

## Emotions in Therapy

Venting strong, negative emotion—usually called catharsis—is nearly always a dead end. More than that, most of us are wary of strong emotions. Emotions have traditionally been seen, by philosophers like René Descartes, for example, as part of our primitive animal nature and, therefore, not to be trusted. Reason, by contrast, has long been thought to reflect our higher spiritual self. In neuroscientific terms, the implication is that we're at our best when we live out of our prefrontal cortex and leave our limbic brain behind. More specifically, emotion is often associated with disorganization and loss of control. As Latin author Publilius Syrus, known for his maxims, wrote in the first century B.C., "The sage will rule his feelings; the fool will be their slave."

All this is now changing. We're in the midst of a revolution, as far as emotion is concerned. Antonio Damasio, one of the great scholars in the emotion field, notes that this revolution began in the 1990s, when the inherent "irrationality" of emotion began to be questioned. We're now at the point where emotion—the apparently crazy, irresponsible sleazebag of the psyche—has been identified as an inherently organizing force, essential to survival and the foundation of key elements of civilized society, such as moral judgment and empathy. Emotion shapes and organizes our experience and our connection to others. It readies us for specific actions; it's the great motivator. As the Latin root of emotion, *movere* (to move) suggests, strong feelings literally move us to approach, to avoid, to act.

Way before this emotion revolution, many of us, therapists included, accepted that there was more to emotion than simply learning to control it—that directly working with emotion was somehow central to relationships and the task of therapy. We recognized that old Publilius was wrong: it's not always good to control your emotions rigidly, and it's not always foolish to listen to them! The idea that some kind of "corrective emotional experience" was necessary for any kind of effective psychotherapy was repeated endlessly, at least in the more dynamic psychotherapies. But exactly what the key elements of this experience are and how we get there with our clients remains difficult to define.

It makes sense that emotions are especially intense in difficult interactions with loved ones. Emotion and emotional signals are the central organizing forces in intimate relationships and changes in emotional responses, such as increased love and tenderness, are hard to generate if we don't work with emotion directly, thus Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) uses emotion as a positive force and powerful tool for shaping growth in couples and families.

It's self-evident that emotion is captivating. Research tells us that when therapists help clients deepen emotion, clients attain better outcomes in therapy. When we shape powerful emotional interactions in EFT, we see seismic shifts in the core interactions that define lifetime relationships. Emotion takes us to the heart of the matter. New emotional mosaics create new perceptions and meanings. Even more important, they move us—psychologically and physiologically—into new response modes. If we can become comfortable with the power of emotion, it becomes the therapist's and the couple's greatest ally, rather than a disruptive force to be contained.

Even if we view emotions as essentially problematic, damping them down or circumventing them is no small task. Structured skill-building exercises may temporarily defuse negative emotions, but eventually the emotion usually seeps through and takes over anyway. Physiologically, the attempt to suppress emotion is hard work, often resulting in increasing arousal. James Gross, a key researcher in affect regulation, finds that interactional partners pick up on this increased arousal and become more agitated themselves. We can all relate to the argument that goes: "You're mad," "No, I'm not" (said with clenched teeth), "Yes, you are; I don't even want to talk to you." New, positive ideas and actions will remain peripheral, unless we feel their force and connect with them on an emotional level.