

## 5. EMOTIONS: TAMING THE DESTRUCTIVE AND CULTIVATING BALANCE

### Chapter Overview

As the title states, this chapter is about emotions, how to reduce destructive emotions and cultivate helpful emotions. To begin with we will look at what we mean by emotions and explore what we know of emotions from a contemporary scientific perspective and a traditional Buddhist perspective. The chapter will outline how mindfulness can be used to balance our emotions and short circuit dysfunctional emotions. We will explore anger, fear, sadness and happiness in detail and how mindfulness can be used to understand and balance these emotions. The chapter will conclude by offering some strategies for working with painful emotions.

### What are emotions?

The word emotion originates from the Latin "*emovere*", which means to disturb. The first part of the word, "*e*" means "out", and "*movere*" translates as "to move". When we need to function effectively in a demanding world, emotions move us to action. There is no direct Pali equivalent for the term "emotion". Rather emotions are understood as a combination of physical sensations, feelings (*vedana*), states of heart-mind (*citta*) and mental and physical patterns. Emotions involve complex body-mind interactions.

Emotions are necessary for our personal development, survival and thriving as a human being. They save lives, motivate behaviour and help us form relationships. Balanced emotions are essential for effective communication and the welfare and wellbeing of our families and communities. Unfortunately emotions can be unbalanced, dysfunctional, painful and destructive. At times, emotions can move us to act unskillfully with dire consequences. Emotions can arise and pass relatively quickly. Though it is possible to cultivate and reinforce emotions they often come uninvited. That is, they may come up in a way that seems out of our control because they are either "hard wired" (part of

our neurological-biological-mental systems) or they are conditioned. When we experience an emotion it focuses our attention on the task at hand but it can also bias our perceptions. When we are frightened, for example, there may be a bias to see things that confirm our fear. When we are angry nothing seems to go right and it seems as if the world is against us. When we are sad the world seems negative and when we smile the whole world seems to smile with us. If we are happy everything seems fine.

## **Emotions: a contemporary perspective**

Paul Ekman, one of the world's leading authorities on emotions<sup>i</sup>, describes an emotion as a process influenced by evolution and our personal past that is triggered when we sense something important to our welfare is happening. This results in physiological changes and behaviours to deal with the situation. Ekman describes an emotion episode timeline as the coming together of: the environment, an emotional alert database, automatic appraisal, a trigger, an affect program and a refractory period.<sup>ii</sup>

As the name implies a trigger is something that initiates an emotional experience. Some triggers are “hard wired” or imbedded into our emotional systems due to evolution and our genetic inheritance. For example, everyone will express a fear response when they un-expectantly fall backwards. Such a fear reaction is “hard wired” because we did not need to learn it. Many triggers, however, are learned due to our upbringing and our own unique individual experiences. The emotional alert database is like our own experience library. It contains hardwired or universal triggers, but is mostly filled with triggers that have been learned. Past emotional experiences are embedded in our memory. We automatically appraise the environment by searching for anything that resembles the memories stored in the emotion alert database. Once the automatic appraiser recognises a trigger the affect program begins. The affect program is our emotional response to a situation. There are many affect programs and they vary dependent on the emotion that they relate to. Once an emotion has begun there will be a period of time in which it will continue. This period of time is called the refractory period.

During the refractory period perception may be narrowed or distorted and our thinking cannot incorporate information that doesn't fit with or justify the emotion. Focused attention on a problem is beneficial in the short term, but if it outlasts its usefulness it can lead to inaccurate perceptions and inappropriate emotional behaviours. Ekman<sup>iii</sup> suggests the refractory period may be increased by lack of sleep, alcohol, work stress, a build up of unresolved resentments and importing "scripts" from earlier life experience so that they colour the current situation. Therefore ways to reduce the refractory period include living a healthy lifestyle, communicating clearly and being mindful.

In his research Ekman (2003) identified seven basic emotions that have universal facial expressions. These are sadness, anger, fear, surprise, disgust, contempt and happiness. Emotions can be distinguished from moods, traits and disorders. Emotions and moods can influence each other but generally moods are longer lasting than emotions. Similarly traits are more enduring than emotions or moods and tend to colour a person's perception. Disorders occur when emotions become unbalanced. For example, the emotion of fear may have the corresponding mood of apprehension, which may persist to become a trait of shyness and could result in a disorder such as chronic panic attacks.

## **Emotions: a neurobiological perspective**

We know that emotions are often experienced in the body. Sadness, for example, may be felt as heaviness in the chest and the body and fear as churning "butterflies" in the tummy or shaky legs. Anger is often felt as a tightening of the arm muscles, shoulders and chest and happiness may be described as a sense of light, buoyancy throughout the body. From a neurobiological perspective emotions are visceral experiences directed by the brain involving a cascade of biological responses including neural connections and bio-chemical interactions. At the beginning of the chapter it was stated that emotions save lives, motivate behaviour and help us form relationships.

To do this, emotions function within three interrelated systems (Gilbert, 2009; Hanson, 2013).

1. **Avoid, Survival System** (fight, flight and freeze)
2. **Approach, Resource Seeking System** (pursuing and wanting)
3. **Attach, Relationship System** (bonding, safety, soothing)

The first system is related to our basic survival responses. This system includes emotions such as fear, anger and disgust and responses to threat and danger such as the flight, fight or freeze responses. The main bio-chemicals related to this system are adrenaline, nor-epinephrine and cortisol.<sup>iv</sup> These bio-chemicals are responsible for changes in our bodies such as increased heart rate, alertness, hyper-vigilance and an increased blood flow to the arms and legs in order to hit out, fight or flee danger.

The second system relates to motivation, pleasure and reward. This system includes emotions related to drive, excitement and vitality. The main biochemical in this system is dopamine. Dopamine plays a major role in reward-motivated behaviour. An imbalance in this system may result in depression at one end of the spectrum and addictions at the other end.

The third system relates to feeling safe and developing relationships with others. We feel safe when we are protected, our basic needs are met and we have a sense of belonging. The emotions in this system are related to feelings of contentment, safety and connection and are essential for human health, wellbeing and flourishing. The main bio-chemical of this system, oxytocin, has a function of soothing distress. The cultivation of loving kindness and compassion are integral components of the Buddha's eight-fold path<sup>v</sup> and represent the development of this emotion system at refined levels.

The three systems are interrelated and when balanced, work together to maintain our safety and wellbeing.

<insert Figure 5.1 here>

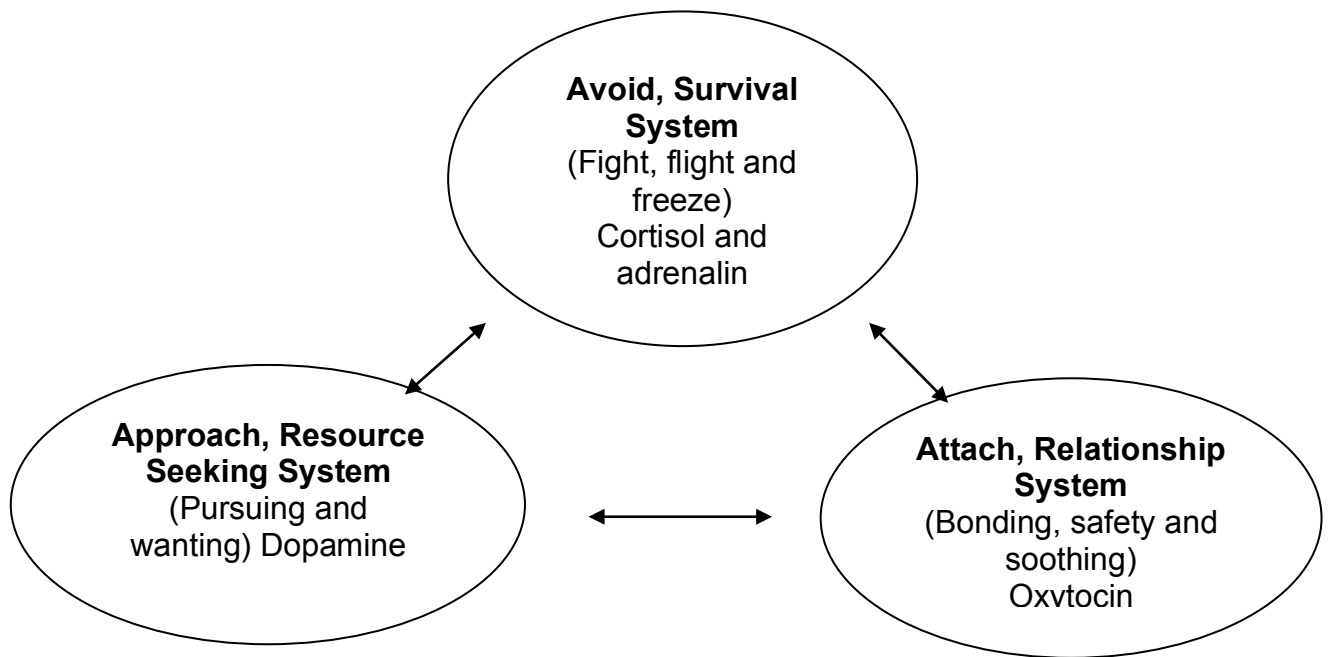


Figure 5.1: The emotional systems (adapted from Gilbert, 2009 and Hanson 2013)

