

## A Theory of Emotions: Part Three (Emotional Masters)

Jason Bauche, M. Sc., Registered Psychologist

My recent articles for this newsletter have focused on a theory of emotions. The basic tenets of this theory are that emotions are a universal and vital human experience, that all emotions are valuable (i.e., adaptive) because they provide essential information about our experiences, that each emotion identifies a “need” from the world around us, and that all feelings (even unpleasant ones) must be acknowledged and expressed in order for us to get our needs met. This article will extend this theory partially into practice, focusing on strategies to accurately label and effectively regulate emotions.

Our emotional responses (how we express our feelings) are heavily influenced by our past experiences (more accurately, how we interpret our experiences). An idea more central to this article is that how we choose to express our emotions (and we do *choose* how to respond) serves to further influence our perceptions, our behaviour, and how others respond to us, thereby helping to shape our environment. Since our personal world is significantly influenced by our emotional responses, it is vital that we choose our responses carefully. Emotional Masters know how each emotion “feels” (i.e., they are self-aware), they accurately label the feeling, they know that each emotion is associated with a different need, and they consciously choose a response intended to get the need met.

The keys to choosing our emotional responses wisely involve *emotional self-awareness* and *emotional regulation*. An astute reader will notice that I use the term emotional regulation and not emotional control. I do not advocate *controlling* (i.e., trying to manipulate, restrain, or suppress) feelings, which I believe is often impossible, since our “true” feelings have a way of coming out in the end. Controlling emotions is also almost always unwise, since pretending we don’t feel something can be detrimental to our wellbeing. Emotional regulation, on the other hand, involves actively acknowledging the presence of a feeling but modulating its intensity so that we can rationally choose a response that will (hopefully) result in the “need” of the emotion being met.

In order for us to choose the “best” response to a feeling, not only must we be able to regulate its intensity, we must also be able to identify the “correct” emotion. This is where emotional self-awareness comes into play. People who are emotionally self-aware are not afraid to turn inwards when an emotion is experienced and ask, “What is this I’m feeling?” even when the feeling is unpleasant. They know the subtle, idiosyncratic difference between their experience of irritation, frustration, and anger; between their experience of sadness, grief, and regret. Furthermore, emotionally self-aware people have a rich and varied emotional vocabulary. That is, not only are they aware of how each emotion feels, they have words to identify the myriad of emotions they sense in themselves.

Building emotional self-awareness and emotional regulation skills has begun to infiltrate much of my work with clients. I have found it helpful to assign tasks that require clients to periodically engage in an “emotional self-scan” during their day – each time, simply asking “What is going on in my body?” “What am I *feeling*?” This, it is hoped, helps to increase their awareness of their distinctive emotional experiences. In conjunction, I have found it helpful to use a “Feeling Words” list to increase clients’ emotional vocabulary and bring to their awareness that there are important differences between emotions that we often “lump together” or mislabel. This, it is hoped, helps people to understand that they aren’t angry, they’re irritated; they aren’t sad, they feel betrayed, etc. I use a list that categorizes feelings as “Pleasant” versus “Unpleasant or Difficult,” (rather than “Positive” or “Negative”) to highlight that all emotions, even ones that are

not pleasant to experience are valuable because they identify something we need from our world. It is not important that the vocabulary list be exhaustive (there are far too many human emotions to even envision a list that encompasses the breadth of what we are capable of feeling). It is just important that the list is varied enough to expand our language and highlight differences between various feelings.

Meanwhile, James Gross (2007) and his colleagues believe that there are five ways in which you can influence your emotional reactions. These are all integral parts of my work in assisting clients to become Emotional Masters. The five methods of emotional regulation are:

1. Decide, in as much as it is possible, which situations to put yourself in, attempting to avoid those that tend to evoke difficult feelings and “overreactions.”
2. If you find yourself in an emotionally charged situation (which is inevitable), consciously modify your response (e.g., relax your jaw during a fight with your partner; modulate your voice tone when you communicate your irritation with a coworker).
3. Direct your attention away from a “too intense” emotional event (e.g., take a break from a frustrating work assignment; use appropriately-timed humour during an argument to diffuse the unpleasant emotions involved).
4. Change your outlook by engaging in cognitive reappraisal (e.g., when you are assigned yet another work task by your boss you can interpret this task as being assigned by someone who has no idea of your heavy workload, or as being assigned by someone who sees you as a trusted and valued employee).
5. Take a deep breath. Our brain relies on oxygen to function properly and the emotional centres of our brain are activated when we do not get oxygen to the parts of our brains that are responsible for rational thought and behaviour.

With practice and support, we can all become Emotional Masters – at least some of the time.

Gross, J. J. (Ed.). (2007). *Handbook of emotional regulation*. New York: Guilford Press.

*Jason is a Registered Psychologist providing assessment and counselling services at Eckert Centre. Jason makes a unique contribution to the Centre through his work counselling those with addiction, those with marital difficulties, as well as through his skill in career assessments.*