

THE COMPLETE PERSON

EMOTIONAL HEALTH

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I. Introduction

When God created man, He created him with the ability to *feel*. We call these strong feelings “emotions”. They include such feelings as: fear, anger, hate, love, exhilaration and happiness. Our emotions are part of our physical and mental being. They are like breathing . . . we cannot live without them! They are a normal function of being human. If we deny them or try to stop them from functioning, our entire body – physically and mentally – will be harmed. Although it is harmful for us to repress our emotions, it is just as harmful to express them in an inappropriate manner. How we express our emotions does not just happen. We choose how we want to express them. Usually, our choice is the result of how we were taught by our parents. An example is the expression of anger. When we are angry with someone, we choose how to express it. The healthy way is to tell the other person: “I am angry with you because you did _____.” *Unhealthy* ways would include suppressing our anger, blowing up, screaming, or trying to run away from the person. When we express our emotions in a proper way, we strengthen our mental health and make our environment a better place in which to live. Many people have accepted the idea that they have no control over their lives, much less their emotions. In Proverbs 23:7, Solomon wrote . . .

“For as he thinks within himself, so is he.”

Thus, we are what we think we are! If we think that we have no control over ourselves, we do not. If we think that we are responsible for what we do, we will be responsible for our lives. This includes how we express our emotions. Part of Jesus’ mission to earth was to provide a model for how the perfect, complete man is to live. Jesus lived in the same sinful world in which we live. He experienced the same physical and mental hardships and joys that we experience. As we look at the life of Jesus, we see that He shaped the events around Him instead of allowing the events to shape Him. He was as Hebrews 4:15 attests: “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.” Jesus set the example for us. When we follow His perfect example, we will be able to overcome the hostility of the sinful world in which we live (Romans 8:6, 28 and Philippians 2:5-11). When we follow Jesus, we become *more than conquerors*.

II. The Emotionally Unhealthy Person

A. The Emotionally Unhealthy Person Is Afraid

Fear is one of the main reasons people do not express their feelings or emotions. First John

4:18 tells us . . .

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.”

John is saying that the perfect or complete person is motivated by love. When love motivates us, we have no reason to fear. Then, *what* do we fear? The reason some people fear to express their emotions is because of social rules. All societies have unwritten rules that either encourage or discourage how we express our emotions. Some of the rules are valid and healthy. Others are unhealthy. Rules such as “Don’t get angry” or “Control yourself – don’t get excited” are basically unhealthy. They tell us that it is not normal to get excited or angry. Excitement and anger are some of our most basic emotions. When we deny or suppress them, we become emotionally unhealthy. Why do we fear violating society’s rules? Social rules – especially *unwritten* ones – are more binding than written laws. When we violate them, our society looks upon us as if we were carriers of a horrible disease. And in a way, that is true. Living outside of social rules does not mean you have committed a crime or acted in a harmful manner. It just means ignoring the little rules of life that society has imposed upon us. Examples in our society would be to *not* take a bath every day, to *not* brush your teeth, to wear *shorts* to a formal occasion, to call the President by his *first name*, or for two people to overly show physical affection for each other in public. Usually, a person can get by with violating a social rule ever so often. When a person decides to live beyond the rules of society, he or she is considered eccentric and ignored or considered dangerous and locked away. This fear of censure by society causes people to follow the rules. This is called intimidation.

Another reason that can cause us to fear expressing our emotions is our social role. Society has assigned each person a role. As long as we follow our assigned roles, we are accepted and even praised. Once we try to change how we play our role, society tries to force us back into our “appropriate” pattern. A sales clerk must treat customers with friendliness and submission (“The customer is always right”). What would happen to a sales clerk who greeted the customer with a frown and told him what he could buy? This sales clerk has stepped outside his assigned social role. He will either be fired or forced to apologize to the customer, reverting to his assigned role of friendliness and submission. Once again, the fear of censure keeps people within a role that can be emotionally unhealthy by forcing them to suppress their emotions or to live with artificial ones.

A third reason that we fear to express our emotions is a fear of self-disclosure. All the talk in our society about expressing our emotions is just that . . . *talk*. Usually, the kinds of emotions that we are encouraged to express are either surface, phony, or an attempt by one group to control another group. This deception is easily recognized, but it does not invalidate the real need that we have to express our emotions. It is risky to open oneself up and express one’s real emotions. It takes courage. To refuse to do so will only cause a person to be emotionally crippled. It is only when we have the courage to face our emotions and to express them openly in an appropriate manner that we become emotionally healthy. Finally, one of our fear about expressing our emotions is that often we do not recognize them. So many restrictions have been placed on our emotions that frequently we have lost the ability to feel deeply about something. When we deny or suppress an emotion, our ability to recognize it decreases. This also causes us to be emotionally crippled.

