

The Christian and Mental Health:

Part 3: Emotions

In this study we will consider the broad topic of our emotions. Every human experiences emotions, though not all in the same way or to the same intensity. God has created us as whole beings and we all act, think and feel all of the time.

The Bible is filled with emotions and very often these are ascribed to God Himself (e.g. His settled fury against sin in **Nahum 1** or His delight over His people in **Zephaniah 3**). Yet whilst it is accurate to say that God feels, His emotions are to be understood by analogy to our own, not equivalence. God's anger, for instance, shares some similar features with ours, but also significant differences.

A) What are emotions

Emotions come in a very wide range, and we can experience multiple different emotions throughout the day (and even at the same time). In broad terms we could speak of emotions as being internal responses to our interpretation of the situation/event around us.

Emotions are internal – we experience emotions both through feeling certain shifts in our mood as well as bodily sensations, such as increased heart-rate, breathlessness or discomfort in our digestive system (“butterflies” in the stomach).

Emotions are responses – they are a reaction that occurs and we are moved (note “e-motion” – there is movement).

Emotions come from our interpretation of the situation/event around us. This is important to note, as the emotion experienced is never directly caused by a particular situation/event. Rather, it is how we perceive and understand that situation/event. This explains why people can experience the same situation/event with very differing emotional responses. This difference can be influenced by context,

upbringing, personality and culture, but ultimately it is grounded in fundamental beliefs.

Though we may speak of positive emotions (joy, gladness, hope) and negative emotions (anger, grief, frustration), all emotions serve a purpose and exist for a reason as we live as God's creatures in a fallen world. For instance, Moses was moved by his anger to deal with the awful situation of the golden calf ([Exodus 32](#)), and Ezra was moved by his grief to lead the unfaithful returning exiles in prayer of confession ([Ezra 9-10](#)).

B) Where do emotions come from?

The Bible uses the metaphor of the heart for describing the thinking, feeling and willing centre of a person. Jesus explicitly says that not only our words ([Luke 6:45](#)) but also our thoughts, acts and feelings ([Mark 7:20-23](#)) all originate from the heart. It's thus at the level of the heart that we interpret the situations/events around us and this triggers our emotions.

Jesus speaks of the heart having "*treasure*" ([Matthew 6:21](#), [Luke 6:45](#)) – that is, our hearts incline towards certain things, and incline away from other things. These inclinations are sometimes called affections, and they determine the course of emotions. For instance, a determined preoccupation with being liked will mean that a person responds to any criticism with great discouragement. And a love of being in control will mean that a person responds to sudden unexpected changes with anger and frustration.

Our emotions therefore reflect what our hearts value, and also the degree to which it is valued. A brief self-examination of relative emotional experiences (i.e. of two situations that brought my joy, for instance, which one brought more?) will soon highlight the disordered desires of our hearts.

C) What do perfect emotions look like?

In the incarnation the second Person of the Trinity assumed a true human nature, becoming exactly like us except without sin. Jesus therefore experienced the full range of human emotions. He displayed anger (**Mark 3:5**), compassion (**Luke 7:13**), joy (**Luke 10:21**) and deep sorrow (**Luke 19:41**), just to name a few.

Jesus wasn't stoic; nor was He ever controlled by His emotions. His emotional life was perfect in every way because His heart was perfect in every way. He perfectly loved good and hated evil. For the Christian united to Christ, we long for the character of the Lord Jesus to be produced in our lives. Becoming more Christlike means not only speaking and acting like Jesus, but feeling like Him too.

D) What do we do with our emotions

1. Don't ignore them

It's easy to fall into one of two extremes when it comes to the subject of our emotions – either to esteem them with the greatest importance and follow them wholly, or else to consider them relatively insignificant and suppress them. Neither extreme is healthy not helpful.

We should, of course, not be ruled by our emotions, but neither should we ignore them. God deliberately made us to be emotional and we should have concern for how we feel. It can be helpful to think of our emotions as data to be analysed and understood.

2. Interact with them

Whilst obsessive introspection is unhelpful, some level of interaction with our emotions is good and right. When emotions are felt intensely it can lead to a sense of being overwhelmed which greatly reduces our capacity to function. Merely giving ourselves the time to articulate our feelings and to seek to understand them in light of our circumstances can be a helpful way of reducing our distress.

Emotions can be something of a gauge, highlighting the existence of underlying problems. These could be physical (e.g. an unsustainable lifestyle or illness), relational or spiritual.

Normalising is a helpful way of interacting with another person's emotions in a counselling situation. This involves merely the assurance to the other person that their emotional response is understandable, given their situation.

3. Interrogate them

Emotions reflect something of our thinking and our core beliefs. In times of heightened emotion we may be prone to various forms of false-reasoning (such as catastrophizing, over-generalising, mind-reading and so on) and this needs to be confronted with biblical truth.

Beneath this the emotions reflect the inclinations of our hearts and can reveal the things in our life that have become more important than the Lord Jesus Christ. It is at the level of the heart that we need God to work by His Holy Spirit and through His Word to progressively sanctify us and make us more like Jesus. This will lead to sanctified emotions.

E) Conclusion

To experience emotions is a fundamental component of being human. Our emotions were designed by God and therefore should not be ignored by us. However, in our fallen condition our emotions reveal the distorted nature of our hearts. As we interact with our emotions and identify our hidden idols, God works within us to bring about sanctifying change from the inside out.

F) Useful Resources

Beynon, Graham *"Emotions: living life in colour"*

Haddow, Catherine *"Emotions: Mirrors of the heart"*