

CHAPTER 4

Why Do My Emotions Hurt So Much?

We've established that emotions have functions and uses, but so what? You may be having such a rough time with your emotions that you think no survival function is worth the intensity and chaos that you feel. But let me tell you, it's not just the sensitive people who feel painful emotions like sadness and fear—we all do. However, we experience our emotions with varying degrees of intensity, and there are factors that may be increasing the intensity with which you feel them. The factors to consider include:

- Biology
- Vulnerability factors
- Judgments and secondary emotional responses
- Modeling and learning factors, and other environmental factors

Biology and Emotion

As we've said, your emotions are in part biologically hard-wired. You can't experience your emotions without your brain getting involved. And when your brain is involved there are numerous hormones and neurotransmitters that get involved, too. The way that

each of us experiences our emotions is affected by the shape of particular parts of the brain, certain levels of one hormone or another, and all of these are affected by our diet, sleep habits, and so forth. Later we will look at changes that you can make in your lifestyle to increase your emotional resilience. For now, here are some of the chemicals in our bodies that are involved in emotion:

Cortisol. This hormone is important in helping the body metabolize proteins and carbohydrates and is related to coping with stress and fatigue. Recent studies suggest that individuals with lower baselines of production of cortisol are predisposed to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), problems with attention, and impulsivity. In some individuals, unusually high levels of cortisol are released into the brain at the time of a traumatic event. With prolonged stress or trauma, cortisol levels appear to drop, but traumatized individuals demonstrate an especially heightened sensitivity to the amounts that are produced in their bodies, and this may have some relationship to the experiences of flashbacks.

Serotonin. This hormone has a wide array of functions, including emotion control, perceptions, and mood modulation in response to stressful events. For those who suffer from depression it is thought that their brains don't produce enough serotonin or use it effectively. These deficiencies contribute greatly to depressed mood. Carbohydrates and exercise help increase serotonin levels. The anti-depressants known as serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) recycle serotonin in the brain and make more of it available.

Endorphins. Related to feeling good and pleasure, endorphins are produced in response to touch and exercise. If you've ever heard of "runner's high," this is a shorthand way to talk about the experience of increased endorphins. Endorphins and human touch are so important to us that newborns who aren't regularly held and touched are more likely to die prematurely than those who are.

Vulnerabilities

Vulnerability factors increase your reactivity and susceptibility to being too emotional and impulsive, or to emotional suffering. Even people who are generally unflappable are vulnerable to being overly emotional when they are fatigued, becoming more easily angered and irritable. The antidote? Well, in this case, sleep. If you've been amping up on coffee all day you will be more likely to fidget or become anxious.

Look at the following list of vulnerability factors and check all that apply to you, and then add others you may be aware of but that aren't on the list. By building awareness of your vulnerabilities, you learn how you can then reduce them. Vulnerability factors include:

- Too much or too little sleep
- Too much junk food
- Dehydration
- Too much caffeine

- Hunger and poor nutrition
- Overeating and under eating
- Injuries or wounds
- Physical or medical illness
- Financial problems
- Underemployment or unemployment
- Overworking
- Eating too much sugar
- Eating too much fat
- Recent losses or accidents
- Recent natural disasters
- Recent relationship difficulties
- Being a victim of crime (assault, rape, theft, etc.)
- Lack of exercise
- Fatigue
- Dwelling on recent personal failure

Other: _____

Judgments, Self-Talk, and Interpretations

Vulnerabilities also affect our thought processes for the worse. The more run down or reactive you feel, the more likely you are to think less of yourself. If you're a man, and you think of yourself as a sissy for experiencing fear or for experiencing sadness, you may feel worse. Your emotion won't simply be fear or sadness, but fear about fear, sadness about sadness, and maybe shame about both of these. Perhaps you judge yourself as being weak-willed, crazy, or having "lost it." Your automatic thoughts and judgments will affect the way you experience your emotions. And these judgments often lead to secondary emotions, which don't help us with survival, social connection, or general well-being.

If you thought about it, you would likely discover that your judgments about your emotions are learned, coming from your environment through modeling how to express, control, or think about feelings. This can happen either implicitly or explicitly. What judgments do you have about your emotions, and where did they come from?

Take a moment to check the items on the following list that you identify with. In the blank next to each, write the source of this belief. Then write out the pros and cons of holding that belief. Pros for holding any belief might include that it's just easier to hold

your beliefs as they are since there's no extra work to be done. A con might be that you continue in your same old patterns, doing ineffective business as usual.

Judgments and Automatic Thoughts

- **Emotions are bad and dumb.**

Rate strength of belief: 1 2 3 4 5

Where did this belief come from? _____

Pros and cons of holding this belief:

Pros: _____ Cons: _____

- **My emotions aren't important.**

Rate strength of belief: 1 2 3 4 5

Where did this belief come from? _____

Pros and cons of holding this belief:

Pros: _____ Cons: _____

- **Others don't care about my feelings, so I shouldn't care either.**

Rate strength of belief: 1 2 3 4 5

Where did this belief come from? _____

Pros and cons of holding this belief:

Pros: _____ Cons: _____

- **Expressing my feelings is a sign of weakness.**

Rate strength of belief: 1 2 3 4 5

Where did this belief come from? _____

Pros and cons of holding this belief:

Pros: _____ Cons: _____

- **Being emotional is the same as being out of control.**

Rate strength of belief: 1 2 3 4 5

Where did this belief come from? _____

Pros and cons of holding this belief:

Pros: _____ Cons: _____

- **Anger isn't for women.**

Rate strength of belief: 1 2 3 4 5

Where did this belief come from? _____

Pros and cons of holding this belief:

Pros: _____ Cons: _____

- **Fear isn't for men.**

Rate strength of belief: 1 2 3 4 5

Where did this belief come from? _____

Pros and cons of holding this belief:

Pros: _____ Cons: _____

- **I should never feel afraid.**

Rate strength of belief: 1 2 3 4 5

Where did this belief come from? _____

Pros and cons of holding this belief:

Pros: _____ Cons: _____

- **Being emotional is a sign that I'm weak.**

Rate strength of belief: 1 2 3 4 5

Where did this belief come from? _____

Pros and cons of holding this belief:

Pros: _____ Cons: _____

- **Emotions always get in the way.**

Rate strength of belief: 1 2 3 4 5

Where did this belief come from? _____

Pros and cons of holding this belief:

Pros: _____ Cons: _____

- **Emotions are for the hysterical.**

Rate strength of belief: 1 2 3 4 5

Where did this belief come from? _____

Pros and cons of holding this belief:

Pros: _____ Cons: _____

- **I wish I never felt anything.**

Rate strength of belief: 1 2 3 4 5

Where did this belief come from? _____

Pros and cons of holding this belief:

Pros: _____ Cons: _____

- **There is never a right time for strong emotions.**

Rate strength of belief: 1 2 3 4 5

Where did this belief come from? _____

Pros and cons of holding this belief:

Pros: _____ Cons: _____

- **I'm afraid of my emotions.**

Rate strength of belief: 1 2 3 4 5

Where did this belief come from? _____

Pros and cons of holding this belief:

Pros: _____ Cons: _____

Any others? Use the space below to write down any thoughts or beliefs about emotion you may hold that aren't reflected in the above choices. Make sure to include the sources for each of the additional beliefs as you think of them, and include the pros and cons of holding the beliefs.

Ranking Your Thoughts

Out of the above automatic thoughts and beliefs you have about your emotions, take the top five and list them in the following numbered blanks (1-5) and write in the degree to which you believe each one (1-5). Once you finish this exercise, take a moment to look at chapter 9, "Challenging Your Self-Talk."

Top Five Beliefs

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Modeling, Invalidation, and Other Environmental Sources

Your secondary emotional responses sometimes get in the way of your primary responses. You can become so dysregulated that you forget what you felt about something in the first place. Instead of simply letting your emotions do their job when appropriate, or simply validating them, you reject your emotions as invalid, inaccurate, and ultimately unimportant. You treat your sadness as though it's a weakness rather than an informant alerting you to what's important to you in your life.

If you think about your family when you were growing up, I'm sure you can remember instances of how your parents responded to your emotional communications. I don't necessarily mean an explicit message like, "Suck it up." The message is often more subtle. For example, were you ever spoken to angrily or even threateningly when you were crying? That would be a message that your parents disapproved of your display of emotion. In my sadly realistic example, the angry parent doesn't say, "Gee, Timmy, mommy doesn't like it when you cry. In fact, I feel angry and would like you to stop crying now." More likely, she said, "I'll give you something to cry about!"

How did your parents display their own emotions? Did they appear to be terribly reserved and repressed, or did they fly off the handle at every provocation? Were they consistent or inconsistent? What is modeled to us as children has a profound effect throughout our entire lives about how to live with our emotions. We seem to record the patterns of our parents to some degree or another.

You may have been the sensitive, reactive, and emotional one in your family. That's neither good nor bad, that's just the way it is. But if you displayed intense responses in a family with a very low tolerance for emotional displays, you may have faced repeated invalidating responses to your outbursts. Invalidation would be responses from your family and environment that tell you that your private emotional experiences, and certainly your public communications of emotion aren't legitimate in their own right or worth paying attention to and are better stuffed or kept silent.

The problem here is that while you might shut up for a while, temporarily making things easier for others, it doesn't teach you how to effectively solve problems, nor does it teach you how to label your emotions. Sometimes, this oversimplification of your problems and emotional experiences is the path to behaviors that are so extreme they force the people around you to notice your pain and take you seriously. So if you're also struggling with particular behaviors such as self-harm, suicide threats, rages, or other ways of "acting out," there is a function within the apparent dysfunction of such behaviors.

If you have engaged in any of these behaviors, you may notice how the environment will take notice, because these "in-your-face" behaviors can't be ignored. When the world comes to your aid, and validates you in these extreme moments, the problem behaviors

are strengthened—reinforced—and likely to happen again. And why wouldn't they? The behaviors got you validation, which is something we all need and want.

Did You Ever Experience Invalidation?

Take a look at the following statements and check all that you identify with having had the statement communicated about you or to you. You'll notice that some statements are dismissive of needs, while others are direct put-downs. The idea of this exercise is to help you build your awareness of your experiences. Mark statements only if you can recall receiving the statement as a consistent message for a good deal of your upbringing. If you check three or more, there's a good chance you were raised in an invalidating environment.

- You're just a big baby
- Why can't you be more like your brother/sister/friend, etc.?
- If you don't stop crying I'll give you something to cry about
- Boys don't cry
- Crying is for sissies
- Your problem is that you're lazy
- You're just good-for-nothing
- Don't make such a fuss
- You're so sensitive
- You're never happy with anything
- Shut up!
- You're so stupid
- You're such an embarrassment
- Stop whining, it's annoying
- Good kids don't complain
- Why are you always complaining?
- You eat like a pig
- Are you talking back to me?

Other: _____

Think of familiar memories of situations that occurred frequently in your childhood in which you can recall experiencing invalidation, such as being sad and crying but being told, "I'll give you something to cry about," or "Boys don't cry," or being told to shut up. Or describe how your attempts to express your internal feelings and experiences were met with indifference. Using a situation that occurred often will make it easier for you to identify your experiences of being invalidated. Don't make things up, or exaggerate your memories. Just do your best to remember what you tried to express, to whom, how they responded, and how you felt and how you believe it affects you to this date. If you live or work with someone currently whom you believe is invalidating, you may use situations from your interactions with them.

Describing Invalidation

Invalidating situation #1

Describe the situation including who and where: _____

What were you trying to express? _____

How were you invalidated? Were you called names, ignored, or did you have your needs minimized? _____

What emotions and thoughts did you have when you were invalidated? _____

What did you do in response to the invalidation? Was this effective or ineffective? _____

What did you feel and think after trying to cope with invalidation? _____

How do you think this experience affects you in your life today? _____

Invalidating situation #2

Describe the situation including who and where: _____

What were you trying to express? _____

How were you invalidated? Were you called names, ignored, or did you have your needs minimized? _____

What emotions and thoughts did you have when you were invalidated? _____

What did you do in response to the invalidation? Was this effective or ineffective?

What did you feel and think after trying to cope with invalidation? _____

How do you think this experience affects you in your life today? _____

Invalidating situation #3

Describe the situation including who and where: _____

What were you trying to express? _____

How were you invalidated? Were you called names, ignored, or did you have your needs minimized? _____

What emotions and thoughts did you have when you were invalidated? _____

What did you do in response to the invalidation? Was this effective or ineffective? _____

What did you feel and think after trying to cope with invalidation? _____

How do you think this experience affects you in your life today? _____

Reflecting on Invalidation

One problem with having experienced invalidation during your formative years is that you probably weren't taught effective skills for identifying your emotions, self-soothing, or problem solving. Invalidation treats your problems as unimportant, and an invalidating environment may attribute your lack of problem-solving skills to some undesirable trait such as laziness or stupidity. This can be very frustrating.

Another problem is that you can take these messages of invalidation with you into your adult life, and begin to invalidate yourself. You may develop patterns of second-guessing yourself, not taking your own problems seriously, or becoming overly dependent on your environment to decide what you should be doing, thinking, feeling, or even wanting.

Take a moment to reflect on whether and how you may have internalized invalidation. You may notice that if you have internalized invalidation, that it may have come over the course of your life, beginning in your childhood. You may notice that these past experiences or the internalized invalidation make it difficult for you to handle certain kinds of people or situations, perhaps because they remind you of those past circumstances. Later, in chapter 9, we will explore ways to challenge this internalized invalidation.

Awareness of Self-Invalidation

What invalidating messages from your upbringing do you tell yourself these days?

What situations are most likely to trigger self-invalidation? _____

Describe if/how you try to ignore your feelings, thoughts, wants: _____

Describe if/how you oversimplify the problems and challenges you face in your life:

Describe how you think your self-invalidation affects how you feel and think about yourself: _____

Your Emotional Role Models

As a child, you probably learned patterns from others by watching how they dealt with their emotions, expressing them or denying them, or being overly reactive themselves.

Make a list of the major emotional role models in your family, or from your childhood and adolescence. List your parents, guardians, uncles, aunts, siblings, grandparents, caregivers, teachers, clergy, etc.

My emotional role models were:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Other: _____

Next, rewrite your list below, using up to five people that you think were most influential. If your list of the most influential is shorter, then work with that. Then, in the space provided below each person's name, list their dominant emotional style (their general emotional trait), then write a brief summary about how you remember these persons.

Think through if you remember them as angry, peaceful, balance, imbalanced, depressed, anxious, etc. Finally, summarize what you think you may have learned from each of these individuals. For example, did you learn to ignore your emotions? Did you learn emotional balance? Did you learn to take your emotions seriously? Did you learn to be out of control or chronically angry, or how to judge others for displaying their emotions, and so on.

You may include in this summary your opinion about whether these models and their lessons have been effective or detrimental to you.

Emotional role model #1: _____

Emotional style: _____

What I learned from this person: _____

Emotional role model #2: _____

Emotional style: _____

What I learned from this person: _____

Emotional role model #3: _____

Emotional style: _____

What I learned from this person: _____

Emotional role model #4: _____

Emotional style: _____

What I learned from this person: _____

Emotional role model #5: _____

Emotional style: _____

What I learned from this person: _____

Sources of Emotional Pain

I hope the above exercises give you a clearer picture of why emotions can be so intensely painful.

To summarize, there is the biological gear that you come with hard-wired into you. Whether there were in vivo traumas, head injuries, chronic stressors, or nutritional influences, a great deal of what you experience is simply your body and brain doing what they do naturally. They have nothing to do with your good or bad attitude. Next, depending on your general state of rest, fluid intake, nutrition, medication, unexpected emergencies, illness, etc., your general baseline mood will be affected. These factors will influence your emotional arousal and cooling down, and your own appraisal of how you think you may or may not be able to cope. Another factor is what you say to yourself when you become emotionally aroused, since your thoughts can affect your control of emotion. Finally, what you learned about your emotions from your emotional role models provide a sort of template for how to relate to your emotions.

In the next chapter, we'll move from general awareness of our emotions to the special kind of self-knowing called mindfulness.