

Restoring Your Heart Workbook: Understanding Emotions

Restoring Your Heart Workbook: Understanding Emotions, Participant's Edition
Second Edition

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NOTE:

In an effort to recognize that both men and women are co-heirs of God's grace, we have chosen to use alternating gender pronouns in this document. However, we do recognize and embrace gender-specific roles in Scripture.

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Introduction

The purpose of this workbook is to help people understand their emotions, learn how to express them in appropriate ways, and learn to access and express buried emotions. Why is this important? There are several reasons.

There is little teaching or understanding about emotions in the Christian community. Negative emotions in particular are often seen as sinful. There is also confusion about the purpose of emotions and how they should be handled. These reasons alone are enough to prompt the writing of this workbook, but there is still a far more important reason. Not knowing how to deal with emotions leads to some predictable emotionally-based problems which create destructive, life-controlling difficulties.

What do we mean by “emotionally-based problems” and “life-controlling difficulties”? The following is an explanation of how emotionally-based problems begin and the difficulties that result from them.

Emotionally-based problems usually begin in childhood. They begin when a child experiences pain and does not know how to deal with it. There are many sources of pain in life, and children are not immune to them. The pain may come from different sources: parents, siblings, neighbors, peers, sports leaders, school personnel, church personnel, etc. In reality, the problem is not the pain itself. The problem is unresolved pain that occurs when a child experiences pain and does not know how to process and learn from it.

Scripture indicates that pain is meant to bring positive results into our lives. It says, “We also rejoice in our sufferings (which is pain), because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” (Romans 5:3-4) When we are able to process pain and learn from it, it changes us and develops our character. If we leave pain unattended, it will produce negative results in our lives. Unresolved pain sets off a chain reaction of problems.

There are three typical results of unresolved pain in a child’s life. The first is that the child must adapt to survive, and he will usually adapt in one of two ways. He may develop an addiction to something that helps him feel better, distracts him from the pain or numbs the pain. An addiction is something outside of ourselves that we focus on to avoid dealing with difficult emotions. A person can be addicted to anything: drugs, cleanliness, food, work, health, etc. Unfortunately we live in an addictive society because many of us do not know how to deal with pain.

In addition to developing an addiction (or instead of), a hurting child may adapt by developing unhealthy survival or defense mechanisms to avoid getting hurt again. Instead of seeking safe, supportive relationships she is likely to avoid relationships in unhealthy ways or become involved in damaging relationships. In either case, her life becomes worse, not better.

The second result of unresolved pain relates to the painful feelings themselves. If there is no way to process painful emotions and release them, what happens to them? The child suppresses them. He buries the emotions, and they are stored in his body as internal stress. As this internal stress increases, one or more of the following things happen: emotional overreaction, hypersensitivity in areas of pain or emotional numbness.

The third result of unresolved pain is the development of a shame-based identity. As more and more negative things happen to a child, and she has no way to resolve them, she begins to believe that there is something wrong with her. Often there are people in her environment who reinforce this thinking. The child may come to believe that she is “broken and cannot be fixed.” When she makes a mistake, she does not think that she made a mistake, but that she is a mistake. When a child develops this negative self-concept, she loses hope and healing is difficult.

A child takes the behaviors, stress and wrong thinking into his adult life where these limitations and distortions cause even more pain. The following is a list of painful problems an adult will often experience when he is unable to process negative emotions in healthy ways as a result of unresolved pain in childhood.

Relational Problems — A person’s survival mechanisms, addictions, compulsions, and emotional immaturity will interfere with relationships. As a result of unresolved problems, a person may not have the relational skills necessary to interact with others in a healthy way.

Poor Decisions — Because the person does not think correctly about herself, her emotions, her needs or life issues, she will often make poor decisions that add even more pain to her life.

Full-Blown Addictions — Addictions, which may have existed in seed form in a child’s life, now take on a life of their own and get worse. The pain increases so the addictions worsen.

Needs Still Not Met — Addictions, wrong beliefs, unhealthy survival mechanisms and the inability to deal with emotions prevent a person from recognizing and getting his needs met.

Abusive Relationships — If there were abusive relationships in a person’s past, she may unwittingly seek out similar relationships as an adult because these kinds of relationships “feel” normal. Of course these relationships are unhealthy and only produce more pain and problems. It is not uncommon for a person to go from one abusive relationship to another, repeating the same pattern over and over.

Depression — If a person lives with internal stress for a long time, it may cause a breakdown in the chemical balance of the brain, and the result will be a clinical depression.

Numb or Primarily Negative Feelings — Negative emotions and positive emotions are integrally connected. Therefore, if negative emotions are suppressed, a person may eventually lose the awareness of positive emotions also. The most difficult emotion to suppress is anger. If anger is suppressed, the person will often be left with only the feeling of numbness.

Poor Relationship with God — All relationships are affected, including the relationship with God. Problems, which began in childhood, often lead to distorted views of God or negative feelings toward Him.

Feeling Out of Control — As problems intensify, a person may feel increasingly out-of-control, even though he himself may be a controlling person.

All of these problems began with an inability to process and learn from painful emotions. Few people in our culture and our churches have been trained to deal with their emotions. In fact, there is little permission to deal with pain in healthy ways.

