

Facing Feelings by Carolyn Swearingen, Ph.D.

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I have recently been reflecting on the importance of feelings- more specifically, the power feelings can have over us when we deny, repress, or disregard them in our lives. So often we are afraid to experience the more difficult emotions which life brings us- anger, sadness, grief, frustration, helplessness, etc. But I have noticed with so many of my clients at the California Counseling Institute that when we deny our feelings they become transformed into other, often more intense feelings (such as depression and chronic anxiety) or problematic behavior patterns (addiction, rigidity, compulsivity). Thus it may be helpful to explore here what emotions are, why they are important to attenuate to, and potential consequences of either ignoring or repressing them.

Emotions are simply energy in motion. They allow us to monitor our basic needs, give us information about ourselves, and provide us with energy to act. They are an important source of individual power. They also inform us of what is important to us in our relationships, help us take a clear position on important life issues, and assist us in clarifying limits around what is acceptable and tolerable to us as individuals.

Because some emotions can be difficult and painful to face, many of us try to avoid or ignore our emotional world. What are the ramifications of not facing and exploring our feelings? In my experience as a therapist I have witnessed how the failure to attend to our emotional experiences can greatly impair our experience of self, our sense of esteem and worth, and our ability to be intimate with others.

Feelings do not go away simply because we want them to. Rather, they typically grow in intensity and/or transform into needs for something else, such as alcohol, food, drugs, or control. Indeed, most of our maladaptive coping behaviors are due to avoidance of legitimate pain. Examples of maladaptive coping behaviors include addiction, codependency, excessive need for control, eating disorders, obsessions and compulsions, and perfectionism. Typically these behaviors become enacted in an effort to avoid, alter, or escape from our underlying feelings.

In contrast, adaptive coping responses to painful feelings include crying, journaling, talking to loved ones, listening to music, moderate exercise, and creative expression, among others. Many of us may be reluctant to face our feelings by ourselves and may not feel able to discuss them with others in our lives. This is why many people find counseling so helpful, because it allows you the structure, support, and guidance of an experienced professional that many of us need for deeper self exploration.

Regardless of how you begin or continue your own journey, I encourage you to keep in mind that by working on yourself you are providing a stronger foundation for developing intimate and gratifying personal relationships as well as a more profound sense of self and connection to your inner wisdom.