B. The Emotionally Unhealthy Person Demands Security

Life is full of risks. There is no security in it except that which is offered by Jesus Christ. Because we are fallen people who live in a fallen world and associate with other fallen people, life is risky and dangerous. There is no guarantee that when we openly and honestly

express our emotions to others, they will not reject us or use our openness against us. The emotionally unhealthy person refuses to take that chance. He is so insecure within his own self that he cannot allow others to find a possible weakness to use against him. It is only when we want to be emotionally healthy more than being afraid of others that we can express our emotions openly without fear. So what, if someone sees your emotional health as a weakness? *As long as you are secure in your relationship with Jesus Christ and in your strength of character, nobody can ever really harm you.* Do not harm **yourself** out of fear of others. Often an emotionally unhealthy person will act defensively and aggressively even though he really wants peace and harmony in his life and in his relationships. He does this because he is afraid – afraid that unless he is in total control of every situation in which he finds himself – he will be manipulated or looked down upon. He uses fear and anger to keep others in a position of submission. He keeps them at a safe distance. He sees this position as peaceful and harmonious but he knows that it is phony and dangerous.

C. The Emotionally Unhealthy Person Is an Addict

The idea of an addict being “ill” is a concept of the twentieth century. Previously, the term “addiction” meant engaging in a habit – either good or bad. Out of this idea of doing something habitually came the concept that doing anything “habitually” (especially if the results were negative) is a *medical addiction*. People are not born to be addicts (though a new-born may suffer as a result of substances abused during pregnancy by parents). Addiction is the result of a lifetime of faulty behavior and refusal to behave within society’s limitations. Most people do not have just one addiction, but several. It is rather interesting that the explosion of new types of medical addictions began in the 1960’s. The classification of alcoholism as a “disease” by the American Medical Association opened the way for its *treatment* and financed by medical insurance plans. This was the dawning of “The ME Generation” when all of the old social and religious barriers were swept away and replaced with slogans such as “Do your own thing” and “If it feels good, do it.” An emotionally unhealthy person is also a person who has low self-esteem and an over abundance of shame. He is distorted in his thinking and feeling. Instead of seeking a way to become emotionally and psychologically healthy, he tries to find relief for problems by the continuous repeating of some form of self-destructive behavior and loss of control. Addictions do bring some short-term relief. They help the addict cope with situations and feelings that he otherwise could not handle (he thinks). Instead of trying to solve his problems, he numbs them with his substance of choice. Once he temporarily stops his addictive behavior, the numbness wears off. Then his problems return – *full force!* So, he starts the addictive behavior again to numb them. It is a never ending vicious cycle. It will end only when he stops his addiction or his addiction destroys him.

One result of addictions (in the long term) is that problems get worse. A person’s self-esteem will sink lower. His self-control will lessen. His emotional energy will decrease. Instead of making a person stronger and more capable of living a complete and perfect life, the addiction makes him weaker and more dependent. A bizarre result is that the addiction no longer deadens the pain. So, the addict turns to other, stronger addictions.

The addict’s behavior can only be broken when he can rid himself of his shame, raise his self-esteem, and replace his distorted thinking and feeling. This is impossible for a person to do on his own. It happens only when he turns his life over to God. This is not some mystical experience by which God just changes everything. God’s gift of grace saves us (Ephesians 2:8-9). His grace is meaningless to us unless we accept it. To accept God’s grace, we have to make a major reorientation in our thinking, behaving, and feeling. We must be “born again” (John 3:3, 5, 7). We need to express sorrow – true regret – for our past lives. We need to

forgive others for what they have done to us and we need to forgive ourselves. Also, there might be times in which we need to make restitution to some for harm done. All this means that we must repent of our past conduct and want to bring our lives into conformity with God's will. This brings us into contact with God's grace.

III. The Emotionally Healthy Person

A. The Emotionally Healthy Person Is Not Free from Problems

Because we are fallen people and live in a fallen world, we will always have problems. The question is . . . *What will we do with them?* We have two options. One choice is to give in to them and let them control and ruin our lives. The other option is to face and try to solve them. The emotionally unhealthy person gives up. The emotionally healthy person faces his problems.

Although the emotionally healthy person confronts his problems, he may not always be successful in solving them. He might not solve them but he will learn to cope with them. His emotional health will help him adjust and accept his problems. It is like the Serenity Prayer – “Help me accept things I can’t change. Give me courage to change what I can. And, give me wisdom to know the difference.” This person is free of long-term, intense, incapacitating problems.

One point to remember is that many of our problems are brief in nature and related to a definite stressful situation. Remove the stressful situation and the problem is removed. The emotionally healthy person understands this and works to remove the stress.

B. The Emotionally Healthy Person Knows How to Express Emotions Effectively

Failure to express one's emotions effectively leads not only to mental problems but can cause physical ones. There are several guidelines to use in expressing our emotions. The first need is to *recognize* our feelings. One way to do this is to know the physical effects that emotions have on our bodies. When we express strong emotions, our bodies react. When we are embarrassed, often our face will turn red and become warm. At times, we may even stutter. Another guideline is to choose the best language to express emotions. When asked how you physically feel, do not just say that you feel good, great or bad. Express the emotion in words like “My stomach is tied up in knots.” Another way to express your emotions in words is as simply as saying, “I love you.” Still another way to express emotions is by describing what you would like to do such as, “I feel like running away.”

