

Secret 9

GET YOUR PAST OUT OF YOUR PRESENT – GO AND LEARN FROM THE PAST

One of the greatest failings of conventional medicine, and indeed our cultural education, has been the downplaying of the importance of emotions. Historically, this happened during the period that is known as the Age of Reason in the 17th and 18th centuries when it was believed that all knowledge was derived from sense-experience. All learning was based on experiment and observation to discover cause and effect, but this method of scientific reasoning was not a suitable way of studying emotions and how they affect our lives and health.

As intellect became paramount, the emotions, which defy measurement, became repressed. This continued until the 20th century when Sigmund Freud argued that many neuroses and health issues had their bases in repressed emotions. Only recently, through developments in neuroscience, can we measure emotion to any extent, and see its effects on both mental and physical health. It is becoming increasingly clear that no thought occurs without an emotion, and that emotions, positive or negative, have a massive effect on our health and the way our bodies operate. The whole basis of our memory, which is how we hold the story of our lives, depends on emotion. Emotions are the basis of the subtlety of human relationships, and relationships are as important to us as water is to fish. We only develop as human beings through relationships, and it is developing emotional intelligence that allows us to interact healthily with others, so that our needs will be met and to understand the needs of others. Positive emotions, such as love and joy, and the ability to resolve negative emotions is the ninth secret of being 100 per cent healthy.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE STORE UP TENSION FROM THE PAST

The experience of life means that we inevitably accumulate emotional tension and unresolved memories from the past. The more disturbing of these become deep-rooted negative emotional patterns that unconsciously determine how we react to the stresses of life. Nowadays it is considered normal to be neurotic, and our TV shows raise to heroic proportions, people even more dysfunctional than ourselves.

The word 'emotion' comes from the Latin *e* for 'exit' and *motion* for 'movement' – so emotion is a natural energy, a dynamic experience, which needs to move through and out of the body. Yet, as children we are often taught not to express our emotions; for example, we might have heard, 'don't be a baby'. Or, when we are angry, we are taught that it's not appropriate to express it: 'Don't you dare raise your voice to me!' At some level most of us are taught that emotions are not OK.

Our task, as healthy adults, is to flush out and let go of the emotional patterns from the past that mess up our lives and no longer serve us. As Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt therapy, often said, 'The only way out is through.' It's not easy, and the vast majority of people deny the symptoms or anaesthetise themselves through work, TV, food, alcohol or some kind of drug. By discharging negative emotions attached to past memories we become more able to respond spontaneously in any given moment, allowing us to be more present in our relationships and to the gifts of the world around us.

THE BODY EXPRESSES WHAT THE MIND REPRESSES

These emotions literally store in our cellular memory throughout our lives. They can manifest as physical tension, causing a variety of health problems, including headaches, ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and more serious illnesses, including cancer and cardiovascular disease. Extreme emotions affect heart function, depress the immune system and inhibit digestion. I remember one client who suffered from terrible IBS. Every nutritional treatment I gave her failed to make any difference. Then one day she confessed, for the first time, an act of infidelity. From that day on her irritable bowel syndrome disappeared.

Grief is another example. It depresses immunity and may be one explanation why many people who are unable to come to terms with the death of their partner often die shortly after.¹⁶⁶ Such emotions need to be fully expressed, for both our physical and psychological health, so that we can learn from our experiences and move forward.

OUR MOST COMMON EMOTIONS

We all experience many different emotions, but the most common ones are shades of anger, fear or sadness. Sadness is usually associated with regrets, losses and the loss of opportunities in the past. Anger is associated with not having our needs met, not being listened to, or not being understood. We also have sexual needs and the need for physical and emotional satisfaction and intimacy.

Rage, violent reactions and extreme anger usually originate from a sense, whether real or just perceived, that our survival is literally under threat. Fear often comes from not being able to adapt to our present circumstances and is associated with fearing the loss of our sense of self; for example the fear of going mad or dying. As Franklin D. Roosevelt said, during the 1933 recession in America, 'The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.'