The purpose of this workbook is to focus on the sources of these problems (probably in childhood) rather than looking at the symptoms resulting from these problems. We realize that the symptoms may need special attention (such as in addictions and clinical depression), but that is not the scope of this workbook.

We highly recommend that you read the booklet *How Emotional Problems Develop*. You can purchase a printed version at <https://www.disciplebuilding.org/store/restoring-your-heart/how-emotional-problems-develop-2/> or download a free pdf at <https://www.disciplebuilding.org/store/restoring-your-heart/how-emotional-problems-develop/>.

This booklet will give you more insight into how the past impacts your present struggles. It is our prayer that God will use this restorative process to bring healing to your life and give you hope for the future.

Understanding Emotions—Lesson # 1

God created us with a wide range of emotions, and they are an important part of our lives. It is our emotions that make us feel alive, but they can also make us feel miserable. They fluctuate according to our life circumstances and our interpretation of those circumstances.

We live in a time when life-controlling problems have reached epidemic proportions, and almost everyone has been affected to some degree. The source of these life-controlling problems is the way people have learned to deal with their emotions, particularly negative ones. Some people try to avoid negative emotions because they are confused by them. Others deny that they have negative emotions altogether.

The culture we live in falsely says that pain in any form is not good, and therefore, is to be avoided at all costs. Pleasure, on the other hand, is said to be good, and things are good only if they feel good.

- 1. What messages have you received from your environment about negative feelings?**

- 2. What do you believe about negative emotions such as pain, anger, fear, guilt or sorrow? (E.g. I should avoid them, they are okay, they are sinful, they are overwhelming, etc.)**

God created us with negative emotions for a reason. They tell us about our environment and ourselves. God Himself experiences negative emotions. In Exodus 4:14 it says, "Then the LORD's anger burned against Moses..." and in Psalm 78:41 it says, "Again and again they put God to the test; they vexed the Holy One of Israel." Therefore, we should expect to experience negative emotions as well.

In addition, God promised Christians that we will experience trials, tribulations, and persecution which will bring about negative emotions. In Scripture many saints, as well as Jesus, experienced negative emotions.

In Psalm 13, King David expresses his sorrow, confusion, and fears to God.

· **How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?**
· **How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?**
How long will my enemy triumph over me?
· **Look on me and answer, LORD my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.**

In Matthew 5:4 Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." An interesting description of Jesus occurs in Isaiah 53:3-4:

· **He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.**
· **Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.**

Jesus experienced sorrow, grief, and rejection in His life. He said to His disciples, "Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also." (John 15:20) From these verses, we see that life will include difficult experiences and the negative emotions that accompany them. God never condemns these feelings.

3. How would you summarize what Scripture says or implies about negative emotions in the above passages?

4. Think of a recent experience that evoked negative emotions in you. What did your emotions tell you about yourself, others and/or the situation?

Many people do not know how to think about their emotions or how to process them appropriately. As we have said, how we handle emotions was largely determined during our childhood. We learned about processing and expressing emotions by observing how our parents handled their emotions. We also saw how our parents reacted to our expressions of emotion, giving us signals about what we should believe or feel about our emotions. Other people affected us too, but our parents are usually the first and primary influences in our lives.

When Sarah was 12 years old, she decided to help her mom by cleaning out the cookware cabinet in the kitchen. She wanted to do it so her mom would be proud of her. Her mom was not scheduled to arrive home until 6:00 pm, so Sarah had an hour to accomplish the task. She put all the pots and pans on the floor where she could arrange the items neatly. She was excited about surprising her mom.

Her mom arrived home 30 minutes early and went into the kitchen. When she saw the mess, she began yelling. "What are you doing? You have made a mess. Hurry up and put those things back in the cabinet like I had it." Sarah felt hurt, angry and guilty. Her mom would not listen to her explanation so she felt misunderstood and disappointed. Sarah carried these feelings inside because she was not allowed to express her negative emotions, but was expected to obey.

5. What did you feel as you read about Sarah?

6. Summarize how emotions were expressed in your family, especially by your parents.

Typical emotional struggles an adult may face:

Check any of these that apply to you.

- 1. You are numb and do not feel your emotions.
- 2. The emotions you feel are mainly negative.
- 3. You tend to overreact and be supersensitive in certain situations.
- 4. You don't know how to express emotions appropriately.
- 5. You are afraid of certain emotions.
- 6. You try to distract yourself so you will not feel certain emotions, or you do unhealthy things to alter your moods.
- 7. You believe that certain emotions are bad and that you should not have them.
- 8. You are confused by some of your emotions.
- 9. You are depressed for no clear reason.
- 10. You don't know how to deal with pain.
- 11. You feel bitter, negative, or simply unable to enjoy life.
- 12. You take out your anger on people who are not the source of the anger.
- 13. You are unable to control your expressions of anger.
- 14. You feel out of control most of the time.

In the pages that follow, we will look at how to identify emotions, both past and present, and learn how to express them in healthy ways. In addition, we will take a more in-depth look at the negative emotions of anger, guilt, pain and fear.

At the back of this workbook is a tool called *The Feelings Wheel*. This tool is useful to help you explore and express your emotions. It is healing to be able to name the emotions you are feeling at a particular time. The feelings named on *The Feelings Wheel* are not exhaustive, and you may come up with many more words to express what you are feeling. We have found that *The Feelings Wheel* is a valuable aid in the emotional healing process.

NOTES: