

HOW TO HANDLE NEGATIVE FEELINGS

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When was the last time you had a negative feeling? A month ago? If you're normal you regularly experience some painful feelings. These are sometimes difficult to handle, but God has given us clear principles of dealing with them. The purpose of this paper is to help you better understand your negative feelings and handle them well as God desires.

To be better in touch with your feelings as you study this, you may want to stop now and go through the "Negative Feelings Checklist" on page seven. Note how often you experience each one, using the scale at the bottom.

Myths About Feelings

Here are three of the most common myths about feelings. As you read these, ask yourself if you believe any of them, and search the Scriptures to find what God has to say about them.

1. "All negative feelings are sinful." Many believe that all negative feelings come from the lower nature. But feelings are God-given capacities. God is a feeling God, and we are made in his image. Jesus experienced painful feelings such as anger and sadness (Mark 3:5, John 11:35,38, 12:27). He experienced deeply distressed, troubled and sorrowful (Mark 14:33,34). Proverbs 29:11 says that both fools and wise people get angry. How they handle it determines which kind of person they are. See Ephesians 4:26, 1 Samuel 11:6 and Numbers 16:15.

2. "Feelings are neither right nor wrong, they just are." Feelings are not sinful in themselves, but at times they may come from sin in our lives. For example, selfishness

may result in anger, or lack of faith may be at the root of inappropriate fear. See Numbers 11:1-6 for an illustration. Let's look at three situations:

a. Appropriate feeling: You're walking at night and some huge dog lunges toward you, snarling and showing his teeth. Your fear is appropriate! In fact, it is a God-given survival mechanism.

b. Insufficient stimulus: You're walking at night and some little puppy runs out to greet you, but you run away in terror.

c. Imaginary stimulus: You don't go out at all, because you're afraid a dog might be out there.

Ask yourself: "Do I have a habit of reacting negatively to insufficient or imaginary stimuli?" If so, the answer lies in resolving the attitudes or other problems which bring about the feelings.

3. "Feelings are adequate guides to action." Some believe they should or must act out their feelings. For example, if you feel angry, it's only normal and healthy to act angry, regardless of how it affects others. This myth is common in our culture, but it contradicts God's Word and hinders dealing effectively with feelings.

Ways of Mishandling Feelings

There are two main ways of poorly handling negative feelings. Both are contrary to Scripture and thus ineffective. They are usually based on the above misconceptions. Ask yourself what you tend to do.

1. Deny them. Some of us have been taught as children that feelings were “bad” so we deny them. It’s possible to bury feelings, but we bury them alive, and they will come back to haunt us! They never just vanish into thin air. They must come out in some way. Some people project them onto other people. Others save up little hurts, angers and fears until they have enough to “cash them in” on a temper tantrum, major depression or severe anxiety reaction. Buried feelings sometimes come back to life through illness. Here are two ways of denying our feelings:

a. Saying to others, “I don’t feel anything.” It’s a conscious decision to bury a feeling. This may be ok when the situation doesn’t warrant expression or action, but doing this alone is never enough. It leaves the feeling buried alive, to be resurrected later unless it is resolved.

b. Saying to ourselves, “I don’t feel anything.” This can become an automatic response, based on a long habit pattern of suppressing certain feelings. We can grow out of this habit pattern little by little, by accepting our feelings, asking the Lord to help us become more aware of what we feel, and by a conscious effort to follow biblical principles in resolving our feelings.

Both ways of denying feelings are basically dishonest. They are attempts to deceive others and sometimes ourselves. See Proverbs 10:6,11 and 18.

2. Act them out. Acting out feelings gives the lower nature power to rule over us. It is Satan’s lie that we must act them out. Our culture constantly emphasizes the idea that venting emotions is the only healthy way. But this blatantly denies personal responsibility and directly contradicts God’s Word.

Proverbs 29:11 says, “A fool gives full vent to his anger... “See James 1:20. God’s Word never encourages us to let feelings be guides to action. We are to act lovingly no matter what we feel (Luke 6:27,28). The world sees only two ways: deny them or act them out. But God shows us a better way.

Biblical Concepts for Handling Feelings

Our Designer and Maker fully understands us, and He has given us an operating manual, with many examples and commands related to our feelings. He wants us to be able to control and resolve them, and has told us how to do so. Following are six biblical steps in the process. God’s way of handling feelings is characterized by honesty and by actively dealing with them, not by passively hoping they might go away by themselves. God makes it clear that we must do something, and not try to ignore our feelings.

1. Be honest with yourself. Psalm 51:6 says, “Surely you desire truth in the inner parts.” Jeremiah 17:9 says that the heart is deceitful above all things. Whom does it deceive? Ourselves first! Honesty with self is absolutely necessary; we can’t resolve our feelings without it. This involves three specific steps:

a. Become fully aware of the feeling. Let yourself actually feel it, without trying to ignore or bury it. This may sound strange, but some people do everything possible to avoid feeling uncomfortable emotions. This only drives the feelings deeper. We need permission to feel them as deeply as need be if we are to resolve them. See 2 Corinthians 1:8,9 for an example in Paul’s life.

b. Put it into words. Give it a name. When you're struggling with what feeling you're experiencing, look over the "Negative Feelings Checklist" for ideas.

c. Try to identify why you feel it. Write down just what bothers you and why, as specifically as you can. What external and internal causes might there be? Often feelings come from more than one source. These three steps alone keep us from burying our feelings, and enable us to follow through on the other five steps. We can't be more honest with God than we are with ourselves.