What is it to have a healthy emotional response to life's inevitable circumstances? 'Anyone can become angry – that is easy. But to be angry with the right person at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way – this is not easy,' said Aristotle. How do you deal with a circumstance where someone accuses you of something you didn't do? Or when your relationship breaks down and ends, or when a loved one dies? How about when you lose your job or run out of money? Before exploring these questions it's good to have a brief emotional check-up to see how you relate to the world of feelings.

Questionnaire: check your emotions

1. Do you feel your emotions take over your life at times, or do you often feel disconnected from your emotions?
2. Are you often angry, upset, irritable or grumpy, or do you feel aggressive?
3. How do you express anger?
 - a. Do you explode, shout or scream?
 - b. Do you take it out on yourself by crying or putting yourself down, or do you deny it or never feel it?
 - c. Do you rarely feel angry and express it appropriately when you do?
4. Are you often sad or do you suffer from mood swings or depression?
5. How do you relate to sadness?
 - a. Do you often cry, and are you capable of crying for hours?
 - b. Do you rarely let yourself feel it or deny it, perhaps saying that life is too short?
 - c. When you feel sad, do you express it appropriately?
6. Are you often fearful or anxious?
7. How do you relate to fear, such as a fear of change, abandonment/loss, fear of success, failure or poverty, ill-health and death?
 - a. Are you often fearful about situations that have not happened?
 - b. Do you find it difficult to let go of fears about things that have happened in the past?
 - c. Are most of your fears justified and do you take appropriate action to move on?
8. Do you find it difficult to convey your feelings to others?
9. Do you find it difficult to express either sadness, anger or fear?
10. Do you feel a lack of enough love in your life?
11. Do you find it difficult to spend time alone and try to avoid it?
12. Do you rarely reward or acknowledge yourself for your achievements?
13. Do you rarely feel completely content or happy?
14. How would you assess your relationship with your:

Very good Good OK Not good Bad

Spouse/lover/partner (if you have one)
Mother (if still alive)
Father (if still alive)
Brothers and sisters
Friends
Colleagues at work
Self

Score 1 point for each 'yes' answer; 2 points if you answered (a) in questions 3 and 5, and 1 point if you answered (b); 2 points for any relationships you related as 'bad', and 1 point for any relationship you rated as 'not good'.

Total score:

Score

0–4: Level A

You have a high emotional IQ, reacting to situations appropriately, and you effectively manage and enjoy your relationships.

5–7: Level B

You have signs of emotional issues that need some work. The recommendations in this chapter are likely to help.

8–12: Level C

You are in need of an emotional detox and are very likely to benefit significantly from some appropriate counselling. This chapter explains what works.

13 or more: Level D

Negative emotional patterns are having a major impact on the quality of your life and are likely to affect your health unless you deal with them now.

100% HEALTH SURVEY RESULTS

A survey of 101 top health scorers shows that:

- 85% consider state of mind to be extremely important for health.
- 85% per cent always or mostly wake up looking forward to the day.
- 100% think that having a positive attitude is important for health.
- 73% say they are happy.
- 95% consider relationships to be extremely or moderately important for health.
- 80% are in a couple and 20 per cent are single.
- 85% consider their primary relationship as excellent or good.
- 83% have a close circle of family and friends.

THE BENEFITS OF GOOD EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Emotional health is just as important as physical health, and emotional ill-health causes us just as much, if not more suffering. The World Health Organization says that mental health problems are the number-one challenge for the 21st century.

Having a positive outlook on life makes a huge difference. In one study by researchers at the University of Pittsburgh, which followed 100,000 women over a period of eight years, optimists were 30 per cent less likely to die from heart disease, and 23 per cent less likely to die from cancer than those women who had a general distrust of people.¹⁶⁷ But where does distrust and unhappiness come from?

