



Transcript: EM 0301 Emotional Challenges

Today's topic is emotional challenges. So once you start doing some work doing, some exploring, doing some practices, making space in your life for emotional information to surface, there are going to be some inevitable challenges that you encounter along the way.

So here we are. We've started doing the practices. We've started making space for our emotions, and suddenly all the emotional stress appears. It's quite common, especially if you've been in the habit of suppressing emotions, that when you start to make space for them to appear, you get a lot all at once. That can be a little bit overwhelming.

Remember, step one is to regulate those emotions. You've got the practices of emotional first aid that can help you in the moment to reduce the intensity or to bring back your focus. Practice regulating those emotions so that they remain at a manageable level. You can also do co-regulation with other people. Sometimes the best way to regulate our emotions is actually to go into a social interaction with another person, because that can help us to balance our physiology and return to a regulated state.

In the long term it's the practice of feeling emotions while alone that will help you to develop the skills of holding your own emotions and also to reduce the overall level of emotional pressure. But if in the moment a lot of things come up, emotional first-aid practices and co-regulation with other people will be the first port of call.

Once you have regulation under control and you can keep your emotions from getting too intense and you can stop yourself from zoning out or floating away, you can really begin to explore your emotional world. So first of all you're going to learn to describe the sensations that emotions produce in your system. Whether those are visual or bodily sensations, however they show up for you, and from those sensations to identify emotions. Remember you have your emotion wheel to help you to put words on exactly what it is that you're feeling. Inside the feeling, inside the emotion, there will always be some kind of useful information. So the end result of this exploration process is to start to understand what is the information that our emotions are bringing to our conscious mind. The third step is to take action on that information. Maybe what you need to do is set some really good boundaries with some people in your life. Or maybe there are aspects of your authentic self that you've not been cultivating until now, but with good boundaries in place you'll have more space to grow the things that are really authentic and express yourself in the world.

When a lot of emotion is flowing through the system it can be quite unnerving and I've often had people say to me 'I don't know am I going crazy?'. Generally I would say the answer is: 'no, you're not going crazy although it might feel like that sometimes'. It helps to have a little bit of an understanding of the kinds of things that might be happening, so that you can best decide how to deal with them.

So the first thing that may happen, apart from an emotional reaction to a current event, but something that's an unexplained emotion, is what we call emotional release. This is where you've had an emotion in the past but at the time that you were having that emotion it wasn't possible or it wasn't appropriate for you to fully express and process that emotion. So the subconscious just stuffed it down somewhere waiting for an appropriate time. The nice clean space that you make when you do these emotional practices that we're doing now in the program, making peace and quiet and space and paying attention, it's just exactly the kind of time that your subconscious will

decide 'oh, one of these old emotions... that can come to the surface now'. So that could manifest physically as shaking, involuntary movements, and the body tears out of nowhere or you could get waves of identifiable emotions, like anger or sadness or something like that, or you could just get suddenly memories or visuals. It can manifest in many ways, but it's a good thing. It means that your system is releasing some of the emotional pressure that we were talking about. And there's no need to worry or take any kind of action if this is happening during your emotional space holding practice. This is normal.

What's not normal then? What would we have to do something about?

If you have trauma reactivated then you may need to do something different. You may need to stop with the space holding practice for a while and do some other techniques. Or you may need to deploy emotional first aid or even go and talk to somebody else.

How would you know if you were having trauma reactivated?

One sign is the feeling is overwhelming so you can't regulate it yourself, even though you've used all the emotional first aid techniques and it's still not really working... at that point I would say talk to somebody else. Talk to your coach, talk to a health professional, talk to somebody and get some firsthand advice on exactly what's happening to you and how to manage it.

Secondly you might run into what we call an emotional blockage. This is where you can feel the emotion... it starts to happen and then you just shut down. The shutdown can be either zoning out or it can be high anxiety and actual fear and terror. We actually can say it some people literally develop a phobia of their own emotions. If this is happening to you. You start to get in touch with the emotions and you either completely lose touch and zone out or you have high levels of fear, then you may need assistance and support from another person to make you feel safe enough to allow whatever is happening under the surface to come into your conscious mind.