### **Mindfulness of emotions: a traditional perspective**

According to traditional Buddhist texts, there are thousands of different states of heart-mind. These range from refined and subtle states of mind, such as sublime peacefulness, to coarse states of mind such as angry rage. Some of these states of mind would be considered as an emotion and some would not. As was stated at the beginning of the chapter, in Buddhism emotions are understood as a combination of physical sensations, feelings (*vedana*), states of heart-mind (*citta*) and mental and physical patterns. As mentioned in chapter three, feeling (*vedana*) refers to the pleasant, unpleasant or neither pleasant nor unpleasant aspects of all experience. Feelings have the capacity to move us, as when we say, “that was very moving,” or “I was moved by that.” Feeling, therefore, refers to the aspect of experience that moves us, that stimulates a response.

Feelings in the Buddhist sense and emotions as we understand them in contemporary psychology are not the same. They are, however related. What they have in common is that they represent the aspect of life that moves us to

act. In the context of *satipatthana*, mindfulness of feeling opens us up to the world of stimulus and response, to the fact *that* we are moved to act and *how* we are moved to act. This in turn can stimulate wisdom, understanding *why* we are moved to act. Mindfulness of feeling is central to working with emotions. It is also central to short circuit reactive cycles that often involve emotions.<sup>vi</sup> The process of taming destructive emotions and cultivating emotional balance requires the skilful application of all four domains of mindfulness. However, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> applications of mindfulness are, perhaps, most relevant to emotions.

### **Contemplating feeling: The second application of mindfulness**

Feeling (*vedana*) refers to the pleasant, unpleasant or neutral aspects of experience. We could compare feeling to flavour. When we eat, we experience the physical sensations of the food, its hardness, softness, texture, moisture, and so on. We also experience the flavour of the food. Although flavour is distinct from these sensations, it is intimately connected with them. It is the flavour that moves us. We are moved to take more if the flavour is pleasant; we are moved to take less if the flavour is unpleasant; and we are moved to indifference if we can't find any flavour. But what moves us, what stimulates a response, is flavour. Feeling is like the flavour of experience.<sup>vii</sup>

According to the *suttas* the Buddha says there are three fundamental aspects of feeling, and these stimulate the three fundamental movements of the heart-mind. These are: pleasant feeling, which moves us to grasp; painful feeling, which moves us to resist or reject; and neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, where we don't know what we are feeling, and are moved to dullness, doubt or confusion.

Feelings are not emotions as they are considered in our everyday language, nor are they physical sensations. *Vedana*, the Pali term used for feelings, is often mistakenly translated as sensations. Unfortunately, this translation can be confused with physical experiences of the body such as pressure, heat,

movement and so on. Feelings are not solely physical or mental but more like a bridge between body and mind that can be triggered by physical or mental experience.

If we trip and graze a hand and it hurts it may give rise to unpleasant feelings. In this case the unpleasant feelings arise from a physical object. If on the other hand, someone we like smiles kindly at us, and we experience pleasant feelings, it is more related to mental experiences. In some rare cases, what would normally be considered as painful physical sensations, may actually give rise to pleasant feelings. For example, when we get a massage and the masseuse digs into a tight muscle, it may hurt but it also “feels” good.

Since feelings arise dependent upon conditions that are beyond our control, we cannot control our feelings. We can, however, influence the way we respond to our feelings. Understanding that a feeling is “just a feeling” can short-circuit the tendency to overreact. For example, pain management may often entail an accepting and peaceful state of mind despite experiencing painful feelings arising from the body. Similarly, as will be clarified in the next chapter, “urge surfing”, which can help substance abusers interrupt the cycles of their addictions, involves mindfulness of feeling.

### **Contemplating heart-mind: The third application of mindfulness**

In the context of mindfulness practice, heart-mind represents our inner state; how we are, at this time. Mindfulness reveals the current situation of our heart-mind, how its naturally transparent awareness is affected by what is arising within it at the time. Is the heart-mind coloured by the wholesome or the unwholesome? What kind of wholesome? What kind of unwholesome? In the contemporary context, this practice entails mindfulness of the thoughts, moods and emotions we find within ourselves.

As explained earlier contemplation is a translation of the word *upassati* (Pali) which means to: “*to repeatedly look at*” or “*to closely observe*” or “*see along*”

*with*” or “*track*”.<sup>viii</sup> Contemplating the heart-mind or *citta* involves tracking our inner centre of subjectivity. . The essence of the heart-mind is awareness or consciousness. An undisturbed heart-mind is compared to a mountain lake, where the water is clear and undisturbed. A person standing on the bank of such a lake could look into it and see clearly to its bottom seeing fish, plants, rocks and pebbles.<sup>ix</sup> On the other hand, the disturbed heart-mind is compared to water mixed with colour or mud, covered with algae, stirred up by the wind or heated until it is boiling.<sup>x</sup> In these situations, the water’s natural transparency is lost. According to His Holiness the Dalai Lama the nature of *citta* is luminous and aware. It knows, and it illuminates the objects that it knows. It is also able to illuminate itself. It is easy to confuse the nature of heart-mind with the states that it is coloured by. Mindfulness clarifies this confusion.

In the *Satipathana Sutta*, the Buddha described many sub-domains of the third application of mindfulness. He recommended being mindful of the heart-mind in all its manifestations; wholesome and unwholesome, helpful and unhelpful, gross and subtle.

We have a strong tendency to identify with our heart-mind, to create identity from the movements within it. Contemplating heart-mind helps provide some space from this identification. It reins in the tendency for destructive emotions to run rampant and construct a dysfunctional identity. Mindfully tracking the changing nature of destructive and painful emotions helps us to break reactive patterns often associated with them.

<open Box here>

### ***Mindfulness of heart-mind***

*Ensure that you are at ease with your posture and your body is free from constriction and discomfort. Set the intention that for the next 15 to 20 minutes you will first ground yourself with mindfulness of body practices then shift your attention to monitoring and contemplating the heart-mind. Know also that*



*being mindful of heart-mind can include being aware of emotions as they arise and pass away, moment to moment.*

*Let awareness centre on a chosen primary object. The object could be sitting or the rising and falling of your abdomen. It could be strong sensations in your body or sounds. Whatever you choose let that object be like an anchor or a place of reference where you can bring your attention back when you need to. Allow your attention to be open and accepting and be with experience moment to moment. Note, whatever is happening in an open minded, soft, yet clear and distinct manner.*

*(Silence)*

*Just as a stage may have many performers and props but a spotlight focuses on only one part of the stage, let the spotlight of your awareness focus on the state of your heart-mind. Do not reject other experiences, but let the state of your heart-mind be the focus of attention. You can shift your attention to rest around the area of your chest if you wish, but let the central focus be on the state of your heart-mind or the general flavour, colour or atmosphere of your mood.*

*Just as a caring and kind healer may pay attention to the state of your body, bring kind and curious attention to the state of your heart-mind. What are you experiencing right now in the domain of moods, emotions, and mental states? Tune into your heart and ask yourself what is happening here right now. In a manner that is kind, spacious and allowing, ask yourself what am I experiencing in this moment? Try not to identify with the experience. Do not take it personally but see it as it is as a changing event. Try not to be hijacked by thoughts about the experience and as best you can, tune in to the state of your heart-mind.*