EMOTIONAL PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOUR ARE LEARNED

When we react emotionally these reactions are automatic and physical, literally flooding your brain and body with neurotransmitters associated with the stress response. They take over the rational mind, stop you being able to listen and lead to irrational reactions and behaviour. Your heart rate can jump from 70 beats a minute to over 100 in a single heartbeat, muscles tense and your breathing changes. Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, calls this 'emotional hijacking'.¹⁶⁸ The emotional reaction patterns that trigger emotional hijacking are learned early in life and can be changed into more functional responses by coming to an understanding of how our past programmes us to respond automatically to current events.

LOOKING BACK

Cast your mind back to your early childhood. How did you see anger expressed? Did you ever see your mother or father shouting, or did they give you the silent treatment? And were you able to sense their anger underneath? What did you learn from this? If you had a raging, shouting parent you've probably learned to shut down, as you had to do when you were a frightened and vulnerable child. Perhaps you said that you'd never be like that when you grew up, and swore that you would certainly never, ever treat your children in that way. Yet, in a moment of weakness or frustration, you might have reacted in just the same way they did, and felt really guilty afterwards. It can take a lot of energy to be different from how we were brought up, because we had years of 'emotional education', both positive and negative, from our parents as well as our schoolteachers.

A small survey of the top 101 health scorers in the 100% Health Survey shows that healthy people rate emotional health as very important and tend to be emotionally healthy.

A softer emotion than anger is sadness. Think back to how your parents dealt with sadness or grief. For example, if there was a death in the family, how did your parents react? Sadness is an appropriate reaction, but left unexpressed it leads to depression. Depression can also arise from suppressed anger. 'Don't get sad, get mad,' the saying goes. If you are depressed, is there something you are angry about but have been unable to express or do something about? Do you think either of your parents were depressed, and if so, how has this affected you?

LOOK AT YOUR OWN CHARACTERISTICS

Are you either always trying to be positive or do you have an underlying sense of hopelessness – or perhaps you flip-flop between the two? Do you fear that any love relationships are doomed, a minefield that could explode at any time, or are they best avoided completely? What lessons did you learn about love and relationships when you were growing up? If you always fear being abandoned or not finding a loving relationship, that may very well stem from early memories of feeling abandoned or unwanted as a child. Janie is a case in point:

CASE STUDY: JANIE

Janie, an attractive interior designer in her thirties, had always attracted emotionally unavailable men. Her friends would say with exasperation, 'Just don't give them your phone number,' but like a moth drawn to a flame, she could not break the habit. It wasn't until she looked back very honestly at how her father had been with her – cold and distant and, because of work, rarely home – that she made the connection with her relationship history. She felt unwanted, and therefore unconsciously set up that situation, as it was so familiar.

Being such a primary love wound for her, this was a deeply ingrained emotional behaviour. She had to work hard at breaking the connection once she had identified it during a one-week retreat called the Hoffman Process (see page 209 for more details). By taking some time to devote to her own personal breakthrough, she went firstly from identifying the cause to expressing the anger and sadness at what she had missed out on, both as a child and as a grown woman.

She had to walk back into her memory and feel what it was like as a child. It was painful for her, but it gave her the impetus to say firmly to herself, 'Enough, I don't want to live that way!' Later, feeling stronger, she sat down quietly, closed her eyes, and imagined sending waves of forgiveness to her father and the later men in her life for their part. Finally, she took responsibility for her own role and made a commitment to attracting an emotionally available and committed man.

She recently wrote to say she was getting married, and that the man was an old friend she had known for years but had never considered as suitable. With the past feeling of 'I don't deserve' put in the rubbish pile, we can all start attracting much more positive situations in our life.

LOOKING CLOSER AT HOW WE DEAL WITH RELATIONSHIPS

The kind of relationship your parents had with each other will also have had a massive impact on how you deal with relationships in your life. Here's an exercise that can help you see how we inherit these negative emotional patterns from our parents.