Thirdly another thing to watch out for is... you may sit or lie down to do these emotional practice and then the alarm goes off and it's 15 minutes later and you've got no idea what happened. We call this dissociation and if this is happening consistently, every time or most times when you try to do the practice, it's worth talking to your coach about it, because you may need to do the practice slightly differently so that you can keep yourself present and focus on the practice. You may even need to go and do some other things to get to the bottom of the trauma that's causing the dissociation before this practice will really start to bear fruit for you.

Finally you can have actual flashbacks to traumatic memories and there's two kinds of flashbacks.

There's the kind where you actually find yourself back in that event, whatever it was, a specific traumatic event. You see it like a movie, you're hearing it... it's almost like you're there instead of in the present moment. The other way flashbacks can happen is that you can flashback to a memory that happened so early in life or happened in such a traumatic setting that you don't have the movie like memories. In that case when you have a flashback, what you get is just the emotion of the experience without any clues as to what it is that you are feeling these feelings about. Now it's okay, you don't need to know what you're feeling the feelings about. The thing about flashbacks is, is they're often very intense emotions and because we were very young in the case of the emotional flashbacks, the feelings the emotions that are involved with them can seem incredibly overwhelming. The important thing with flashbacks is to remember where you are in space and time right now. If the flashbacks are so intense that you actually lose touch with the present moment, again you'll need somebody outside of yourself to help you to stay in the present moment while that flashback is unfolding so that you can allow it to move. To allow the trauma to move and release. But if you're having flashbacks when you're by yourself and you're able to remind yourself 'I'm actually here' 'I'm in this location' 'I'm this many years old' while the flashback is unfolding, then eventually the flashback will have expended all of its energy and you won't get that particular flashback anymore. Although you may get a different one from a different traumatic event.

So if any of these things are happening to you any of the trauma related things please talk to your coach, let them know what's happening and find out the best way to proceed with the exercises in a way that's going to support you in healing and not re-traumatize you.

Thanks to the power of neuroplasticity we now know that no matter how severe the trauma is, it is possible to heal any of this emotional material from the past specifically when it comes to trauma. We need to heal by keeping all three parts of our brain active at the same time. What tends to happen in trauma is that one or more parts of the brain become deactivated and we can't access the functions of that part of the brain, so we may lose our analytical capability, our ability to reason, to plan our awareness of space and time.

Or we may lose the emotional brain the mammal brain. The social functions, the ability to read other people's emotions, the ability to express ourselves in a way that makes other people feel safe. So for healing we want to really build the neural pathways of having all three parts of the brain active at the same time and the more that we do that in our life in all moments in every way, the better we make those neural pathways, the more likely we make it that we can keep all parts of our brain active when a traumatic memory is surfacing and therefore allow the traumatic memory to release.

It also means we're less likely to be traumatized by intense events in the future if we make the neural pathways very strong. Keeping these three parts of the brain all active at the same time.

How do we do that?

It's actually remarkably simple. When it comes to keeping the analytical brain online the number one tool for that is mindfulness. If you do any form of mindfulness practice, just being aware of the senses in the present moment and what's happening in the physical body, as long as you're mindful and consciously being aware of yourself, then your analytical brain will stay functional.

The mammal brain is involved not only in our socializing but also in our coordination, even non-verbally with other people. So anything that you do in coordination with other people will automatically be keeping the emotional brain, that mammal brain, online. So you can combine mindfulness and coordination together by doing something in coordination with other people which requires you to be mindful. That could be anything from chanting or singing or playing music or some kind of physical movement activity, like acroyoga or any form of partner dancing, like line group dancing, square dancing, anything that involves coordinating with other people.

Movement. The reptile brain is responsible for movement, so if you can keep yourself moving in coordination with other people and being mindful, then you'll be building the pathways of all three brains being active. Fortunately these days in order to coordinate with other people we don't actually need to physically go to where other people are. You could actually coordinate with a recording of other people. So you could sing along or dance along to music that other people have recorded and it will have the same effect of keeping your emotional brain, your mammal brain, online. So you can pick your favorite movement activity, whether it's Tai Chi or dancing or singing anything that has you in motion, in coordination with some kind of regular beat, some kind of or another actual physical other person, and very being very mindful while this is happening so that you're aware of all of the sensations that are occurring in your body while you are moving in coordination with either another person or a regular beat.

