

New Emotions, New Signals, New Steps

Emotionally focused therapists have to help clients create positive patterns of effective emotional regulation and response. These patterns build a sense of efficacy and foster positive cycles of emotional responsiveness, which shape secure bonds with others. These, in turn, reinforce the effective regulation of emotion. Moving into deeply felt vulnerabilities and congruently sharing them with a trusted therapist or loved one leads naturally to a new awareness of heartfelt emotional needs. This is the first crucial step to meeting these needs in a positive manner.

In couples therapy, the open, congruent expression of such needs tends to touch and move the other partner, evoking empathy and increased responsiveness. To deepen emotion, therapists can reflect back on and repeat the emotional images and phrases a client has used all through therapy, carefully eliciting the deeply felt elements of an emotion to create a cognitively coherent yet bodily experienced reality. When this core emotion is owned and integrated, it changes a client's sense of self and engagement with others. These fully felt emotional moments and interactions release a torrent of positive feelings and new ways of seeing. A new music of positive emotions—surprise and joy—begins to play. New vistas of safe connection to one's own experience and to others open up. More coherent emotions lead to more coherent messages to others and more organized, effective action. As the proponents of Positive Psychology suggest, positive emotion has a broadening and building effect on the human psyche.

A Corrective Emotional Experience

Just as we can now unpack the elements of emotional experience, maybe we can unpack this age-old phrase and try to capture the essence of change. "Corrective," emotion researchers remind us, doesn't mean that older experience is erased or suppressed. The emotional system doesn't allow data to be removed or placed to one side easily because nature favors false positives over false negatives where matters of survival are at stake. But old neural networks can be added to or even overwritten. So there's no need to "get rid of" negative emotions; rather, we should try to expand them. When reactive anger is validated and placed in context, the threat that's a vital part of that anger comes to the forefront, and this awareness changes how the anger is experienced and expressed. This sense of threat, or any primary emotion, is most easily discovered, distilled, and made into an integrated whole within an emotionally congruent, accepting therapeutic relationship. This sense of safety is necessary for a corrective experience, but it's not enough.

For a corrective experience to occur, we must engage with and attend to our emotions in new ways and on deeper levels. Corrective experience redefines the experiencer. With a new sense of mastery comes new emotions; in this case, exhilaration. New action tendencies follow. Corrective also implies that the emotional messages one sends to others, as well as their impact, will evolve and change as they're received and reciprocated. New interactions will continue to reshape not only old habits of defensive withdrawal and reactive criticism, but also the vigilance for potential threat.

An emotionally corrective experience changes more than how emotions are dealt with (for example, whether they're suppressed or reframed): it changes how emotional stimuli are perceived. More-secure lovers not only cope more effectively with hurt and anxiety, but perceive cues as less hurtful, in their relationship and in the world. Jim Coan, who uses fMRI scans to study the impact of attachment in the brain, has shown that holding the hand of a loved and dependable partner is a safety cue that changes how the brain perceives and encodes threats, like the threat of electric shock, even lessening the amount of pain such a shock induces.

A corrective emotional experience has been formulated as resulting from new insights, but cognitive insight is only one part of change. Novelist Arnold Bennett's comment is pertinent here: "There can be no knowledge without emotion. We may be aware of a truth, yet until we have felt its force, it is not ours." Pivotal, small changes in a living system, such as a person or a relationship, can engender radical qualitative shifts, as when ice suddenly hits 32 degrees Fahrenheit and becomes water. A significant shift in a leading or organizing element in a system—and primary emotion is such an element—can reorganize the whole system relatively abruptly.

We're in the midst of a revolution in our relationship to emotion. The idea that emotion isn't the poor cousin to reason but a "higher order of intelligence" has been around for decades, but now the evidence for this assertion is clear. As a result of this change of perspective and the new understanding of the nature of emotion, therapists can more deliberately use these powerful, bone-deep responses to transform their clients' lives and relationships. It's time to see emotion for what it is: not a nebulous force to be minimized and mistrusted, but the therapist's greatest ally in the creation of lasting change.