EXERCISE: identifying your negative emotional patterns of behaviour

1. Write down at least five of your negative emotional patterns – ideally those that cause, or have caused you, the most emotional distress (you can either write them down here or in a private journal). Here are some examples:

- Fear of being abandoned (leads to being needy or clingy).
- Fear of being smothered in a relationship (leads to avoiding committed relationships).
- Feeling put down or criticised (leads to not taking risks).
- Feeling never good enough (leads to having to achieve or prove yourself, or having to please).
- Feeling controlled (leads to having to control others).
- Feeling ashamed or guilty.
- Fear of being wrong (leads to having to be right).
- Fear of failure, or not making it in the world (leads to constant striving and over-achieving).

1

2

3

4

5

2. Now take a few moments to relax and take your mind back to a time in your childhood. Close your eyes and picture yourself as a child of around eight years old. You might even have a photo that could help you access that picture. Standing next to yourself as a child, imagine your parents, or the people who brought you up, just as they were when you were growing up. Next to them, how do you feel? Are you given the sense that you were good enough, that you were OK as you are? Can you start to get the sense of how your whole mood, your attitude to others, indeed your overall perspective of the world might have been affected by these powerful figures? Remember, you depended on them for love and approval.

3. Now write down five or more negative patterns of your mother, and your father. Look for the ones that had the most impact on you; for example: over-critical, uncaring, cold/distant, smothering, over-protective, angry, passive, hopeless...

Mother

1

2

3

4

5

Father

1

2

3

4

5

Do any of the patterns you identified for yourself exist also in either of your parents? Or do you have the opposite pattern of behaviour? In many cases we compensate with the exact opposite; for example, your parent is aggressive, and you are passive, or they are critical and you are always nice.

CARRYING OUR PAST WITH US

The real destructive power of the past can become manifest because we keep recreating history by subconsciously setting up situations that feel familiar, despite our best intentions. It's horrifying and strangely comforting at the same time; for example, if we had a critical parent we might attract a critical partner or boss. Or if one of your parents was always blaming the other one for his or her problems, perhaps you have inherited the victim role. It's never your fault, and you always have someone else to blame. That's the power these negative patterns have in our lives. Psychologists call this transference, whereby we bring our internalised parents into our present lives, along with their, and our, shared emotional baggage from the past.

HOW CAN WE MOVE ON?

So, what do you do when you become aware of how learned negative emotional patterns are messing up your life and your health? In the same way that we need to learn about optimum nutrition and how to choose the right foods and drinks to be healthy, we also need to learn about how to discharge and let go of negative emotions and emotional patterns. As vital as this skill is, it unfortunately isn't taught in school and it isn't part of our culture to learn these things. The first step is simply to acknowledge how you feel in the moment.

IT'S OK TO FEEL

Sadness, anger and fear, and all the shades in between, are perfectly normal reactions when things happen in our lives that don't match our expectations. We all have the need to express, vent and release feelings in healthy, appropriate and conscious ways, thus avoiding getting stuck in negative emotional patterns.

How you consciously experience your emotions makes all the difference. Here is a simple way to do this: When you do feel an emotion and need to express it, take a breath and say clearly: 'I am feeling xyz (for example, angry, frustrated, sad) and that's OK.'

Take another breath and say this again twice more until you sense a different feeling. In some circumstances it may be better to just say this to yourself, not out loud. Whichever way you do it, you are allowing the feeling, and yourself, to 'be', without judgement.

OUR PERSONAL REACTIONS

Often, what happens is that our rational mind is hijacked by an emotional reaction that has a strong charge, because it 'plugs into' something from our past history. Have you ever noticed how something that really makes you react strongly might go over the head of someone else? For example, your boss doesn't say 'Good morning' as he passes by, and you feel hurt. Jackie who works next to you, however, says, 'Oh, never mind, he's probably just got his head in the clouds.' This is a good indicator that your reaction is just a tip of the iceberg of a more deep-rooted negative emotional pattern – in this case one of feeling easily rejected.

Although you may not be able to recognise in that moment how you are feeling and what drives that feeling, or be able to express it in a conscious and appropriate way, here is a simple exercise to help you link how you feel today with deep-rooted emotional patterns in childhood.