A third guideline is to choose the time and place to express feelings. There are times and places when it is not appropriate to express emotions. When rushing to express emotions, often you will express them inappropriately. The old advice of “counting to ten before speaking” is good. Give yourself time to consider what you say. If you do not, you may regret it later.

A fourth guideline is to accept responsibility for your emotions. Others do not cause your emotions – *You do!* You are reacting to what others say and do. How you react is still your responsibility. If another car stops suddenly in front of you in heavy traffic, how do you react? Will you react rapidly and safely stop or slam into them and blame them? Are you frustrated, angry, or do you accept it? It all depends on your attitude.

C. The Emotionally Healthy Person Creates Strong Relationships

The most important relationship that a person can create is the one between himself and Jesus Christ! He will enthrone Christ on the throne of his heart as his Lord and Master. In the

Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told the crowd: "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24). We have a choice. We can either serve God or Satan. There is no middle ground. It is only when we decide to serve God that we can become the type of people that He wants us to be. We will accept God's will. We will be like the people of James 4:15 who said, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that." We will join David when he wrote in Psalm 23:1 – "The Lord is my Shepherd." Regardless of public opinion and peer pressure, we will want to do God's will (Matthew 6:33-34 and Romans 8:28). An emotionally healthy person creates and maintains strong relationships. Love is the foundation for all relationships (Matthew 22:39). If we love others as we love ourselves, we will treat them as we want to be treated (Matthew 7:1-5, 12). A third relationship is the one we have with ourselves. This is an extremely important relationship. Jesus says that this is the model for our relationship with others (Matthew 7:1-5; 12:22-39). If we do not love God or ourselves, how can we expect to love others? We cannot. In the Bible, it is love that binds us together with God, with others, and with ourselves.

D. The Emotionally Healthy Person Is More than a Conqueror

One of the myths of the American experience is that of independent, rugged individualism. It says that we need nobody. We can do it by pulling ourselves up by our boot straps. It is just a myth. We need others. The Bible tells us that man cannot live on his own. He needs God to guide him (Jeremiah 10:23; Matthew 4:4). He needs other people to help and comfort him (Genesis 2:18; Philippians 4:10-19). One of the great paradoxes of Christianity is that of salvation. Jesus says that we gain it only when we lose ourselves in Him and His cross (Matthew 16:24-26). Christianity is about giving. God gave His Son. Jesus gave His life. We are to give so others might come to know and accept Jesus (Matthew 5:19). Giving is so important that Jesus is quoted in Acts 20:35 saying, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." When we live the type of life Jesus modeled, there is no room for fear and anger. Love casts out fear and hides the wrongs done to us (First Peter 4:8). When we come to Christ, we gain true freedom (John 8:32). It does not mean that we will not suffer in this life. It means that we can look at life and its sufferings in a new light. Rather than feared, suffering is to be considered a long term benefit (Hebrews 5:8; First Peter 3:14, 17). Freedom allows us to place our faith and trust in God so we can live on day at a time, knowing that He will provide for us (Matthew 6:24-34; James 4:13). When we live in Jesus Christ, we become complete, perfect, mature persons. The pain and suffering of the world shrink into nothing. We have become more than conquerors (Romans 8:37).

IV. Conclusion

God did not just create us as *physical* beings. He created us with the ability to think and feel. Our emotions are part of what makes us human. When we try to deny or use them improperly, we face the prospect of becoming emotionally ill. It is only when we accept our emotions and express them in the way that God meant for us, that we are emotionally healthy.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Name _____ Date _____

Address _____

1. Emotions are a natural function of being
 - (a) human
 - (b) mineral
 - (c) liquid
 - (d) alien
2. Explaining what one did that provoked you to anger is
 - (a) unhealthy
 - (b) useless
 - (c) healthy
 - (d) stupid
3. One main reason we do not express our feelings is
 - (a) speech impediments
 - (b) fear
 - (c) we have none
 - (d) all of these
4. An "unhealthy" rule is *Don't get*
 - (a) *angry*
 - (b) *food*
 - (c) *sleep*
 - (d) *anything*
5. The many restrictions on "emotions" may prevent us from
 - (a) trouble
 - (b) becoming indebted
 - (c) paying off debts
 - (d) feeling deeply about something
6. Life is full of
 - (a) happiness
 - (b) laughter
 - (c) risks
 - (d) all of these
7. Long-term addiction causes a person's self-esteem to
 - (a) sink
 - (b) soar
 - (c) climb
 - (d) escalate
8. When we give in to our problems, they
 - (a) vanish
 - (b) control and ruin our lives
 - (c) vanish
 - (d) disappear
9. Who is responsible for causing our emotions?
 - (a) The government
 - (b) Family
 - (c) Debt collectors
 - (d) Ourselves.
10. Long-term addiction leads one's emotional energy to
 - (a) increase
 - (b) mellow out
 - (c) decrease
 - (d) none of these