

What is Emotion and Why Should I Care?

EVER PRESENT: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY
OF EMOTION

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“Emotion.” For some, even saying or hearing the word activates . . . emotion. (1) But what is it? Or perhaps the question is, “What are they? Is “emotion” a singular entity or a collection of things? A phenomenon so seemingly common as emotion seems so difficult to understand. In my work as a therapist / pastor / elder I have asked and been asked the question, “What is emotion?” and its various offshoots, such as “What is so important about them?” “Why does it matter what emotion I feel?” hundreds, if not thousands of times. The answer to the question matters. It matters relationally, spiritually, and naturally, emotionally. However, the essence of the word itself remains difficult to capture.

In fact, Thomas Dixon, writing from a researcher’s point of view, states that perhaps the term is so difficult to define and understand that it should be cast from usage in psychology and science altogether

The field of psychology focuses more on the role of "affect" than in defining what "emotion" means. "Affect" (pronounced A ("short A") fect with the emphasis on the first syllable) is defined as (a person's) "immediate expression of emotion." (2) In over 32 years of clinical and church-based practice, I have noted a person's affect thousands of times. In fact, the linchpin of my experience with someone (verbally) walking through their story is joining them as a guide walking with them as they unwind the story from places inside of them perhaps long ago locked away.

I am honored to hear words like, "I have never told anyone this," or "This is so scary, but I trust you," as a person unwinds their story with me. It is not uncommon for an entire hour to elapse with only a small part of the story told and to see a mound of used tissues beside him or her. The reason for the qualifying statements and difficulty talking about the story; the pile of tissues and many long pauses is not the content of the story; it is the emotional impact of the story.

1 . . . despite the continuing proliferation of books, journals, conferences, and theories on the subject of “emotion,” there is still no consensus on the meaning of this term. Some even believe that it should be thrown out of psychology altogether. Among the scientists surveyed by Izard, there was moderate support for the view that the term “emotion” is “ambiguous and has no status in science,” and that it should therefore be abandoned. Thomas Dixon 2012, Emotion: History of a Keyword in Crisis, National Library of Medicine, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3573683/>

2 Martin, David C. The Mental Status Examination <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK320/> accessed 17 March 2023

While scientists wrestle with defining what emotion is and what it means, in my office and countless other offices, restaurant booths, vehicles, homes and many other places, stories and struggles are being communicated through emotional expression, or affect.

Emotions are the language of relationship and are essential for humans to pursue and maintain them. Parents do not have to send their babies to "emotional expression school," or enroll them in a seminar to learn how to express their emotions. The most common expression a small child has is to cry out. From the moment a child is born, he or she is (quite literally) crying out. It is the core of how attachment (or the lack thereof) has such a profound impact on the brain. A person's ability to integrate the events of life into his or her brain is largely shaped by the expression of emotion. (3)

From the moment of birth, it is evident that humans are made for relationship and will (quite literally) cry out for it. Research shows that human beings are "hard wired for relationship to such an extent that researchers label it "emotional architecture."

In a fascinating study at San Francisco State University, researchers discovered that even blind babies will react with a smile while interacting pleasurably with their mothers. Specifically, "Such a smile comes from a developing creature unable to speak, walk, or even sit up, but he already knows how to express happiness through a configuration of muscular contractions he has never seen on anyone's face. His knowledge has to be innate. A blind baby's smile must reflect the brain's inherited emotional architecture. "Spontaneously produced facial expressions of emotion of both congenitally and non-congenitally blind individuals are the same as for sighted individuals in the same emotionally evocative situations." The study states, "(the baby's) knowledge has to be innate." (4)

3 "The communication of emotion may be the primary means by which attachment experiences shape the developing mind. Research suggests that emotion serves as a central organizing process within the brain. In this way, an individual's abilities to organize emotions—a product, in part, of earlier attachment relationships—directly shapes the ability of the mind to integrate experience and to adapt to future stressors."

Siegel, Daniel J., *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, New York, Guilford Press, 2001.

4 "Spontaneous Facial Expressions of Emotion of Congenitally and Noncongenitally Blind Individuals," David Matsumoto, PhD, San Francisco University and Bob Willingham, PhD, Center for Psychological Studies, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 96, No.1.