EXERCISE: tracking emotional patterns

Anger

1. How do you express your anger?
2. When was the last time you felt angry?
3. How did it make you feel, physically?
4. Were you overtly angry or did you cover it up?
5. Now cut back to your childhood. Think of a time your mother or father was angry with you. How did you react?
6. Bring to mind your first memory of feeling angry.
7. How did they react?

Feeling 'not good enough'

1. When was the last time you felt put down?
2. How did it make you feel, physically?
3. How did you react?
4. Now go back to a scene in childhood when you felt put down. Perhaps you were being told off.
5. How did you react?

REORGANISING LIFE IN OUR DREAMS

Whatever emotions we don't express and let go of during the day may surface in our dreams. It's now well established that dreaming sleep is vital for effective learning, but it may also be a way of sorting out emotional problems that you haven't dealt with during the day. Dreaming is how we process and help to release unexpressed emotions. If you don't do this, your brain ends up in permanent 'stress' mode. In fact, it appears that the period of sleep, known as REM (rapid eye movement) sleep helps release unexpressed emotions.

Next time you wake up remembering a dream, become aware of your predominant feeling. Now scan through yesterday and think of a time when you felt this feeling but didn't fully express it. You'll be amazed at how often these unexpressed emotions come out in our dreams.

If you'd like to know more about this I recommend you read *Dreaming Reality* by Joe Griffin and Ivan Tyrrell (HG Publishing).

LETTING GO AND LEARNING FROM THE PAST

So, how do you give yourself the equivalent of a psychological detox, releasing stored-up patterns of negative emotions that keep you blocked, unhappy, over-reactive and generally low? Here are a few simple exercises and options that can help you let go of your emotional baggage. If you are scoring high on the emotional check, I recommend you explore one or more of these options.

EXERCISE: breathing out the emotion

1. Bring to mind an emotionally charged situation that is still causing you some distress or unease.
2. Identify a place in your body where you feel the emotion this memory evokes. Put your hand there.
3. As you breathe in, imagine white light pouring into that area. As you breathe out, imagine the old pain of that memory leaving.
4. Breathe in warmth and light, and breathe out the negative emotions. With each breath you feel lighter and clearer until you feel a physical sense of relief in that place in your body.

EXERCISE: camera eye

This technique was taught to me by Oscar Ichazo. You need someone to be your 'witness', in other words to listen to what you are describing. It's an excellent exercise if you have someone who is skilled in listening to a charged memory.

1. Think of an emotionally charged memory – perhaps the loss of someone close to you, the break-up of a relationship, or the loss of a job or important opportunity.
2. Now describe this incident to your 'witness', factually in the present tense, as if you were watching the incident through a camera. Don't describe your feelings, or thoughts about what happened. Just say what happens (what you see, hear, and so on); for example, 'I am sitting on the sofa in my living room. My husband comes in the room and says ...'
3. Be aware of the moment in the description where you feel an emotion. Initially, you may find it hard to describe exactly what happened in the moment of charge. You may start to rationalise or say how you feel, or get sleepy or skip the actual moment of charge.
4. So, run through the incident more than once and you'll find the emotional charge starts to dissipate. It's important that the person listening doesn't interject, sympathise or pass judgement. Their role is simply to listen.

EXERCISE: writing down the emotion 1

1. Take a piece of paper and, without any censorship whatsoever, write down as quickly as you can one of the emotional scenes from your past, captured in Camera Eye above, that keeps having an impact upon your present. Put your real feelings in there: how you felt as a child, how you feel affected now. Make it emotional, specific and powerful.
2. When you are finished, take the piece of paper and burn it. Have in your mind the sense of the power of that negative pattern being burned and destroyed – floating away with the smoke.

EXERCISE: writing down the emotion 2

This kind of writing exercise is good for discharging negative emotions you have in unresolved relationships – perhaps concerning an ex-partner or parent – and helps you move on.