2. Be honest with God. Tell God what you are feeling, as completely as you can. Psalm 32:1_5 illustrates how important it is to tell God everything. Although a particular feeling such as anger, fear or frustration may not be sin in itself, it can very easily cause us to sin if we don't go to God with it immediately. For example, we can take a neutral capacity for anger and pervert it, thus making us hot-tempered and quick to become angry at the slightest provocation (Proverbs 15:18 and 29:11,22).

The Word says much about being honest with God about our feelings. Psalm 3:4 and 6:6,8 are examples of David's honesty. We are commanded to pour out our heart before Him (Psalm 62:8). This should be done aloud or in writing whenever possible. Here are some reasons for doing this:

a. It gives us opportunity to confess and obtain cleansing of any sin related to the feelings (1 John 1:9).

b. As we are honest with God, we can "cast our burden on Him" (Psalm 55:22) and find His sustaining power. Do you have this kind of friendship with your Father? God is

a great resource as we cast our feelings on Him and find that He helps neutralize them. A negative feeling may not be sin in itself, but it may be sin to consciously hold on to it. We are to put away negative feelings (Colossians 3:8). One way is to give them to God (Lamentations 3:49,55,57).

c. This process helps change our focus from us to God. As we focus our minds on Him in faith, He gives peace (Isaiah 26:3 and Philippians 4:6,7).

3. Be honest with others. Please read Ephesians 4:25_27. Dishonesty with others, especially about feelings, gives Satan a foothold in our lives, to harm us and our relationships. Have you ever said, "I'm not upset/afraid/angry" when you really were?

If someone continues to offend or hurt us we must go and tell him or her (Matthew 18:15). If it only happens once we can often resolve our feelings without going to the person. But if not, we must go and talk it out. Our relationship with God and ourselves cannot be right if we refuse to try to resolve our conflicts with others. Compare Galatians 5:22,23 with Hebrews 12:15. A root of bitterness so easily chokes out the fruit of God's Spirit in our lives. Then instead of the fruit of love, joy and peace will grow the weeds of hatred, depression and anxiety.

Even when another person isn't directly involved it often helps to share our struggles with someone who cares, as long as our motive isn't to put others down. It helps to share feelings of anxiety, fear, guilt, depression and even anger. Another person can help bear the burden by listening, caring and giving ideas on how to resolve it (Galatians 6:2). But beware of sharing with others instead of the Lord (1 Peter 5:7). We also

have a responsibility to help others resolve their feelings toward us (Matthew 5:23,24).

4. Forgive if someone has hurt or offended you. Forgiving others is not optional in the Christian life. It is an absolute necessity. See Colossians 3:13, Matthew 6:14,15 and Mark 11:25,26. Matt. 18:21_35 shows how important this is to God.

Biblical forgiveness has three parts: 1) to grant free pardon for an offense or debt, 2) to give up all claim on account of it, and 3) to cease to feel resentment against the person. God gives us His power to forgive in this way.

See the article, "Thoughts on Forgiving" by the author for a discussion of this issue.

5. Seek to resolve the cause. The causes of our feelings may be immediate or remote. You may clearly see an immediate, appropriate cause of your feelings, or the cause may be in the past and possibly unclear. The cause is often internal, but a person or event triggers the feeling. Take for example a person who is terrified of heights. The height doesn't cause the fear; it only triggers it. Something unresolved inside the person causes it. We often focus on the trigger and avoid looking at the cause.

a. Immediate causes. When a person is doing something that is causing your feelings, Step 3 is a key step in resolving them. Before talking with him, ask God to reveal anything in you that might be provoking him. Confess to the person any wrong attitudes or actions, and ask his forgiveness. Then tell him what he is doing to hurt or offend you, how you feel because of it, and what you want him to do differently. Do everything possible to seek reconciliation. See Matthew

5:23,24.

If your feelings are not brought on by someone, take a careful look at possible causes in you or your situation. Ask God to reveal anything you can legitimately do to change yourself or the situation to resolve the problem. Get godly counsel to help you better understand yourself, the situation, and ways to resolve it. Sometimes you can do nothing to resolve the cause. It may resolve itself, or you may have to live with it and rely on the Lord to heal your feelings as you apply the other five principles outlined here.

b. Remote causes. If a little event triggers a big feeling, or if the cause isn't clear, chances are the cause is remote. Perhaps feelings you've buried are coming back to haunt you. The cause could come from other sources, such as negative attitudes, unfulfilled expectations, deep hurts from the past, destructive self-talk, stress, or physical problems. If you often experience damaging feelings but don't know why, you may want to seek Christian counseling.