*Is your heart peaceful and calm, or is it disturbed by craving, and longing?  
Is the state of your mind contracted and frightened or is it open and expansive with qualities of generosity and kindness?*

*Is the state of your mind, aversive, prickly, frustrated or angry, condemning and judgmental? Or is it loving, open, kind, soft and accepting?*

*Is the predominant state of mind, sad, depressed and miserable or is it buoyant, light and joyful?*

*Is it confused and uncertain, restless and distracted or is it clear, confident, calm and focused?*

*What is the state of your heart-mind right now? Be allowing and open and try to note and name the state of mind objectively and accurately.*

*(Silence)*

*Once you have identified the current state of your heart-mind, monitor how it changes.*

*If there are physical sensations arising in relationship to the state of the heart-mind, tune into how it feels in your body and notice how this experience changes. Sometimes the state may intensify, and sometimes it may subside, be content with whatever happens. Try not to grasp after the pleasant or reject and condemn the unpleasant, simply be allowing and see states of mind as they are without making them more than what they are by thinking unrealistically about them. Notice how the experience arises, changes and passes by.*

*Rest in awareness of the changing aspects of the heart-mind. Simply be present for the heart of your experience and let it come and go by taking refuge in the quality of awake awareness.*

*Resting in awareness you can hold and cradle any painful experience with kindness and care. Simply let painful states of mind be. Remember that they are not you and that they change. Let go of struggle and let the experience be. When you give the experience space it is as if you take refuge in awareness. Firmly grounded in mindfulness you can be deeply peaceful with all experience.*

*By taking refuge in awareness it is possible to tolerate pain. Take refuge in your awareness and allow awareness to be your stable point of reference. It is as if this witnessing is deep and still within the roots of your being. Let awareness be like a solid and stable mountain in the midst of a windy storm. Let awareness be like the still depths of a lake when the surface is turbulent or like a solid island rock in the middle of a rough ocean with strong waves. The states of mind are like waves- coming and going, arising with a distinct energy then rolling on by and changing to something else.*

*Note the presence of an emotion and name or label it if you can.  
Because emotions change they are not you.  
Step back, get unstuck from the experience, give it space.*

*Let it be and let it change. Be at peace with the experience*

*(Silence)*

*Without being caught up, develop curiosity about what is happening when this emotion arises. Also notice how your body feels in response to the emotion. Use noting to help you step back and investigate the experience. Look at and see the experience for what it is, as it is, rather than getting caught up in its story.*

*If the experience is painful or uncomfortable allow the power of compassion to help you bear and tolerate the distress. Let compassionate awareness be like an open house and see the state of mind like a visitor. Honour it and let it be felt in the body. But then let the door open and let the state pass through.*

*(Silence)*

*Resting in a perspective of awareness nurture wholesome states of mind. Try not to grasp after them. Without you getting in the road, joy and peace can arise naturally and without effort.*

*Whether the changing states of your heart-mind are wholesome and pleasant or painful and difficult to bear, be kind and spacious with the experience. Simply stay present and note the experience with openness, compassion and care.*

*Be like a solid rock island in the ocean.*

*Be like the still depth of a lake.*

*Be like a solid mountain.*

*“Be” with the experience and let it roll by.*

*Be present completely here and now practicing mindfulness of heart-mind.*

*When you lose mindfulness simply remember to focus your attention, notice how things change, then with equanimity monitor the changing states of the heart.*

*(Silence 2-3 minutes or as long as you need).*

*In a few moments this meditation session will come to a close. If you have found it useful in any way remember that you can practise mindfulness as you need in your busy daily activities. Thank you for your attention and may mindfulness of the heart-mind bring peace and joy to all.*

<close Box here>

## **Taming the destructive and cultivating balanced emotions**

Emotions can be balanced, constructive and functional or they can be out of balance, destructive and dysfunctional. When they are out of balance they can be excessive or deficient. Out of balance, dysfunctional and destructive emotions are evident in a few different ways, such as when we feel and show the right emotion but at the wrong intensity (e.g. over-reacting), or for an unsuitable length of time. When an emotion is out of balance we may have the appropriate response, but express it in a hurtful way such as with passive aggression. Unbalanced emotions are also demonstrated when an emotion is triggered but it is not the right emotion for the job. Emotional imbalance could also occur when the wrong emotions are running rife. Extremes of elation and

depression, hope and fear, adulation and contempt, and infatuation and aversion could be examples of emotional excesses. Cold indifference towards self and others when compassion and kindness are needed may be an example of an emotional deficit.

### ***Related story: Bec tames the destructive***

*Rebecca, or “Bec,” was a 28 year old employed artist who was generally happy with her life. She did, however, feel her emotions were out of control. In particular she was inclined to frightening outbursts of anger in which she often smashed household objects. Bec was in a relationship and feared that one day she would strike her partner in a fit of rage and thereby destroy a relationship she valued dearly.*

*Bec was highly motivated to change what she saw as destructive emotions and decided to seek help. She attended individual therapy sessions and a mindfulness program. In the individual sessions Bec was supported to process painful emotions and memories of childhood sexual abuse. Through mindfulness and compassionate awareness she came to understand triggers for her outbursts such as when she was feeling disempowered. In the group Bec learnt about the four applications of mindfulness and practised both mindfulness and loving kindness meditation. She progressively came to understand her habitual conditioned responses and gained an ability to choose how she would respond to her emotions. Bec learnt how to give emotions space by practising openness, willingness, allowance and acceptance, remembering that acceptance does not mean blindly acting on emotions. She found that she could see emotions as waves coming and going. She neither blocked nor amplified them, but just let them unfold and fade away according to their nature. In this way she practised the second and third applications of mindfulness. Bec progressed to the fourth application of mindfulness in which she explored what fed her emotions and what flowed from them.*

*In both the group and individual sessions, Bec utilised the practices outlined in the eightfold path. As she confronted triggers that would normally result in destructive outbursts, Bec was able to remember her intention to avoid harm. Reflecting on her aspiration for peace and happiness helped her to tone down her anger and enhance her wellbeing and interpersonal harmony. Two months after she completed the group program Bec decided that she was ready to stop therapy. She was very happy with what she had achieved and felt she had gained some freedom of choice in dealing with her angry outbursts.*

## **Balancing emotions**

Ekman <sup>xi</sup> points out that because emotions are either evolutionarily determined or conditioned to arise under particular circumstances, we cannot control their arising. We can, however, reduce the impact of the triggers, add alternative information to the database, de-automate the appraisers, de-condition the program, and adjust the refractory period. Just as when Bec came to understand what triggered her anger and why, she was able to change her response and bring her emotions into balance.

Balanced constructive emotions get the job of survival, wellbeing and welfare done. They lead to cooperation, collaboration and understanding between oneself and others. Balanced emotions are expressed in a way that is timely and appropriate to the situation.

Marsha Linehan, (e.g. 1993) the psychologist who developed DBT, once compared emotions to horses. Horses are powerful animals that can serve us if we train them in a kindly manner. But if we just sit in the saddle and provide no direction, the horse will just go where it wants to go according to its habitual tendencies. In order to direct the horse to where we want to go, we need to connect with it, develop a relationship and understand its needs and particular temperament, yet maintain a sense of authority.

It is easy for emotions to lead us astray down destructive pathways that cause harm and some emotions are simply difficult to bear, even painful. Often, in our attempt to manage our emotions, we may suppress them or try not to feel them. The trouble with this is that they may come out in other ways with secondary emotions such as guilt and shame.

When emotions are painful or leading us in destructive directions we need to develop a kind yet firm relationship with them. Taming and training emotions involves learning new skills and breaking old habits. One way we learn is through behavioural reinforcement. Reinforcement, as explained in Chapter 1, strengthens habits. Sometimes destructive emotions are reinforced by allowing them to run rampant and out of control. This may involve becoming over-engaged, preoccupied, consumed or hijacked by emotions. Avoidance can also be reinforcing. Avoidance of negative experiences can include denial, suppression, substance abuse, dissociation and even self-harm. Avoidance can provide reinforcement because it is a relief to not confront or contact something unpleasant. Sometimes people avoid positive experiences because the experience provokes anxiety or because they are attached to habitual withdrawal and inactivity. At times, in order to train and tame out of control emotions we need to restrain or “surf” our urges. At other times we need to face up to what we are avoiding.