I can attest to the fact that what begins in childhood continues throughout the entire life cycle. I have found that at the root of human struggle lies emotional upheaval and distress. There is an adage that has been passed through the generations of practitioners that, "we are impaired through relationship, and repaired through relationship." As emotional distress is the root of upheaval, emotional expression in secure relationships is the root of healing. Relationships in which a person is seen, soothed, safe, and secure provide the foundation upon which emotional healing occurs. (5)

Much of therapy in all its forms centers on creating an environment rich in the "4 S's" in order to heal the trauma that is stored in the brains and bodies of hurting people. In other words, even though our bodies and problem-solving skills grow, secure attachment and an environment conducive to expressing emotion remain the key ingredient in healing. Sadly, many people expend tremendous amounts of energy attempting to deny, minimize, pray away, and numb emotions because of how they are reminded of their vulnerability and their need to "cry out" in emotional expression. All too often, their histories of being shamed, blamed, humiliated or punished for "being emotional" fuel the drive to rid themselves of any emotional expression at all and they are relegated to lives of numb greyness.

We are made for relationship, and connection. We inherit an emotional architecture that expresses, passion, dreams, hopes, visions, imagination, desire, and longings. Emotions guide and impact relationships between marriage partners, business partners, parents, uncles, aunts, friends and a host of other relationships.

Though the scientific community struggles to define emotions, scientists and physicians are publishing research at a rapid pace, and reinforcing what pastors, therapists, and other helpers have experienced for as long as they have sat across from hurting people. Hurting, suffering people heal through secure relationships in which they can safely experience emotional expression.

5 Siegel, Daniel, Tina Bryson, *The Power of Showing Up: How Parental Presence Shapes Who Our Kids Become and How Their Brains Get Wired*, New York, Penguin Random House, 2021

"Predictable care that supports a healthy and empowering relationship embodies what we call the "Four S's"—helping kids feel (1) safe... (2) seen...(3) soothed...(4) secure...based on the other S's, they trust you to predictably help them feel "at home" in the world, then learn to help themselves feel safe, seen, and soothed. When we can offer kids the Four S's, making repairs whenever the inevitable ruptures in these connections with our children may occur, we help create what's called "secure attachment," and it's absolutely key to optimal healthy development."

The morning I wrote this essay I received a text from someone I had sat across from for many hours. His text read in part, "I am forever grateful for our work. I am truly living again." As if that wasn't blessing enough, I later read this passage from one of my favorite books, "emotions are at the root of all that we do. Emotion is the messenger of love; it is the vehicle that carries every signal from one brimming heart to another. For human beings, feeling deeply is synonymous with being alive."⁽⁶⁾

Without emotion, the "numb greyness" I mentioned above would be the norm. Imagine a world in which the grey masses simply spoke content and relied on facts, figure, and data to interact and form relationships. There is actually a word for such living, and it's called "transactionalism."⁽⁷⁾ It practices pragmatism, undergirded by the belief that life and relationships are to be date-centered, and static; running at the pace of the latest data transfer needed to get a problem or conflict solved.

The people that come into my office, and I suspect almost every person reading this essay would kindly decline such a life. Something inside us pushes and desires something far more than problem solving our way through life. We much more deeply desire to love and be loved, to fight for love and relationship; to know and be known. We desire movement and energy, and we have it inside of us in the form of emotions and the ability to express them. Curt Thompson gets to the heart of this desire for more than static transactionalism when he wrote, "Emotion itself could be considered to be the gasoline in our human tank. If we were to take emotion out of the human experience, we would literally stop moving."⁽⁸⁾

We are not made to stop moving. We are made to live and to love; to cry deeply and to laugh loudly. To get to the end of our days emotionally tired but with the emotional vigor that has resulted from a lifetime of the good, the bad, the hard, and the wonderful in the fight for living fully.

6 Lewis, Thomas; Amini, Fari; Lannon, Richard. A General Theory of Love . Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

7 Dewey, John and Arthur Bentley, Knowing and the Known, Boston, Beacon Press 1949

8 Thompson MD, Curt. The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe About Ourselves (p. 24). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.