If you can just practice all three things at the same time on a regular basis you will be bit by bit healing yourself from past traumas and immunizing yourself against future traumas.

I often have people ask me 'How do I even know if I'm having an emotional flashback'. The thing about emotional flashbacks is that they are not about what is currently happening right now. They are about something that happened in your past and often it happened when you were a young child. Or it happened in such a stressful situation that you didn't form a full memory of it. What you get is an emotion which is unrelated to what's happening in the present moment although there may be something happening in the present moment that reminds you of that past situation. That's why the emotion might choose to come at that particular moment.

One way to test 'is this an emotional flashback?' is to first ask yourself this question immediately when you feel an strong emotion coming up. Often if you ask yourself that question, the answer becomes apparent immediately. If you're not sure you can ask yourself 'Is this emotion unusually intense for this kind of situation?' 'Do I seem to be having a very strong emotional reaction, perhaps stronger than the situation calls for?'

Or you can look at the flavor of the feeling and see whether it matches up with the major emotional challenges of the developmental stages. For example in the first stage from birth to nine months the challenge is just deciding whether or not this is a safe place to be. If you're feeling unsafe just being here on earth, then that's likely a flashback to this early part of your life when at the important stages of those first nine months you didn't get the feeling of safety that you needed.

Between 9 to 18 months it's separating and merging. If you're having an intense fear in a situation where you might be somehow separated from somebody who's important to you and it seems they're very over-the-top intense fear, it may be coming from this flashback to this stage of your life. Also you can be afraid of merging. This can be another thing where you're totally fine right up until the point when you start to get intimately connected with another person. Then suddenly you find yourself having this emotional reaction that can also be a flashback to this stage of life.

Between 18 months and 3 years we're working on our sense of self. So if you have an emotional experience where you feel like you're nothing. Or where you feel like other people are not treating you with the respect you deserve. That's a flashback to having too small a sense of self or too big a sense of self and that may be to this age. There may have been something that happened to you in this age that caused this emotional memory to be embedded in your system.

From three to five years we're working on cooperating with other people. The big challenge here is sharing. If you find yourself having very strong emotional reactions, when you think something is unfair or someone else has taken more than their part, or someone took one of your French fries without asking, that may be a flashback to this age. The other kind of flashback you can have from this age, the other challenge that we're dealing with here, is having a good connection with solid objective reality. If you find it very emotionally disturbing when someone questions your perceptions, you may be flashing back to a trauma from this age.

From 5 to 12 years we're dealing with the fact that in the rest of the world outside of our family of origin, we have to do things to get approval. We don't just get unconditional love. Of course in the ideal world we've got lots of condition unconditional love at home, but if we haven't, then we may struggle with the conditional approval that other people offer us. What will happen here is you may find yourself feeling panicky and perfectionistic in advance of having to produce a result. Or you may feel yourself being just completely devastated if for some reason you don't get the result that you want in life. Strong emotional reactions to having to produce results or failing to produce results can be a flashback to traumas from this age.

Of course with puberty comes adult sexuality. Our introduction of adult sexuality can be traumatic in so many different ways, that there are many cases where people experience emotional flashbacks in a sexual situation. Those can be flashbacks to either this stage of puberty or they can be a sexualized version of a flashback to an earlier age.

So you can just do the test on yourself like that what is exactly this feeling that I'm feeling that seems more intense than the situation warrants, and test and see whether it seems to fall into any of these categories. That may help you to identify that you're having an emotional flashback.

We're always going to have emotional challenges in life. Life is going to throw up difficult situations which provokes strong emotions. As well as the current moment in the current situation though, we often have to deal with emotions from the past and traumas that have been stored. That have been waiting for an opportunity to resolve as we start to do our work as we start to heal, we will have to deal with the unresolved emotions and traumas and release them from our system.

In order to do that we simply practice the allowing. Allowing the emotions to exist, allowing whatever's moving in our system to move through our system. And exploring, discovering, and naming how the emotions manifest in us and uncovering the information that they're trying to communicate to our conscious mind.

As long as we're practicing the three levels of activity at the same time: mindfulness, coordination with others, or the beat and movement. Then we are progressively making stronger neural pathways to allow the release of past traumas and immunizing ourselves against future traumas.