“Response prevention” is a term used in contemporary psychology that refers to not reinforcing avoidance or other behaviours. In other words, if we choose to not act on our impulse to avoid emotional distress, the discomfort will eventually change and fade away because it is no longer reinforced. In behavioural sciences a term that is used for when a behavioural pattern fades is “extinction”.

If we face up to what we are avoiding in a very sensitive and graduated manner, our conditioned reactions and old habits can become extinct. If, on the other hand, we face our pain and fears when they are too overwhelming it can make our conditioned reactions worse. Where physical pain is concerned we should respect the need for avoidance and act wisely. It also helps to

understand that purposely facing emotional pain is best done when we are somewhat confident that we can cope and it will not make our reactions worse. There is a window of opportunity for the “extinguishing” process. Too little distress has no effect. Too much distress re-sensitises us to more complicated reactions. The process of tolerating distress and allowing habitual reactions to fade away is best when we proceed in a sensitive, gradual manner and in a way that is timely, suitable and appropriate.

The process of taming destructive emotions and cultivating balanced emotions involves first getting to know and understand them. Once we know what we are working with we are in a better position to make decisions to either reinforce them or allow them to fade away. All emotions are important for our survival, wellbeing and welfare and they can all be in balance or out of balance. On the following pages I will describe four common universal emotions: anger, fear, sadness and happiness.

## Anger

<insert cartoon illustration 5.1 here>



Try, for a few moments, looking into a mirror while pulling your eyebrows down and together. Open your eyes wide staring with your upper eyelids against your eyebrows at the same time as pushing your lips tightly together.<sup>xii</sup> Do you look un-mistakenly like someone who is angry? Do you feel angry or are you reminded of a time when you were angry? This



expression, according to Ekman (2003), is the universal facial expression of anger. No matter where you go in the world with whatever culture you encounter the experience of anger is connected with this facial expression. It is a universal sign of anger. It has served a purpose in evolution and, according to biologists, it is essential to the survival of our species that we experience and express anger.

Anger has many grades and variations, from subtle aversion to blind rage.

Some words for the various gradations of this emotion include:

Aversion	Exasperation	Hatred	Rage
Aggravation	Ferocity	Hostility	Resentment
Agitation	Frustration	Irritation	Revulsion
Annoyance	Fury	Loathing	Scorn
Blustery	Frenzied	Mean-	Spite
Burned up	Fierce	spiritedness	Torment
Bitterness	Fed up	Outrage	Vengefulness
Dislike	Grouchiness		Wrath
	Grumpiness		

The most common trigger for anger is being blocked from pursuing what matters to us, or being stopped in achieving a desired outcome. The desired outcome could be as simple as being able to change lanes in the traffic or as complex as feeling that others do not perceive us in the way we wish to be perceived. Some people seem to get angry at anything and everything. People get angry at injustice, insult, abuse, having freedoms taken away, not getting what they want, being disrespected, criticised or cheated. We can get angry when we are offended by another's beliefs and values or betrayed, abandoned, rejected, falsely accused or when other people break the rules. We can also get angry with ourselves. The list of possibilities is endless but possibly the easiest way to get angry is for others to express anger towards us, as anger seems to breed anger.

Anger gives us the energy to fight against something that is blocking a desired outcome and remove the obstacle. For example, the energy required to protect a young child can be generated by anger and the courage to stand up against oppression and injustice can also be supported by anger. Anger can also be directed inwards and give us the motivation to change something about ourselves that needs to change. Unfortunately anger can be dangerous because it can quickly drive us to act inappropriately in ways that may hurt and harm ourselves and others. Internalised anger can easily degenerate into the fuel of self-hatred and depression and as anger rarely occurs alone it may lead to an array of secondary emotions such as guilt, jealousy and self loathing. Excessive anger is detrimental to physical health, increasing blood pressure and the risk of coronary heart disease. Unconscious suppression of anger can also increase the likelihood of coronary heart disease and lead to an array of destructive emotional experiences, such as resentment, guilt and depression. “Anger management” is often a reason for visits to psychologists and participation in self-help courses because anger has a great potential to hurt, harm and destroy property, oneself, other people and our relationships.

There are many strategies for working with anger in contemporary psychology because it is such a desired skill. Assertiveness training, for example, is a popular way of working with anger skilfully so that it minimises harm and demonstrates respect for the rights and wellbeing of all parties. Some other general strategies to work with anger are:

- Being familiar with our personal cues and triggers and knowing what our personal signals for anger are. Ekman says that this type of awareness helps us to “catch the spark before the flame”.<sup>xiii</sup>
- Being able to surf the urges to follow aggressive intentions and take “time out” or do something completely different to acting on anger.
- Applying mindfulness to thoughts so that we know what thoughts may be feeding anger and knowing that these thoughts are not necessarily facts to be believed.

- Being able to note and name anger for what it is, so that we know that anger has arisen in us, but we need not identify with it.
- Choosing not to justify and reinforce violent, harmful and revengeful actions including the way we speak to ourselves and others.
- Practicing right speech (including self-talk), which entails not engaging in the types of speech that are toxic to relationships such as shaming, blaming and unwarranted criticism.
- Becoming skilled with exercises that calm the mind and relax the body so that we build up a buffer zone to soften the impact of angry triggers as well as reduce the length of time we are in a refractory period.
- Reflecting on what was helpful and what was not helpful after the episode has passed.
- Cultivating warm friendliness and compassion.

Anger is often the way the hindrance of ill will is expressed. One traditional Buddhist approach to remedy ill will is by cultivating warm friendliness or *metta*. If you refer back to the diagrams about the three emotional systems (Figure 5.1) presented earlier in this chapter, you will notice that there is a relationship between the survival system and the relationship system. The relationship system serves to calm and soothe unnecessary reaction and upset in the survival system, demonstrating how anger can be balanced by *metta*.

## Fear

<insert cartoon illustration 5.2 here>



The themes of fear can involve imagined, misperceived, expected, anticipated or actual threats of harm. Most humans fear psychological or physical pain. Fear gives us the energy to escape from danger for the welfare and wellbeing of ourselves or others. Fear is essential for survival and it is important that this experience is communicated quickly to others. Hence, there is a universal facial expression for this emotion. When fear is experienced there is a tendency to move the head back as if pulling away from the experience. The brows are up and pulled together, the lips are stretched horizontally, the eyes are open wide and the upper eye lids are also raised and as wide as possible.<sup>xiv</sup>

Fear is an emotion of avoidance. The levels of avoidance can range from a mild evasion to an extreme desperate escape from whatever frightens us. At extreme levels, fighting, fleeing or freezing are natural survival avoidance responses to danger.

As with all the emotions there are many grades of fear from subtle avoidance to intense terror and some of the words that are used for the family of fear include:

Afraid	Hysteria	Shock
Cautious	Jumpiness	Tenseness
Dread	Nervousness	Terror
Edginess	Petrified	Threatened

Fright

Panic

Uneasiness

Horror

Scared

Worry

When we are confronted with danger and fear takes hold we will experience a fight, flight or freeze response. The freeze response is a shut down coping mechanism related to danger. A mouse playing dead in the mouth of a cat, as an example, may increase its possibilities for survival. Sometimes we humans shut down emotionally and dissociate in order to cope with extremely difficult experiences. Sometimes these patterns become habitual and they occur when we no longer need them. When this response is no longer helpful mindfulness can help to break the habit. The fight or flight (FoF) response is a more common response to danger.

Adrenaline is the main biochemical that is released immediately when we are confronted with danger so we can avoid or manage injury, act quickly and move away from danger or be able to fight it. In response to demands some of the following physiological changes occur:

- Breathing speeds up so that there is more oxygen for muscles.
- Blood moves towards the muscles to supply energy.
- Muscles tense in preparation for quick responses.
- Heart rate and blood pressure increase so that the oxygen and nutrients the blood carries can be quickly supplied to where they are needed.
- Perspiration increases, in order that the body is cooled should it be involved in strenuous activity.
- Blood vessels may expand and move towards the skin also in order to help cool the body (thus giving a blushed or blotchy appearance).
- Blood clotting ability increases to minimise blood loss should an injury occur.
- We become hyper-vigilant (on the lookout) for danger so that there can be a quick response if needed.

