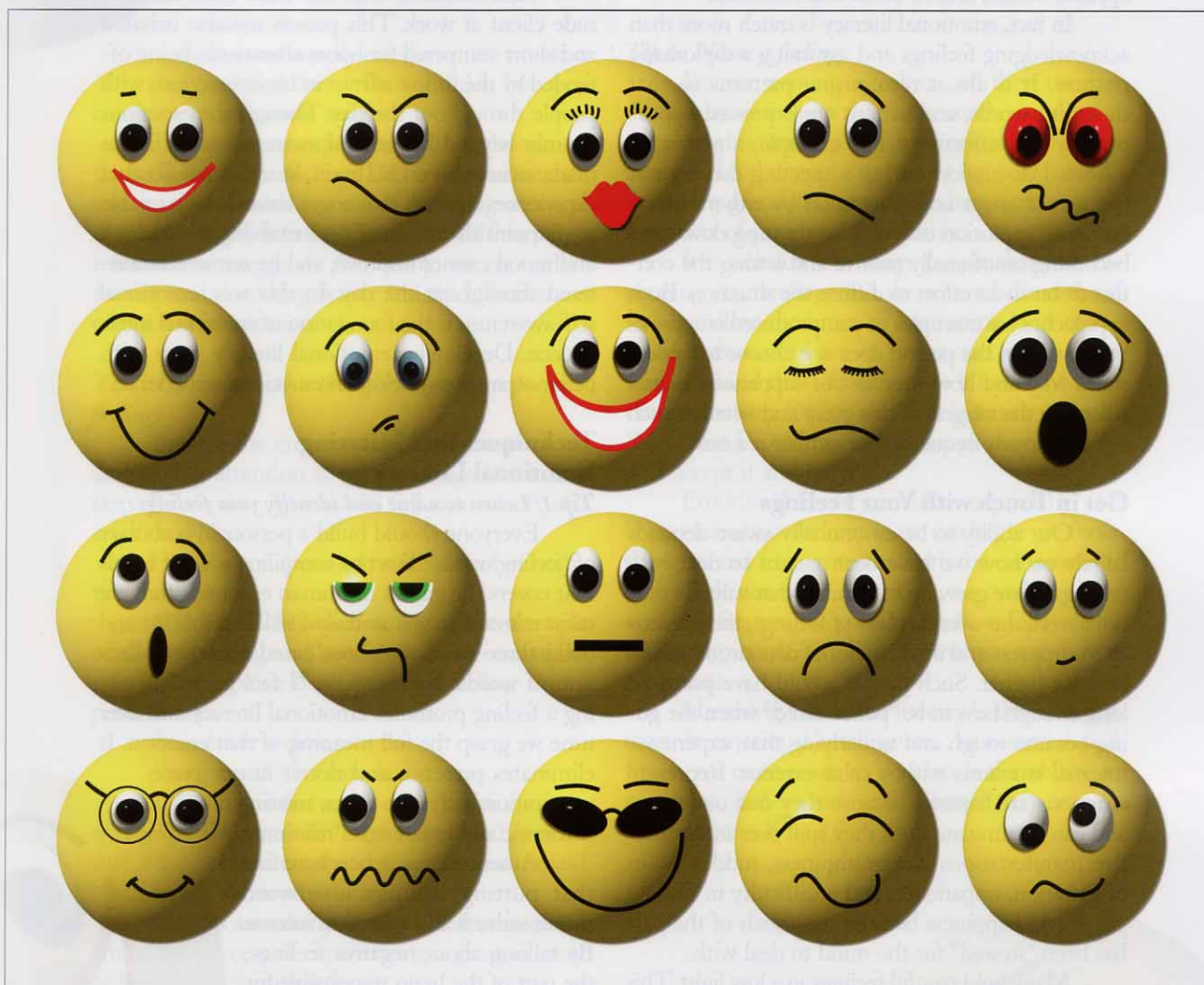


Mastering Emotional Literacy

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By Dr Granville D'Souza

THE purpose for developing emotional literacy is to accurately identify and communicate our feelings. One of the first steps to developing emotional intelligence is to improve our emotional literacy.

Emotional literacy is the ability to accurately perceive and interpret emotional information. It is the key to interpreting, understanding, and managing our feelings. Emotions are the foundations of our thinking and therefore our feelings. They influence our moods and hence willingness to engage with ourselves and others.

Our emotions guide us in facing life's challenges and predicaments. Each emotion offers the

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spark that sets us into action in our lives. The simplest and the most practical definition of emotional literacy is the ability to be real, open, and honest about our feelings and emotional states. This means having the courage and finesse to confront emotionally awkward and painful situations, rather

than shut them out of our lives. One of the biggest misconceptions about emotional literacy is that it is about reacting in only a conciliatory manner, to appease others, and to avoid confrontation.

In fact, emotional literacy is much more than acknowledging feelings and assuming a diplomatic posture. It is about recognising patterns so that thoughts, words, and actions are expressed appropriately and effectively. For example, a person in a heated discussion during a meeting can express feelings of anger and frustration by either lashing out in an explosion of words or shutting down and becoming emotionally passive and letting the conflict fester in an effort to diffuse the situation. Both approaches are examples of compromised emotional literacy when the person does not choose to understand why and how they lost or suppressed it; and recognise the triggers of this event and whether such events happen frequently for similar reasons.

