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PSYCHOLOGY OF THE EMOTIONS — PRACTICAL ASPECTS FOR THE TEACHER

E. G. LOCKHART

Basic Facts about the Emotions

1. The organic changes that characterize the emotional disturbance are intellectually stimulated — a crucial fact when we come to teach the control of the emotions.

2. The exact nature of the organic disturbance depends upon how one interprets the exciting situation with respect to his own well-being.

3. The magnitude and duration of an emotional disturbance for any individual depend on how seriously the threat or promise (as he interprets its meaning) appears to affect him.

4. Individuals differ widely in the character and magnitude of their emotional response to identical situations. This may be because the two persons interpret the situations differently with respect to their own welfare, or it may be due to a difference in the sensitivity of the two autonomic nervous systems. Probably both of these determinants vary in different individuals and from time to time in the same individual.

5. Characteristic physiological changes follow automatically and result from the mental state. These reactions (the physiological changes, not the mental state) are unlearned reactions.

6. Among these physiological changes included in a strong emotion is a partial or total blocking of the digestive-assimilation system with all its attending processes.

7. The circulatory system is disturbed, also, by an emotion; the acceleration of the heart with the contraction of the artery muscles increases blood pressure.

8. The emotional disturbance is attended, also, by an acceleration of the activity of certain endocrine glands resulting in an excess in the blood stream of highly stimulating secretions. Likewise, the liver pours into the blood stream relatively large quantities of glycogen. The excessive quantities of these substances in the blood act as poisons unless the organism is immediately engaged in the violent exercise for which it is thus prepared. It has frequently been pointed out that a strong emotion of fear or anger prepares the organism to meet the enemy with flight or

combat — that is, as a jungle savage would meet his enemy. But since society will not permit us to meet opposition in an uncivilized manner the preparation for such behavior is useless or harmful.

9. Strong emotional excitement weakens recall, distorts perception, and hinders accuracy of motor control, lowering the quality of manipulative skills. This makes it obvious, of course, that strong emotions have no place in the schoolroom.

10. Emotions tend naturally to express themselves by certain characteristics physical manifestations. This gives these disturbances social significance. One's character and intelligence is often judged or misjudged by the way he "controls" his emotions.

It is clear from the foregoing that emotions have hygienic significance and educational significance. Their control is also important socially and vocationally.

When we consider that a strong emotion of fear, anger, or grief will handicap an individual in any legitimate civil activity, we are convinced that these emotions appear to have outlived their usefulness in the human race. If we should go to war and our fighting is to be effective, we need to have a steady hand and a clear head; we must exercise good judgment and be accurate. Even mild fear aroused by the imagination about the future events is disastrous to health and efficiency.

CONTROLLING THE EMOTIONS

It is most important to remember in this connection that merely to prevent the manifestation of an emotion is not to control the emotion itself. I am not necessarily controlling the emotions when I do not fight when I am angry, or run when I am afraid, or cry when I am sorry. The most harmful aspect of the emotion is the physiological upset we have described above. This is what must be controlled. Probably if we must get angry or afraid it would be more healthful for us if we were to fight or run — that is, do what we are at the moment physically prepared to do. We might ruin our reputation, but we would save our digestion.

No, to control an emotion is to prevent those violent organic changes that are the really serious aspects of it. But since these physiological changes are hereditary reaction patterns, how can they be controlled? It is true that the reaction pattern is hereditary, but that is not to say that heredity determines what reaction pattern, if any, shall appear in response to the exciting cause; this is determined by the interpretation that is put on the situation. Whether the situation shall mean loss, gain, or danger depends

on the understanding. When that understanding comes, heredity determines what the physiological response shall be. These physiological changes are probably wholly responsible for the feelings we experience of fear, sorrow, joy, etc.

It is clear that if the teacher can control the interpretation the child puts on the exciting cause she can control his emotions. This is a matter of habituating right attitudes and right responses; usually this form of education must be developed in opposition to an instinctive tendency. For example, it is instinctive to become angry when one's activities and plans are blocked or thwarted; likewise, it is instinctive to fight when angry. We seem to have no great difficulty in training children not to fight when they are angry. It should not be impossible to train a child to meet opposition with a problem-solving attitude rather than with a combative, emotional attitude. Negative learning is not difficult, nor is it especially hard to overcome instinctive tendencies. Much of the child's early education is of that type. It seems to the writer that the methodologist in child training could render real service to parents and teachers by developing teaching techniques by which the child may be trained to meet any situation in such a mental state as will qualify him to cope with it most efficiently. All agree that a strong emotional state destroys efficiency in our modern world. If this is true it is imperative that we train children to meet antagonisms, danger, or loss with a problem-solving state of mind. We must remember that it is not the situation itself but the way one interprets it with respect to his present or future well-being that is responsible for the nature of the feeling response.

It follows then that children should be taught to regard those situations that usually arouse an emotion as problems they need to solve. But that is not enough; they should become interested in the solution of those problems. Teachers and parents can assist children to solve problems of this kind to the end that results are satisfying.

OTHER EXCITING SITUATIONS

Finally, teachers and parents should remember: (1) that the situations producing the mental state responsible for emotions need not be real. They may be in books, magazines, on the radio or in the child's imagination; (2) that children (adults as well) often develop abnormal appetites for certain types of emotions; (3) that pleasurable emotions may cause children and adults to habituate the use of certain imagined situations and daydream to

excess. The affective component of the personality may thus become unbalanced. This field of the child's experience is usually overlooked.

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