

# KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY EMBODYING EMOTIONS

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For many of us, emotions are

something of a mystery.

On the one hand, they can be delightful; they give life meaning and depth that would be impossible without them. On the other hand, they can be uncomfortable; they can hinder and disturb us; and anger in particular can sometimes cause a whole lot of very big trouble.

Learning to feel, understand, and use our emotions is central to mastering the complexity of life. Our emotions become much clearer and easier to use the more we pay attention to the physical sensations that go with them.

How do you know you feel afraid? Is your breath more shallow, your chest tight, your belly vibrating? For many of us, the first sense we have of fear is when we're *already* overtaken by the emotion, uncomfortable with the need to avoid or endure something that feels threatening.

In the case of panic attacks, the physical process leading to the emotion of panic can start much earlier than the panic itself. A tightening of our chest, a constriction in our breathing, can lead to a change in CO2 levels in our blood as early as *40 minutes before we feel anything!*

By the time we're actually panicking we're already in trouble, with an intensity of emotion that can be genuinely disabling.

*Often, panic is not about an external fear at all, it's a physical response to feeling like we're suffocating – because the CO2 levels in our blood are telling us that we are.*

If we're prone to panic attacks, and we're aware of when our breathing initially becomes shallower, at that point we can gently deepen our breathing when we notice it. *Doing this can quite possibly avert the panic attack entirely.*

## How do you know you feel angry?

Do you feel tension in your muscles, tightening in your jaw, an intensity of physical energy in your body? For those with anger issues, it can feel like a switch just got thrown, and the anger floods in, becoming overpowering, and leading to potentially dangerous consequences.

That's because overwhelming anger is a function of the fight branch of our sympathetic nervous system, and it can kick in within about a 10<sup>th</sup> of a second to protect us from mortal danger. At least that's its function – but we can get lost in it for a variety of reasons when there is no such danger.

Part of the solution to anger that is out of control is to pay close attention over time to what triggers that anger, and to the very earliest physical sensations signaling that anger is *beginning* to arise, and *before* our fight system is activated.

Avoiding those triggers and using those early sensations as a signal to stop and redirect that emotion are keys to taming and retraining the anger response.

## How do you know you feel joy?

Does your breathing deepen, do your muscles relax; do you feel lightness and a pleasurable vibration in your skin? Often, we just have a sense that we feel happy, but we may not have the words or the awareness of what's happening in our bodies which is an integral part of that joy.

In many cases, awareness of those physical sensations can help us feel even *more* joyful... and it's hard to imagine a downside to that!

Emotions in general involve not just a feeling, but also an impulse to move. And that *impulse to move* is something that happens outside of our conscious awareness.

**Try this:** extend your arm in front of you with your palm up. Now whenever you decide to, flex your wrist. It feels like you're making your wrist move with your conscious decision, right?

But in some fascinating experiments by Ben Libet of UC San Francisco Medical School, measuring this very movement, he found that the brain activity in our motor cortex actually begins about *half a second before* we consciously decide to move.

This is a very strange thing to wrap our heads around. How can our motor cortex know we're going to act before we do? It almost seems to defy cause and effect; and it can be a little disturbing to our sense of free will.

But there's much more to free will than this.

If we can hone our awareness of this impulse toward motion, it can help us recognize our emotions and our impulses sooner; and this can give us more range of conscious control about *what we do with* our impulses and

emotions.

That's where our free will really kicks in; and along with it the opportunity to significantly improve our emotional lives.

With fear, this impulse to move is often a movement *away* from something that we may perceive as a danger – whether it's a wild animal, a confrontation with a belligerent coworker, or a speaker's podium.

With anger it's often a movement *toward* something that we perceive as threatening a boundary – whether that's a thief, a pushy salesperson, or a tailgating driver.

With love, it's *also* often a movement toward something – specifically, toward someone we love.

If we can notice the initial physical sense of arising fear, that sense can allow us to give that wild animal a wider berth sooner.

It can allow us to consciously adopt a stronger posture before that belligerent coworker can throw us off balance; or it can remind us to breath and remember that we've prepared well before walking up to deliver a speech, allowing us to feel more excitement and less fear as we do.

If we can sense the initial physical sense of arising anger, that can allow us to sense the potential thief sooner so we can more effectively protect ourselves.

It can allow us to dismiss a pushy salesperson before they get us too annoyed; or it can allow us to notice that driver approaching in our rear view mirror sooner, so we can make more room in front of us, or move safely out of his way before he's a threat.

If we can notice the initial physical sense of arising love, we can use that to be more present, more ready to be delighted – and to be more *deeply* delighted – when we see the one we love.

The difference is *the awareness of the physical quality of the emotion at its outset*. The initial *motion* of the emotion is where we can use it most effectively.

Practice noticing *where* you feel different emotions in your body. Sometimes they will feel big and obvious; sometimes they will be very subtle, even barely noticeable.

You might have to begin by doing this after you're already in the emotion at first. Take your time; this may be brand new territory for you. But with practice, you can begin to find those physical senses within you; and as you do, you'll be unlocking a treasure of depth and understanding about yourself. You'll gain a better sense of what *moves* you.

And you'll gain a mastery of your own emotions, impulses, and reactions that you can't have any other way.

PS: My course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much

greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. And now you can purchase the *workbook* for this course separately for \$29.95 plus shipping. You can still get the online course with the downloadable workbook at a deep discount, for \$99, if you use this code: LB99.

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