

Are All Emotions O.K.?

by Beth DeVane

“Each and every emotion you have is legitimate.” So say many counselors. Can this be true? Is it really O.K. to feel angry, hostile, fearful, anxious, lonely, harassed, and all those other emotions we consider negative and counterproductive?

In a parenting workshop, dealing mainly with family communication skills which I have taught off and on over a period of several years, one of the sessions traditionally opens with the statement, “All feelings are O.K.” and I agree. The point is that unless we recognize and accept all of our emotions, as well as those of our children, they will act as barriers to open communication between us.

People don’t easily accept this because they are used to thinking that certain emotions are bad and shouldn’t be expressed. But experience shows that when we allow ourselves and our children to express negative feelings, they usually dissipate. Like opening a boil, when you take away the pressure the pain begins to subside. Also, it is vital to a child’s self-esteem that he be accepted for who he is and not for how he acts and feels. That’s how a child learns to accept himself.

In these workshops, we emphasize that the problem is not negative feelings, but how they are handled. If these feelings are denied, they can become festering infections deep inside the mind. Later, they are bound to come out in many different ways: in hostile behavior, in nightmares, or in psychological and physical illnesses. Depression is one of the most common results of feelings denied and repressed. Other people, instead of keeping in their feelings, lash out at whoever comes along, letting loose their resentments on innocent bystanders. Expressing negative feelings without regard for others can be as harmful as denying those feelings.

While I taught all this to others and really believed it was true with my mind, a voice inside me kept saying, “It is bad to be angry and to be fearful. It is good to be calm and unafraid.” I found myself struggling with my feelings.

As I struggled, the deep spiritual truth behind the psychological truth began to emerge. I realized that God is in all feelings and that there is another way to use these so-called “negative” emotions. I realized that when I have these feelings I can turn to the Father within and say in faith, “Thank you. Thanks for the anger, the irritation, the frustration, the loneliness, and the fear.”

As I see good rather than evil in these feelings, the Father begins to show me something of His plan. God made every part of us, including the emotional part. And He said, “It is good. It is very good.” I have found that when I say, “Thanks for the loneliness,” He shows me someone to reach out to, as Him. Without the loneliness, I never would have bothered. When I say, “Thanks for the frustration,” He shows me the areas that need His solution rather than my own. Without the frustration I never would have sought His wonderful resolution of the problem.

What about fear? When I say, “Thanks for the fear,” immediately I am shown someone unlovely to love—often the person behind the fear—a person I would never have wanted to love. “*Perfect love [God’s love flowing through me] casts out fear*” (1 John 4:18). An acknowledgment of my fear not only drives me to love, it drives me to faith. It shows me where I am accepting the lie of my lack of faith, and gives me the perfect opportunity to draw on the One who is faith in me, strengthening me.

“Thank You, Lord, for the irritation which reveals those things about me that I want to see gone.” Maybe my irritation with someone is God saying, “Here’s someone that I want you to pay attention to. They need attention.” Or perhaps I need rest and quiet to restore my awareness of my union with Christ.

Anger and hurt feelings frequently reveal that someone is hurting. Instead of anger turned inward or outward, how about anger turned to love? How does anger become love? Are you angry at the person, or their actions? Why? Are they hurting you or themselves? Perhaps the most loving thing is an anger that will impress on them the foolishness of their actions.

If I am immersed in depression, I ask myself, “Is there a little self-pity here?” Maybe the Father is nudging me to break away and have some fun, for without fun I won’t really be whole and all that God means me to be.

Often, our negative feelings are God reminding us to “Get on with it. Move in here, reach out there. Be Me in My world.”

Our precious Father leaves nothing to chance. Although we may choose to ignore Him, He is truly like a dear parent giving reminders of work to be done. We can say, “Thank You, Father, for the tap on the shoulder in the form of feelings, even the painful ones. They are effective reminders that Your world needs You. And thank You, too, Father, for the struggles within that You use to bring to our attention the truth of who we are in Christ.”