6. Act contrary to your feelings. A biblical key to overcoming feelings is to act contrary to those very feelings, even though you don't feel like it. This is especially helpful when another person is involved and you're working through a decision to forgive. However, if the person continues to hurt you, you still must go to him or her and try to resolve the conflict. Once this is done and you have made a decision to forgive, you must engage in loving actions toward him or her. This does not make you a hypocrite! Your loving actions, though inconsistent with your feelings, are totally consistent with your desire to be what God wants you to be. Don't wait for your feelings to change before acting! It's always easier to act your way into new

feelings than to feel your way into new acting.

The very first time anger was recorded in the Bible, God laid down this principle for handling it. See Genesis 4:5_7 (NASB): “The Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up?’” If we do not do well, “sin is crouching at the door.” But we master sin through right action. Ephesians 4:26,27 indicate that timing is vital. The longer we wait, the more difficult feelings are to handle without sinning.

It helps to list actions that are contrary to different negative feelings. When others have hurt you, include actions which show your love and concern for them. Ask yourself, “What would I like him or her to do if the situation were reversed?” You might bake or buy her favorite pie, write a note, invite her over for a visit, or offer to help in some way. If you can’t think of anything to do, begin by praying for her and asking God to bless her (Luke 6:27,28 and Romans 12:14,17,20,21).

If you’re depressed, anxious or angry, acknowledge it and pour out your feelings to the Lord. Then try praising and thanking Him for everything you can think of. Your feelings should soon begin to come into alignment with your words. Eph. 5:20 says “Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Aren’t you glad it doesn’t say, “feeling thankful?” If you don’t feel like thanking Him, tell Him so, but go ahead and do it anyway, as an act of obedience. Notice how often David’s feelings changed as he praised God in the Psalms.

Conclusion

God created us to be controlled not by feelings, but by His Spirit. He has given us resources to live lives free from their power, and the principles we need to appropriate His power to be free. Make these principles a daily part of your life and enjoy the freedom to which He has called us (Galatians 5:1 and John 8:31,32).

Suggestions for Further Study

This paper has barely scratched the surface of God’s Word in the area of feelings. Here are a few suggestions for in_depth studies in the Word, if you want to discover more for yourself:

1. Study David’s Psalms, to discover ways he expressed his feelings to God, e.g., 3:4, 4:1, 5:1, 6:6_8 and 42:4.
2. Discover the many principles in Proverbs for handling your own and others’ emotions, e.g., 10:12, 14:17, 15:1 and 29:11.
3. Read through Paul’s letters and discover how he talked about his negative and positive feelings. He discussed over 30 different emotions! See how many you can find. How did he react to them?
4. Study commands and examples related to acting contrary to emotions, e.g. Luke 6:27,28, Romans 12:14,17,20,21 and Habakkuk 3:17,18.
5. Learn about Jesus’ painful feelings and how he handled them. Especially study how he handled his feelings about going to the cross. You’ll find that He followed each of the six steps outlined here.

NEGATIVE FEELINGS CHECKLIST

- | | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. afraid | 35. envious | 69. pessimistic |
| 2. agony, in | 36. exasperated | 70. perplexed |
| 3. alarmed | 37. frantic | 71. pressured |
| 4. alienated | 38. frustrated | 72. provoked |
| 5. angry | 39. furious | 73. regretful |
| 6. anxious | 40. grieved | 74. rejected |
| 7. appalled | 41. grief_stricken | 75. remorseful |
| 8. apathetic | 42. guilty | 76. ridiculed |
| 9. apprehensive | 43. heartbroken | 77. repulsed |
| 10. awkward | 44. hopeless | 78. repulsive |
| 11. bewildered | 45. horrified | 79. resentful |
| 12. burdened | 46. humiliated | 80. sad |
| 13. cheated | 47. hurt | 81. shameful |
| 14. confused | 48. hysterical | 82. shocked |
| 15. cowardly | 49. immobilized | 83. sorry |
| 16. crushed | 50. inadequate | 84. sorry for myself |
| 17. cut off from others | 51. incompetent | 85. sorrowful |
| 18. defeated | 52. indignant | 86. spiteful |
| 19. dejected | 53. inferior | 87. terrified |
| 20. depressed | 54. insane | 88. threatened |
| 21. deprived | 55. insecure | 89. torn up |
| 22. deserving punishment | 56. irritated | 90. troubled |
| 23. desperate | 57. jittery | 91. unappreciated |
| 24. despondent | 58. lonely | 92. uncertain of others |
| 25. devastated | 59. manipulated | 93. uncertain of myself |
| 26. disappointed in others | 60. misunderstood | 94. uptight |
| 27. disappointed in myself | 61. offended | 95. used by others |
| 28. discouraged | 62. oppressed | 96. unsettled |
| 29. disheartened | 63. out of control | 97. vilified |
| 30. disgusted | 64. overlooked | 98. victimized |
| 31. disillusioned | 65. overwhelmed | 99. weary of living |
| 32. dissatisfied | 66. panic-stricken | 100. weepy |
| 33. downhearted | 67. paralyzed | 101. wishy-washy |
| 34. embarrassed | 68. persecuted | |

- 1. rarely or never**
- 2. occasionally**
- 3. often**
- 4. most of the time**

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