

KEEPING YOUR SANITY WITH A SIMPLE TOOL FOR MANAGING EMOTIONS

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Getting overwhelmed or misled

by our emotions is one of the primary sources of financial trouble, whether spending, earning, saving, or investing. Emotions are not simple, but sometimes there are simple actions we can take to manage complex things. Today's column will show you a simple way to avoid getting overwhelmed by your emotions.

- When people were treated for phobias, practicing this simple skill lowered their fear by over 18%, and their psychological reactivity by over 27%. They also were less constricted generally, shifting from feeling a sense of threat to a sense of opportunity.
- When feeling stress, using this technique led to people having 40% fewer alcoholic drinks when they went to a bar or party than those who did not use this technique.
- When feeling angry with someone, those using this technique were 40% less verbally and physically aggressive than those who did not.
- Rejection brings with it actual pain. When feeling rejected those using this technique showed less activity in the parts of the brain connected to physical and emotional pain.

Using this simple tool can help us to deal with emotionally upsetting situations with a greater sense of calm and competence.

Okay, enough buildup, here's the skill: learn to identify and name the specific emotions you're experiencing in any emotionally charged situation. The appropriately straightforward name for this is "emotion labeling."

But the problem with simple techniques is that we tend to ignore them; because they're so easy we figure they can't be very useful.

For example:

- If you want to improve your immediate sense of happiness and well-being, do something kind for another person. It's so simple, but that's the most effective action we can take to feel happier right now.

- If you want to increase your overall happiness, think of three good things that happened today, and how they came to happen. Simple. Takes a couple of minutes at most. But among people experiencing deep depression who did this for two weeks, a significant number lifted out of their depression. For those who were not depressed, their happiness increased significantly, too.

The problem with simple techniques is that in order to get the full benefit of any skill, we need to practice it until it's a habit. It has to be something we can eventually do without thinking much about it. When something takes work to learn, we're practicing it just in the learning of it, and then, having invested that time and energy in it already, we're more likely to continue practicing it.

When something's this simple, though, there's not much to learn. We just have to do it. But we haven't invested in it yet, so we tend to take it in, think, "wow, that's a cool idea, I can do that," and then when we're actually in a stressful situation, we haven't done the groundwork so that it comes naturally to us. We haven't made it a habit.

It's kind of like taking a math class, where we get the concept easily, but because it's so obvious, we don't do the problem set to practice it. When it comes time to take the test, we have to consciously remember and think about each problem, slowing us down, increasing our stress, and hindering our performance. Whereas had we practiced doing the problems, the answers would come more easily and automatically during the test.

And emotionally charged situations are a kind of test. The stress can be acute, and often important consequences flow from how we deal with them.

So let's dive a little deeper into this. When we think of emotions, we tend to think in terms of positive or negative. Positive emotions feel good in themselves – things like joy, love, excitement, delight, serenity. Negative emotions don't feel so good – things like anger, pain, grief, anxiety, regret.

Positive emotions lead us to go toward the experience that brought them, or seemed to bring them. Negative emotions lead us to want to avoid the experience that brought them, or seemed to bring them.

To that extent, we're on about the same level as an amoeba. **Approach what feels good; avoid what feels bad.**

We also tend to clump emotions together into similar groups that feel bad. We might glom anger together with shame or hurt. We might combine the revved-up feelings of anxiety, excitement or dread together into the same general spaghetti.

Our emotions are much more complex than we often allow for. Emotions ebb and flow like waves. There are subtleties and details, there is tremendous integration with our past experiences, the stories we hold about ourselves and the world, our beliefs, and what we would like for the future.

So identifying exactly what we're feeling when it matters can help us to understand and integrate our experience, and plan for how we would like to handle similar situations in the future. That leaves us feeling less chaotic and more at ease in general.

As with any skill, it can help to practice it when the heats off. None of us can learn a new skill when we're in the throes of pain, grief, anger, or fear. Our system is already activated, the ship is sailing and we need to attend to the rigging as best we know how, until we make our way back to a safe harbor.

When we don't know how to manage our emotions well, we become susceptible to unhealthy strategies like venting aggression, self-harm, alcohol or other drug abuse, over-eating, avoidance, and withdrawal. When emotions are running the show, we can be at the mercy of our most unconscious, emergency back-up habits.

And of course when we are at the mercy of our emotions, our thinking and decision making around money can suffer mightily. We can make impulsive decisions based on fear, shame, or hope.

Emotions matter.

It's important to have your emotions – all of your emotions – and learn and practice naming them. Then your emotions won't have you.

Start practicing this today, with the easy things. For example, right now I'm looking out the window of my office at a lovely slice of nature, and I can feel some serenity, joy, and then a moment of pleasant surprise as some quail enter the scene. Very subtle, nothing dramatic, but I can sense it and name it, and I feel it all more fully for the naming.

Try it now. As you're reading this, stop for a moment and notice what you're feeling. It may be very quiet. That's fine.

It can help to make a list of possible emotions from your own experience, and then be on the lookout for a degree of fine tuning you may not have considered. Think of it like broadening your vocabulary. Look up emotion words that are less familiar to you.

My challenge to you is to practice this simple skill and keep practicing it often. Set a number, maybe five times a day for 4 weeks. Practice noticing and naming whatever you're feeling in a variety of different situations.

Practice this simple skill, with all the fine-tuning you can come up with, until it's a habit. It will take you a long way toward managing some of the most challenging emotional experiences that life can throw at you. It may also save and/or make you a lot of money on the way.

PS: My new 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. You can get it now with a deep discount, for \$99, if you use this code: LB99.

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