- Digestive processes are stopped or slowed down so that more important and pressing defensive functions are given resources. This may result in such things as nausea and a dry mouth.
- The immune response also slows down as a result of diverting energy to more pressing needs.

The FoF response is an immediate and natural response to threat or danger. After the danger has passed the body should naturally return to a state of balance. However, if something in this complex process goes wrong then the system gets out of balance.

### Fear out of balance

As we have discussed throughout this book, fear can be in excess and easily shift from being an important emotion for survival and welfare to an extremely uncomfortable obstacle to living a fulfilling and meaningful life. In some cases, such as with agoraphobia, it can keep us house bound because we fear a panic attack in a situation that we cannot control. With social phobia we may feel desperately lonely because we fear being judged by others. Sometimes fear keeps us caught in meaningless occupations because we fear taking a risk. We may also fear meditation and the insight that it can bring preferring to be entrapped by our own ignorance. At the opposite end of the fear spectrum, a deficiency in this emotion can lead to foolhardy fearlessness.

In many cultural sub-groups fearlessness is often thought of as a desirable state. In the short term, fool hardy courage or self serving indifference can feel very good, and serve short term goals such as an adrenaline fix, an ego boost or material acquisitions. Some high risk extreme sports people, for example, could be motivated by an addiction to excitement and a desire to feel fear by participating in dangerous activities. Another example of the problems associated with an imbalance in fear is the harm those who are called psychopaths can cause. As well as lacking compassionate empathy, a feature of a person who fits the psychopath profile is a lack of fear. Like James Bond, they are cool and calm in the face of great risk and danger, thus

acting without hesitation in a way that could be harmful to self or others. The psychological profile of a psychopath can also involve no fear of consequences. Fear of negative consequences is, according to Buddhist psychology, considered a helpful emotion. The right fear, in an appropriate amount, in a timely manner consistent with the context and need is a wholesome mental state because it is a disincentive to act in a harmful way.

Anxiety disorders develop when natural functional fear responses become exaggerated, distorted and dysfunctional. When the body's responses to immediate threat are not resolved our systems often do not have an opportunity to bounce back to a state of equilibrium and we become more vulnerable not only to anxiety disorders but also depression and a variety of health conditions. In heavy traffic, for example, when the FoF responses may be at full throttle but we cannot do the things that the body is geared up to do, it may not easily return to a balanced state. If we have repeated FoF responses it can, understandably, affect our emotional and physical wellbeing. When demands become overwhelming, stress responses can become chronic. Cortisol is a stress hormone that is regularly released at different times throughout our day in response to demands. When the stress response becomes chronic the levels of cortisol can also become elevated, increasing our vulnerability to long-term illnesses, such as type II diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease, and immune deficiencies that may increase our risk of cancer. It can also lead to worsening anxiety and depression, and disrupt memory processes.

As we explored in Chapter 1, panic is a fear response when there is no need for this response. Panic is like a false alarm to a situation that does not warrant a FoF response. A panic cycle is illustrated below to show how panic can be self-reinforcing.

<insert Figure 5.2 here>

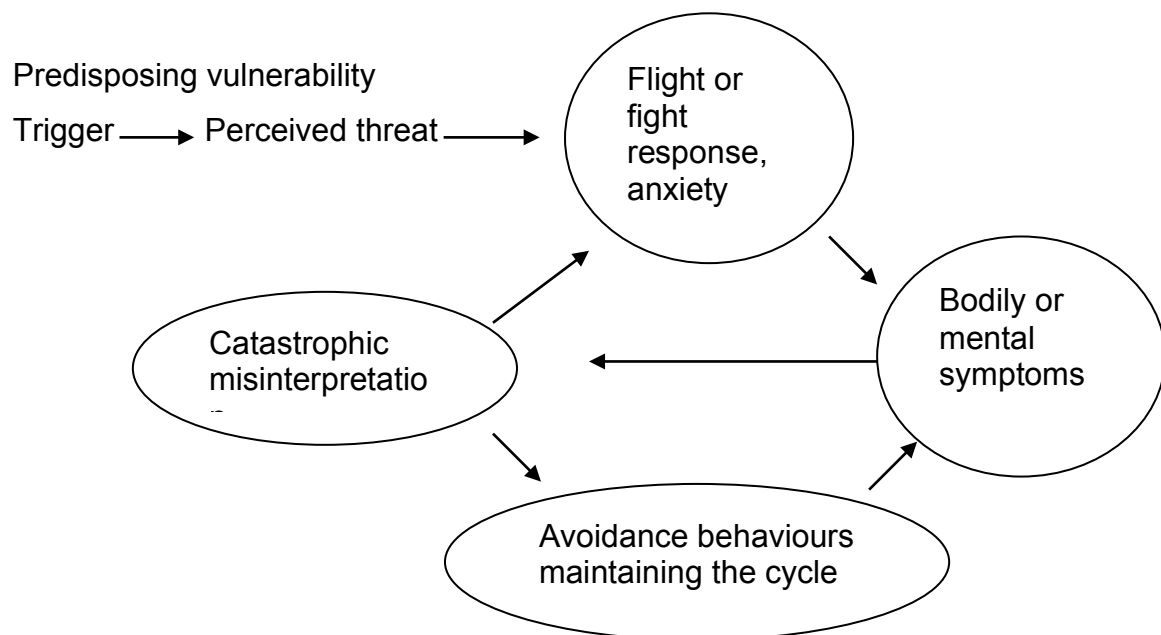


Figure 5.2: The panic cycle (adapted from Wells, 1997)

Panic attacks, in panic disorder are examples of when the natural and healthy emotion of fear develops into a disorder.

For the most part, fear and the chain of events connected with fear are involuntary and necessary responses for survival. We cannot stop fear being triggered. We can, however, change the way we react to fear so that it does not hijack us in an out of control manner. We can reduce our fear of fear and we can also reduce the likelihood that unnecessary fear will arise at all.

### Balancing fear

With reference again to the emotional system diagram (Figure 5.1), the relationships system serves to calm sympathetic nervous system responses of the survival system. When we feel safe and a fight flight or freeze response is no longer necessary, oxytocins released as part of the soothing system stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system, helping the body recover from an incident. Oxytocins slow down our breathing and heart rate and increase the blood flow to digestion. In general they allow our bodies to



rest, recuperate and repair. Oxytocins also counter the ill effects of stress and chronically elevated cortisol, improving our health and emotional wellbeing (Kukchinskis, 2009).

As far as psychological treatment for anxiety is concerned, there is an abundance of successful strategies and therapies. Some of these approaches have already been explained in this book. The way the third wave and Buddhist therapies address the excesses of fear are sometimes counter intuitive. Rather than attempting to get rid of it or eliminate fear and anxiety, the general approach is to embrace and accept it. These approaches provide the opportunity to find freedom with anxiety by understanding it. As far as treating the deficiencies of fear, such as foolhardy fearlessness, there may not be many conventional therapies available or appropriate. Nonetheless, with the cultivation of the heart-mind and the maturation of wisdom, individuals become more aware of imbalances in their lives and begin to realise ways to address them. Mindfulness is a key if not essential activity to find balance with fear.

