

Emotional Temperature

By

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In regard to physical health, most of you have experienced a high temperature of 102 or 103 degrees, or maybe even higher. You may remember lying in bed alternately having the chills and then sweating with your body hurting all over. About all you can do is take fluids because you don't feel like eating. At times like these your body and your brain are working hard to overcome the effects of an infection in your system. You cannot think or act nearly as effectively until your brain and your body are free of having to put energy into coping with the fever.

A similar process occurs in regard to emotional/mental health. It has been my experience, with clients and personally, that the following is an accurate observation: "When emotional temperature goes up, thinking goes down and problem solving goes out the window." This appears to apply for both positive and negative feelings. Here are three examples to consider.

First, picture two people so angry at each other that they are nose to nose and toes to toes, red in the face, and hollering at each other. What they see are bulging eyeballs, open mouths, clenched fists, and red faces. What they hear are angry, hostile, and even threatening noises. Most of the words get lost in the noise and the intensity. The words that do get through are ones for which the parties need to apologize when they have cooled down. It may sound backwards, but once the emotional temperature is down and the people are calmer, they are more able to speak quietly enough to be heard and to hear more effectively. The yelling was heard only in hurtful ways. Once calm is restored, thought can be applied to effective problem solving. I do not mean to suggest that anger or any feeling should not be expressed. I am suggesting that feelings need to be expressed with the assistance of a clear brain, in order that they can be expressed effectively rather than destructively.

A second example is of panic. Think of a hunter lost in the woods. If he or she panics they may begin to run without particular direction. At some point they may notice footprints on the forest floor in front of them. They may then begin to realize that those are their own footprints. They have been running in circles. If they stop and catch their physical breath, then their heart will stop pounding in their ears and they can calm down. In other words, they can also catch their emotional breath. They may be able to hear a car on a road a mile or so away, and thus identify a direction to find their way back from being lost. The point is that one needs to catch one's emotional breath and reduce one's emotional temperature in order to think clearly and act effectively.

A final example is not of a negative emotion, but of a positive emotion. Have any of you ever seen two people in love? Two people like this tend to have a very narrow focus. That focus is each one for the other and nothing else exists. They forget things, they walk into walls, their friends laugh at them and say things like "When they come back down to Earth they'll be able to think again. Right now they are useless." No wonder there is that old saying "Love is Blind."

In conclusion, it is important to remember that both thought and feeling are important ingredients in dealing with any situation. Feelings tend to be the fuel that generates active thought. Thoughts or brainpower regulate the effective expression of the feelings. Here is another way to look at these ideas. Think of a relationship as a car. Think of feelings as the fuel for the car and one's brain as controller for the accelerator, steering and brakes. The further one pushes down on the accelerator the more difficult it is to effectively and safely control the speed and direction in which one travels. The more one uses all of one's control devices to adjust to the conditions of the road, the more likely a person is to reach their intended goal with their car (relationship) in a single effectively-functioning piece.

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