Get in Touch with Your Feelings

Our ability to be emotionally aware depends largely on how we have been taught to deal with feelings. If we grew up in families that valued emotional restraint over displays of feelings, the tendency to suppress and avoid issues of contention might be a lot higher. Such people would have practised long enough how to be “poker-faced” when the going became rough and underlying that, experience internal tsunamis with a calm exterior. Repressed emotions are harmful because they dull our senses and can accumulate until they spill over in destructive manifestations like grumpiness, sudden bouts of irritation, impatience, and a difficulty in finding peace and happiness because too much of the past has been “stewed” for the mind to deal with.

Many hold painful feelings in a low light. This intolerant attitude towards painful feelings, such as anxiety and stress, can make them far worse. We vilify ourselves for feeling bad and we often fight these painful emotions rather than working through them. We withdraw into passive shells and avoid situations that make us nervous.

Some people deal with these painful feelings with alcohol, entertainment, or shopping sprees. Psychologist Steven Hayes has described this as “feel-good-ism”—the harmful idea that bad feelings ought to be crushed or erased by medication. Such intolerance to any kind of emotional pain can do more harm than good.

Get to the Root of Emotions

Emotions that simmer below the surface in our minds, below our conscious thoughts, can have a profound impact on how we behave and perceive the actions of others. Sigmund Freud and psychotherapists after him, such as Howard Gardner, have argued that much of our emotional life is unconscious; feelings that reside within us do not always

cross the threshold into our conscious lives. Developing emotional literacy starts with being attuned to one’s own emotional experience.

Take someone who has been annoyed by a rude client at work. This person remains irritated and short-tempered for hours afterwards, being offended by the tiniest affront in his interactions with people throughout the day. Though the emotions simmer beyond his general awareness, once it has made an imprint on his brain, he evaluates all other experiences through that angry lense. If he is unable to pinpoint the origin of his irritability, his outlook and mood cannot improve, and he remains embittered throughout the day. In this way, emotional self-awareness is the foundation of emotional intelligence. Developing emotional literacy starts with being attuned to one’s own emotional experience.

Techniques for Mastering Emotional Literacy

Tip 1: Learn to name and identify your feelings

Everyone should build a personal vocabulary of “feeling words”. Start by compiling a list of words that covers the gamut of human emotions that are most relevant to you in daily life. Take this list and build three-word sentences based on your collection of words. For example, “I feel angry.” Naming a feeling promotes emotional literacy and over time we grasp the full meaning of that emotion. It eliminates presence and deceit in our communication with each other, creating more authentic and meaningful relationships.

American researchers have found that putting feelings into words makes sadness and anger less intense. By talking about negative feelings, the part of the brain responsible for impulse control is activated.

Sometimes just by naming a feeling, we begin to feel it. We help our mind to access the emotional part of the brain where feelings are stored just by naming the feeling. Identifying the feeling by name is essential to a high development of one’s innate emotional processing abilities.

Tip 2: Affirm, value, and validate your feelings

In a poor effort to control our feelings, we often devalue them, relegating them to being fleeting, and hence, unimportant. Many people minimise their feelings, particularly when they are upset, worried or depressed. Such people may be too proud, too stubborn, or too scared to share their true feelings, so they withhold and guard them.

When we do this, we fail to recognise the message behind these feelings that give us further insight. We fail to take advantage of our own emotional tuning forks.

Don’t exaggerate your feelings. Magnifying





them unnecessarily can distort the situation that produced them. Be truthful in how you convey your emotional state.

The ability to express a feeling, also shows the intensity of the feeling. This will communicate the degree to which our needs are being met and our values and beliefs are being upheld. If we either minimise or exaggerate the feeling, we are undermining and distorting reality and the effectiveness of our communication.

Tip 3: Use constructive thoughts to generate positive feelings

You are the creator of your own experience and paying attention to your feelings is the first step. Remember, you are in full control of your emotional life.

How do you focus and take control of negative thoughts?

1. Reframe the situation. Using the example of an overbearing and boorish boss, we can try to reframe a negative description or feeling into a positive one:

slave driver = driven

disorganised = multitasker.

2. Focus on what works—the positive aspects of conflict. Tell yourself: “I am happy and grateful that this boss is strengthening my endurance and teaching me about emotions.”

3. Focus on what you want. Tell yourself: “I am in the process of experiencing a great amount of learning in this place.”

These three steps will help you manage the negative emotions toward colleagues at work, resulting in a mental clean-up of sorts.

Tip 4: Keep a record of your goals and accomplishments

Developing emotional literacy is handling negative and celebrating both small and big accomplishments. The best way to do this is to keep a journal or record of your goals. Set goals for six months, one year, and five years. Make them achievable but challenging enough so that you have to push yourself to accomplish them.

Tip 5: Observe cause and effect of thoughts and feelings

When you have feelings that seem overly strong, take note of what happened before you experienced these emotions. Did you experience a difficult situation earlier that you might be taking out on someone later? Often emotions are triggered by an incident that is not connected to the moment.

Tip 6: Name a feeling

Practise naming a feeling and then naming three or more feelings that are around or under the first. We almost never have only one at a time. For example, I feel disappointed about not being able to attend my grandson's graduation because I treasure moments of pride with the family.

It is unknown to many people that just expressing your feelings and the reason behind those feelings allow the brain to have some kind of release. It does not have to tinker and search for a reason behind those feelings once it has clarity. We can go one step further and that is to ask yourself: “Now that I could not attend the graduation, how do I accept it and move on?”

Emotional literacy involves expressing and being clear about feelings so we can better use those thoughts and feelings to deal with the circumstances. If we do not express ourselves, our minds go into overdrive from regret, pain, and sadness followed by wallowing in self-pity. The destructive spiral then progresses.

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