<open Box here>

### ***Surfing panic with understanding- guided instructions***

The following suggestions are strategies to work with a panic attack when it is occurring. These suggestions involve being objective and not reacting to or feeding into a panic cycle and so allowing a panic attack to naturally subside or burn out. The following guidelines follow principles of insight meditation. <sup>xv</sup>

- *Acknowledge or note the most noticeable experience. You could say to yourself, for example, “panic...panic” or “panic has arisen”.*

*Remember to be calm with the tone of noting and step back or into a perspective of awareness that is not cut off from the experience but also not lost in it. Be careful not to be hijacked by thoughts about the experience and be as honest as you can about what you notice. Let thoughts about the experience be on the periphery of your awareness*

*and turn your attention to your body and describe, to yourself, what is happening. If your heart is racing note, for example, “racing heart”. If your body is shaking note: “ shaking....shaking”. If you are breathing quickly note “fast breathing” etc.,*

- *Investigate the experience, and tell yourself something accurate about it. For example, you could ask yourself: “what is actually happening here?”, “where do I experience my panic most of all?” “on a scale of one to ten, how would I rate this particular panic attack?”*
- *Try to be objective and honest about the experience. Do not note panic if in fact you are not panicking.*
- *Access your understanding of panic and remind yourself of your insights. Say to yourself statements reflecting your insights such as:*
  - *This is a natural fear response, which is misfiring.*
  - *The brain sometimes makes mistakes; this panic is one of those mistakes.*
  - *This panic is just a false alarm.*
  - *This false alarm is being fuelled by catastrophic misinterpretations that I need not believe.*
  - *Any catastrophic thoughts that I may be having are not facts to be believed.*
  - *Just because I am experiencing an intense emotion it does not mean I have to act on it.*
  - *This panic has a beginning middle and end and it will tend to dissolve more readily if I let it roll out rather than struggling with it.*
  - *Turning attention towards panic rather than reacting and running away from it is one way that I can overcome and heal this problem.*
  - *Making friends with panic is therapeutic. Struggling and fighting panic only makes thing worse*
  - *Just because this experience of panic may seem overwhelming, I am not panic. I don’t need to be trapped by taking this panic personally.*

- *When I can connect with the part of me that knows and is watching panic, it is spacious and peaceful.*
  - *I can be at peace with panic.*
- *Cultivate patience with panic. Know that in time it will pass and that the less you struggle with it the easier it will pass.*
- *Try to be completely open and receptive with your current experience. If this is unpleasant note “unpleasant feelings” and relax into the discomfort without resistance. The more you accept and allow the closer you come to healing and letting go.*
- *Be completely receptive to whatever unpleasant physical experiences arise. Melt and soften with these experiences, knowing that the more you can soften and open to them the closer you come to healing and being at peace with them.*
- *Be open and receptive to catastrophic thoughts but remember that you don’t need to believe them. They are only thoughts with inaccurate messages. Let such thoughts come and go. They need not take hold and hijack you.*
- *Notice the urge to avoid the experience and seek out safety behaviours. Remember that the more you avoid the more the cycle is reinforced. Resist the impulse and urge to move away and rather stay with the experience in this present moment. If you want you can note “aversion...aversion” or “urge.....urge”.*
- *Take refuge in awareness with the knowledge that awareness is like the still depths of a lake buffeted by strong winds. The depths are peaceful while the surface rough and turbulent.*
- *Hold firm to the confidence that the turbulence will settle.*
- *Rest in the peace of awareness and let the panic roll out and finish.*
- *Maintain a stance of presence and let mindfulness be your refuge.*
- *Be open, compassionate and kind with whatever presents in your sphere of awareness. Find peace and freedom from panic by being courageously present.*

<close Box here>

## Sadness/grief

<insert cartoon illustration 5.3 here>



If you feel confident that you can cope, think of a time when you lost something that was important to you. It could be the loss of a job, your health or your clear vision or hearing. It could be the loss of self-esteem or the admiration of colleagues or friends or the loss of a dream. The loss could be related to a rejection from a friend or the death of a child, spouse, sibling, parent, friend or pet.<sup>xvi</sup> How did you feel when those important things were lost? How do you feel now when you reflect on your losses? What do you notice happens to your body? What is the facial expression you feel forming and how is your posture and breathing? What types of thoughts arise and what is the strongest emotion you experience? Can you name it? Do the words that come to mind include grief and sadness, or one of the following?

<i>Abandoned</i>	<i>Disappointment</i>	<i>Hurt</i>	<i>Rejection</i>
<i>Anguish</i>	<i>Discontentment</i>	<i>Insecurity</i>	<i>Sorrow</i>
<i>Bereft</i>	<i>Dismay</i>	<i>Isolation</i>	<i>Sombre</i>
<i>Crushed</i>	<i>Disheartened</i>	<i>Lament</i>	<i>Suffering</i>
<i>Defeated</i>	<i>Discouraged</i>	<i>Loneliness</i>	<i>Unhappiness</i>
<i>Dejection</i>	<i>Futility</i>	<i>Melancholy</i>	<i>Wistful</i>
<i>Depressed</i>	<i>Gloom</i>	<i>Miserable</i>	<i>Woe</i>
	<i>Glumness</i>	<i>Neglected</i>	

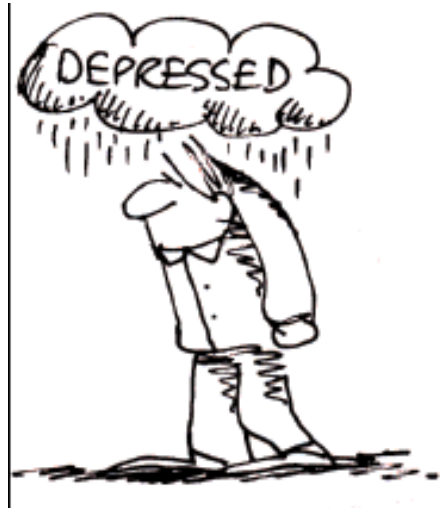
## Hopelessness

The facial expression of sadness is unmistakable. Unless we are blind or impaired in some other way we all know the universal expressions of sadness. Again, if you feel confident that you will cope, find a mirror and pay attention to how you look when you reflect on your losses. If you are not looking sad try the following:

*Let your body sag and slump. Then, if you can, raise the inner corners of your eyebrows up in the centre of your forehead. Move attention to your lower lip and push it up slightly, as if you were pouting. Let your eyes drop and look down. Also let the rest of your face relax and sag with the exception of your cheeks, which if you can, try to raise.<sup>xvii</sup>*

When you make a sad expression does it also seem to invoke the corresponding feelings? Or if this emotion was already present, does an exaggeration of the expression make the sadness stronger? The relationship of the body to the mind is highlighted in the way an emotion will bring changes in our posture and expressions and vice versa. If we manipulate our posture and expressions (both verbal and facial) it can illicit the emotion that it reflects. When we are overwhelmed with sadness we may feel a sinking heaviness, particularly in our chest. We may also feel as if our body is collapsing in on its self. Our chest may feel tight and aching, as if our heart is broken. Our lips may begin to quiver and, of course, tears may start to flow. The trigger for sadness is the loss of something important to us. Sadness is possibly the longest lasting emotion and the boundaries between it as an emotion, mood, temperament and disorder can easily become blurred.

<insert cartoon illustration 5.4 here>



Depression is the disorder of sadness and we have discussed some of the features of this disorder in previous chapters. The types of losses involved with depression are many and include the loss of hope and meaning, faith and confidence. Possibly one of the most powerful triggers for depression is the loss of a loved one. When the effects of this type of loss emerge it is commonly called grief. As well as sadness, the normal grief response can involve the following emotions, physical responses, thoughts and behaviours: anger, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, shock, yearning, numbness, helplessness, the heaviness of fatigue, tightness in the chest, a dry mouth, a hollow feeling in the stomach, tightness in the throat, ruminations, obsessions, confusion or even hallucinations, disturbed sleep, social withdrawal, crying, neurotic responses to old possessions and memories, absent-mindedness, searching and calling out, restless overactivity and more.

When you see someone expressing grief, what do you feel like doing? Do you feel like giving them a hug? Interestingly, kind and well meaning touch stimulates oxytocins, the hormone of human bonding, which is also soothing (Kukchinskis, 2009). One of the functions of the expression of sadness is to get reassurance and comfort from another. From an evolutionary perspective, consoling and helping those who are grieving strengthens bonds and promotes the welfare and wellbeing of our families and communities. When we can practise self-compassion it can help with our own distress (Neff, 2011). In my opinion another function of sadness is to provide an opportunity

to process the losses we experience by internalising and withdrawing from our normal way of relating to the world. We come to terms with what it means to be who and what we are in the absence of that person, animal or object that was so important to our sense of identity and wellbeing. When we lose a loved one, the grieving period also provides the time to respect and honour that person's life, the meaning of their life and the impact they had on us.