1. Make a list of people you still feel upset with or haven't forgiven. Choose one. Next, write a letter expressing all your negative feelings about their behaviour or attitude. Hold nothing back, but tell them that you won't accept their negative projections. Remember: don't send it!
 2. Next, write a letter expressing everything you appreciate about them and all you have learned from your interaction with them. Really open your heart to them and forgive them.
- This simple exercise will make you clearer and more able to meet them, if you wish to, or move on, without always carrying the weight of the past with you.

EXERCISE: journaling

Another writing method is journaling. The best time to do this is first thing in the morning, because this is the time when you will have the least noise from your very own inbuilt critic (that's the voice in you that undermines you and stops you from doing certain things or trying something new).

1. Get a couple of pieces of paper and write down whatever comes up. We are not talking about fine literature here, but the chance to 'take an emotional dump', as a colleague of mine once so evocatively put it.
2. You might find yourself repeating sentences, using colourful language or appreciating the beautiful trees around you; on the other hand you may find yourself pouring down scorn on someone or something – it doesn't matter what emerges, just go with it.
3. Let your hand write faster than you can think, don't worry about spelling and grammar or even writing within the margins.
4. If you are writing about a past situation and get stuck, start each sentence with the phrase, 'I remember...' and allow whatever comes to follow. It doesn't even matter if it feels made up – it's your emotional truth.

This method, called 'Morning Pages' was originally designed by Julia Cameron to help creative artists get past their blocks, but it is of value to each one of us. After all, we are all creative: we are creating our own lives, and we'll be more and more creative if we are freed from the chains of the past.

EXERCISE: moving it out of your body

A great way to discharge negative emotions is through movement itself. As you know, when you have a good walk or a run, you come back feeling refreshed. The effect will be doubled if you use that exercise to discharge your negative emotions.

If you are emotionally upset, go for a jog, swim or walk, and with each step or stroke imagine letting go of the emotion you are feeling.

One excellent and systematic way to do this is to join a Five Rhythms class (see Resources). Its founder, Gabrielle Roth, has pioneered a way of using music and movement to tap deeply into unexpressed emotions and release them. It incorporates five specific rhythms, from very quiet to very frenetic, that magically bring up the full spectrum of unexpressed feelings.

READ THESE BOOKS

Gabrielle Roth's book *Maps to Ecstasy: Healing Power of Movement* is helpful for moving through and letting go of negative emotions. My favourite is Tim Laurence's *You Can Change Your Life*. Also excellent for understanding the effect of our family conditioning is Oliver James's *They F*** You Up*. If you are drawn to journaling, a very good book to help you is *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron.

EMOTIONAL THERAPY

Many therapies only get to the point of identifying what's wrong, not finding ways of letting go of the past and developing new, healthier habits. A good psychotherapist can help you let go of negative emotional patterns and develop healthier ways of being. To find a psychotherapist or counsellor in your area, contact UKCP (The United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy) (see Resources). Also, I have been particularly impressed by psychotherapists and counsellors trained at the Psychosynthesis and Education Trust. They have an excellent two-weekend workshop called *The Essentials*, which enables you to look at your life, how you would like it to be and what needs to change. (See Resources.)

THE HOFFMAN PROCESS

By far the most powerful and effective course I have come across, which keeps receiving excellent reviews, is a one-week residential course called the Hoffman Process. It thoroughly 'undoes' the negative patterns of behaviour that we inherit from childhood, resulting in a profound transformation in relating and relationships, and a sense of who we are. It crosses the fine line between psychology – healing the psyche – and spirituality: getting you back in touch with the higher 'self' or soul. Since 1967, more than 70,000 people worldwide have used the techniques of Hoffman to achieve personal strength, clarity and freedom from destructive emotional patterns. Participants have reported benefits such as much better relationships with family members and being able to communicate more effectively at home and at work. I often get letters from people who want to express their gratitude for the introduction to this excellent course, and the transformation they have received from doing it. (See Resources for details).

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