yourself.

Another issue you may need to face concerns allowing your feelings to own you. The classic example of this is the man who says, "I want to ask that girl to dance, but the fear stops me". The fear does not stop him. He stops himself. He does not *want* to. He does not *want* to ask the girl to dance, because if he *wanted* to, he would. He does not want to *because* he is fearful.

This man needs to accept that 'the fear' is not some object *out there* that stops him doing what he wants to do. The fear is *within* him. He needs to own it. Once he owns it, he can take responsibility for it. Until he owns it, he is giving away responsibility to a feeling that controls him. Fear is this man's internal *response* to a situation, in this case the opportunity of asking a girl to dance. As always, you need to remember: **your responses are your responsibility.**

Expressing Feelings

There are many different ways to express feelings. The key theme is to express them in ways that are not harmful to others or yourself. As far as harm to others is concerned, your responsibility stops at the door to their inner selves. For example, a man may write to his father expressing his feeling carefully and considerately that he is not ready to meet him yet despite his father's desire for a meeting. The father may respond with anger and harmful depression. That is the father's response and the father's responsibility, because the son did all he reasonably could. The son acted responsibly.

Contrast this with situations we often see in rehab. Residents make nasty and insulting remarks to each other as a way of expressing their anger. Then, when others take offence, the offenders say that they are not responsible for other people's hurt feelings ("that's their stuff!"). Residents who do this are not acting responsibly. Therefore the other party's response, which remains that person's responsibility, was at least justified. In all cases of expressing your feelings you need to avoid harming others through either deliberate intent to hurt them, or negligent disregard for whether you hurt them or not.