The effect of grief can be painful and debilitating. If the grief is excessive and not dealt with effectively it can become pathological and the bereaved person is unable to function adequately for months or years. As we have learned throughout the course of this book one cause of psychological suffering is clinging and attachment. To the extent that we are attached to things that change, to that extent we will suffer grief. Paradoxically, it is now scientifically accepted that secure attachments to significant others are essential for healthy human development (e.g. Bowlby, 1988). If a child does not develop an attachment to a carer then that child will be impaired in their social, physical, emotional and or mental development. In addition, if a child perceives and feels that they are not loved and cared for then they also fail to thrive physically and psychologically. Attachment is developed in humans and other creatures that need nurturing because it has a survival value. As attachment is natural, then it is also natural to grieve. In many respects the pain of grief is the price we pay for the joy of love and the commitment we have to those we love and are attached to. Parents, for example, are attached to their children because we know, intuitively, that it is natural and necessary. Most parents wish for their children to grow and develop into healthy and well-balanced individuals.

Grief is the natural and healthy response to the loss of someone who is dear to us. If we notice someone who does not express sadness when a close relative or friend died, then we may think that they are disordered in some way. Sadness, the natural human response to loss, like fear and anger can be excessive or deficient, and therefore dysfunctional. How do we work through the normal grief responses so that the disruption and dysfunction to our lives is minimised? How do we prevent sadness from deteriorating to pathological

grief? How do we ensure that sadness is constructive and not destructive and that we process our losses in a healthy and beneficial way?

The treatment of depression is one of the key targets of contemporary psychology and some of the approaches to this common cold of psychological disorders have already been discussed in previous chapters. Contemporary psychology also offers an array of strategies to work with both pathological and normal grief responses. Moving through the normal grief response successfully is often described as working through stages. Different approaches describe different stages. One approach that I have found helpful for people suffering with grief is a task based approach described by a psychologist called William Worden (1982).

The sequence he described is as follows:

- Task 1: Accept the reality of the loss.
- Task 2: Experience the pain of the grief.
- Task 3: Adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing.
- Task 4: Withdraw emotional energy from the deceased and reinvest it in other social activity, without uncertainty or guilt.

These principles of acceptance, willingness to experience, and releasing one's clinging and moving on, as described above relate to the loss of a loved one but can also be applied to other losses and provide a way to work with sadness in general. In the beginning paragraphs of the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha says mindfulness is very helpful, if not essential, to overcome grief.

## **Happiness**

In chapter one, three type of happiness were mentioned: 1/ simple feelings of pleasure, 2/ the joy of engagement and 3/ the wellbeing that comes from engaging in meaningful activities. Happiness can be found in all three of the emotional systems outlined earlier (Figure 5.1). Happiness usually happens when we are free from danger and threat, when we have the pleasure of



acquiring something we want or is important to us. Happiness is a broad topic and the cultivation of genuine happiness is one of the main themes of this book.

There are possibly hundreds of words that describe happy experiences some of which may include:

Aglow	Delight	Gladness	Pride
Alive	Ecstatic	Glee	Rapture
Joy	Elation	Happiness	Relief
Amusement	Enjoyment	Light hearted	Satisfaction
Bliss	Enthrallment	Merriment	Thrill
Bubbly	Enthusiasm	Pleasant	Triumph
Buoyant	Euphoria	Jolliness	Uplifted
Cheerfulness	Excitement	Jubilation	Wonderful
Contentment	Exhilaration	Thrilled	Zeal

One cannot mistake the facial expression of happiness as a smile. It is not just the movement of the mouth, however, as a genuine smile also involves the muscles around the eyes. One can tell if someone is feigning a smile by looking at his or her eyes. With a genuine smile the eyes seem to sparkle with warmth as the muscles at the outer corner of the eyes are engaged. The genuine smile is not a forced smile, or a smug smile, or one sided (which can be a sign of contempt) or the grin that arises when we endure pain. A real smile, which is also called the Duchenne smile<sup>xviii</sup> seems to clearly demonstrate the pleasure we experience. There are many types of happiness and many reasons (triggers) for people to smile. According to Ekman (2003) the many different types of enjoyment and reasons to smile can include:

- Contact with pleasing sights, sounds, smells, touch and tastes.
- The types of relief we have when a difficult experience is over.
- The types of elation we feel when we see unexpected acts of human goodness.
- The feelings we have when we succeed at something.

- Amusement, even when it may involve ridicule.
- Schadenfreude, which is a German term referring to relishing in another's misfortune.
- Naches, a type of pride and joy in one's offspring.
- The joy of wonder.
- Gratitude
- Excitement
- The bliss and rapture of absorption in something.

Happiness is self-reinforcing. We like to do things that make us happy. Happiness, like the other emotions, has survival value and works toward the wellbeing and welfare of ourselves and others. The emotion of happiness provides reinforcement for actions, it can deepen connections to others and it can also enhance co-operation within our families, associates and communities. A mother's smile and her other expressions of approval and joy serve to stimulate oxytocins both within the mother and the child. They also serve to reinforce social and emotional interaction and are essential for the child's healthy development.<sup>xix</sup>

Like all the emotions, happiness can be excessive, deficient or dysfunctional. Mania, with all the problems that it can create, is an extreme example of when happiness is excessive. Over excitement is a less extreme example but it can also be the cause of problems such as exhausting and turning friends away, thereby disrupting social harmony and co-operation. An example of dysfunctional happiness would be giggling at a friend or relative's funeral. A lack of joy is the key feature of depression and a very clear example of when there is a deficiency of happiness.

A genuine smile can heal emotional distress at all ages. The experience of happiness can transform our state of being and be curative for depression. Psychologists will often ask people who are depressed to create a pleasant events schedule. This requires the client to schedule activities into their day that may be enjoyable as well as activities that may bring some sense of

achievement. These activities can lift a depressed person's mood. It seems that the experience of happy emotions serves multiple functions in our lives. However, as discussed in earlier chapters, the happiness we get from gratifying the senses is limited. The happy emotions that arise from hedonic pleasures only last as long as the pleasure lasts and unfortunately can become addictive. Sometimes our efforts to realise short-term happiness can bring us long-term misery and unhappiness. Sometimes we become entangled and entrapped by our addictions to fleeting happiness and the pleasure seeking behaviours that are driven by our addictions. As with the other emotions it is important to find balance with happiness so that we can enjoy a fulfilling and meaningful life without falling into a happiness trap.<sup>xx</sup>

Nirvana, the ultimate goal of the eight-fold path, is said to be the highest happiness. But the Buddha also taught how to realise simple types of happiness such as the joy we experience when we work in services that help, when we act kindly to another, or give generously or appreciate and enjoy the fruits of our efforts. The Buddha taught how to live a good life by cultivating wisdom, virtuous actions and the heart-mind. The Buddha was not alone in teaching how to live a wholesome and happy life. Aristotle, one of the great Western philosophers, spoke about the importance of hedonic happiness based on health, wealth, and beauty and "eudemonia", a more sustainable genuine happiness. The primary component of Aristotle's eudemonia was a virtuous (ethical) life.

The theme of this book and the teachings of most if not all wise sages is the realisation of happiness, not just as a transitory emotion but also as a genuine and sustainable way of being. Every chapter of this book addresses this topic in some way or another and mindfulness is a key strategy to find balance and genuine happiness.

## **Reflections on mindfulness of emotions**

With mindfulness we can get to know and become familiar with our emotional lives. We can become very familiar with the cascade of mental and biological responses that are collectively called an emotion. We can become aware of all the components of an emotional episode and have more choice in how we reinforce or allow our emotional responses to fade away. Mindfulness of emotions includes developing insight about emotions. This involves understanding what triggers them, what fuels them, what quells them, how they can fade away and how we can cultivate the ones that best serve the needs and values of ourselves and others. When we are able to track and understand emotions we are in a better position to choose to abandon the destructive and cultivate the constructive. With awareness, resolve and skilful action we can alter the trajectory of a destructive emotional episode so that it is transformed to something helpful and constructive. When we have an understanding of what an emotion is then we are in a powerful position to be able to tame the destructive and cultivate balance.

## **Remember Bec?**

Bec was one of hundreds of people I have had the honour to teach mindfulness to within a group setting. Everyone comes with different stories and reasons for participation in mindfulness groups. For the most part, the motivation for attendance at a group is to work with painful and often destructive emotions. During the session on emotions I usually provide a double page handout which gives participants some strategies to try when they are experiencing painful and potentially destructive emotions. Please find this information on the following pages as a way to conclude this chapter.

<open Box here>

## ***Coping with painful emotions***

*During formal meditation practices or during daily activities some ways to cope with painful and possibly destructive emotions include:*

- *Honour emotions. They arise for a reason and they may indicate that we need to act in a particular way. Act on emotions if this is needed and don't force yourself to investigate emotions when they are too overwhelming. Remember always be kind to yourself.*
- *Note and name the emotions. Say to yourself something like: "\_\_\_\_\_ (the name of the emotion) has arisen". Name the emotion with a tone of voice that is not the same as the emotion you are noting. For example, if anger is there, name it with a tone of voice that is not angry. Naming an emotion helps to create space with it. There are lists of words referring to some basic emotions [in this chapter]. These lists can help find words to describe the emotions you experience.*
- *Give emotions space. As much as possible let them be without rejecting or suppressing them. If it is painful do not suppress the experience. Let it be. Giving space to emotions is like accepting them and embracing them with kindness.*
- *Step back from falling into and becoming entangled with the emotion. Step back from them into a space of awareness. Step back and get unstuck by being aware.*
- *See emotions like waves coming and going. In this way try not to block them or amplify them. Rather let them roll on by. Surfing powerful emotions is like staying balanced and not being dumped by them. Sometimes, it also means being able to dive through them before they pound you into the seabed.*
- *Practise emotional aikido. Aikido is a defensive martial art. Aikido experts are very good at getting out of the road of destructive energy, neutralising destructive energy and even transforming it to something beneficial.*
- *Remember that we are not our emotions but rather they are changing events passing through like visitors. Remember you don't need to take emotions personally.*
- *Practise openness, willingness, allowance and acceptance. Remember that acceptance does not mean that you don't take action when you need to.*

- *See difficult and painful emotions as an opportunity to develop understanding or insight.*
- *Remember that all experiences change and painful emotions have a natural time frame, and will also change to something different.*
- *Be aware of the thoughts related to the emotion but try not to get caught up in them. Relax into how the emotion feels in the body rather than trying to work it out by thinking too much about them.*
- *Feeling the physical sensations of painful emotions endeavour to soften your attitude, sooth the distress and allow the experience, rather than struggle with it. Remember soften, soothe allow.*
- *Enquire into painful emotions. Look directly at emotions and see them for what they are rather than what we construct them to be. Being afraid to look at and investigate destructive emotions can sometimes make them stronger. When we look at them, we might notice that they are nothing to be afraid of, and all the scary parts of them fade away.*
- *Cultivate the opposites of the painful and destructive emotions, such as, for example peacefulness, kindness, compassion, wisdom, acceptance etc.*
- *Unlearn unhelpful responses by not reinforcing old reactive habits. This means that we don't let destructive emotions become the boss of our lives and we make choices to stand up to, and say no to what they are trying to make us do.*
- *Use helpful self-talk such as: "it's OK, this will change", "I am not my emotions" or "this will pass" or "it is understandable that this emotion has arisen, and I don't need to take it personally".*
- *If the emotion is too overwhelming to deal with, use healthy distraction such as watching a movie, or listening to music. These types of distractions can help the destructive and painful emotions pass by without causing any damage.*
- *Find a good friend and talk it out.*
- *Remember to remember to be here now.*

<close Box here>



## Chapter 5 References

- Ballie, A. J. and Rapee, R. M. (1998). *Panic Surfing: A self-treatment workbook for panic disorder*. Sydney: Macquarie Lighthouse Press.
- Bodhi, B. (2000). *The connected discourses of the Buddha: A translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*. Somerville MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Bowlby, E.J.M. (1988). *A secure base: Clinical applications of attachment theory*. London: Routledge.
- Ekman, P. (2003). *Emotions revealed: Recognizing faces and feelings to improve communication and emotional life*. New York: Times Books.
- Gilbert, P. (2009) *The Compassionate Mind: A new approach to life's challenges*. Oakland C.A: New Harbinger Publications.
- Kukchinskias, S. (2009). *The chemistry of connection: How the oxytocin response can help you find trust, intimacy and love*. Oakland C.A: New Harbinger.
- Hanson, R. (2013). *Hardwiring happiness. The practical science of reshaping your brain and your life*. Croydon, UK: Ebury Publishing.
- Harris, R. (2008). *The happiness trap: Stop struggling and start living*. London: Constable and Robinson.
- Linehan, M.M. (1993). *Skills training manual for treating borderline personality disorder*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Nanamoli, B. and Bodhi B. (1995). *The middle length discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.



Neff, K. (2011). *Self-compassion: Stop beating yourself up and leave insecurity behind*. New York: HarperCollins.

Porges S. W. (2011). *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological foundations of emotions, attachment, communication, and self-regulation*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.

Wells, A. (1997). *Cognitive therapy of Anxiety Disorders: A practical Manual and conceptual guide*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Worden, W.J. (1982). *Grief counselling and grief therapy: A handbook for the mental health practitioner*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.

---

<sup>i</sup> Dr. Paul Ekman developed a program with Dr. B. Alan Wallace called Cultivating Emotional Balance (CEB). CEB is an evidence based educational program that uses the contemporary scientific understanding of emotions and training in Buddhist meditation to help participants enhance emotional wellbeing and reduce the impact of destructive emotions (see <http://www.cultivatingemotionalbalance.org/>). With appreciation, I received training in teaching CEB under the guidance of both Dr. Paul Ekman and Dr. Alan Wallace in 2011. Much of the information related to the scientific perspective of emotions in this chapter is credited Dr. Paul Ekman.

<sup>ii</sup> Dr Paul Ekman During CEB teacher training, Phuket Thailand 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Please note that the freeze response does not necessarily involve these hormones and is related to the ventral vagal nerve as it shuts down the human system, as one way to cope with threat and danger. See Porges (2011) for more details.

<sup>v</sup> The cultivation of loving-kindness is mentioned in the final chapter of this book will be detailed along with compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity in the book currently in progress with the current working title: "Harmonious human relationships and the Buddha's path of warm friendliness, compassion, joy and peace".

<sup>vi</sup> Reactive cycles will be the topic of the next chapter.

<sup>vii</sup> Credit is given to Patrick Kearney for making this comparison on the many workshops we have run together and also in the Dharma teachings on retreats he has led.

<sup>viii</sup> Credit is given to Patrick Kearney for making this and the many other clarifications about Pali and Buddha Dharma on the many workshops we have run together and also in the Dharma teachings in the talks he has given and retreats he has led.

<sup>ix</sup> Thanks to Patrick Kearney for pointing out this reference in: The greater discourse at Assapura MN 39. See Nanamoli and Bodhi, (1995, p.370).

<sup>x</sup> Thanks to Patrick Kearney for pointing out this reference from the Sangarava Sutta, SN 46:55. See Bodhi (2000, pp.1612-1613).

<sup>xi</sup> During CEB teacher training, Phuket Thailand 2011.

<sup>xii</sup> Adapted from CEB teacher training in Phuket, Thailand 2011, credit to Dr Paul Ekman

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.

---

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xv</sup> These instructions have been inspired and adapted from instructions found in a manual written about panic surfing by Ballie and Rapee (1998).

<sup>xvi</sup> Adapted from CEB teacher training in Phuket, Thailand 2011, credit to Dr Paul Ekman

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xviii</sup> The Duchenne smile is named after Guillaume-Benjamin-Amand Duchenne (de Boulogne) a 19<sup>th</sup> century French neurologist who researched which muscles were involved in facial expressions.

<sup>xix</sup> In an experiment called "The still face experiment", young mothers are first asked to interact with their 12 month old babies as they would normally. Then the mothers are asked to maintain a blank and still face. In only a few minutes the babies become very distressed.

See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0>.

<sup>xx</sup> With acknowledgment, "The happiness trap" is the title of a book written by a third wave ACT therapist in Australia called Dr. Russ Harris. See Harris (2008).