

# Emotional Intimacy

A Comprehensive Guide  
for Connecting with the Power  
of Your Emotions

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## Introduction

# Into the Heart of Emotion

TO BE ALIVE IS TO feel, and to feel is to experience emotion. Whether our emotions are overwhelming or subtle, fiery or chilling, dark or light, they are always present, finding expression in an extraordinary number of ways. Our emotions are ever-moving wonders, bringing together physiology, feeling, cognition, and conditioning, allowing us to connect and communicate in more ways than we can imagine. The more deeply we know our emotions, the deeper and more fulfilling our lives will be.

However anatomically complex our emotions are, they are simple in their felt immediacy, providing us with the opportunity to participate more fully and more consciously in them so that we might make use of them as wisely as possible. For all too many of us, emotions remain a largely untapped source of strength, freedom, and connection. They are so much a part of us that we tend to take them for granted, losing touch with their sheer mystery and with the marvelously varied ways they transmit our inner workings, facially and otherwise.

How well do you know your emotions? To what degree are you at home with them? How do you view them—are they more ally or foe? Do you distance yourself from them, or get lost in them? Do you keep them tightly reined, or do you let yourself get carried away by them? Or do you cultivate *intimacy* with them, however dark or unpleasant or disturbing they may be?

Whatever we are *doing* with our emotions will not be clear until we know them well. We simply won't be close enough to them to see what directions we may be channeling them into. For example, we might not recognize that hostility is not something that simply arises in us, but it

is something that we are *doing* with our anger. The more intimate we are with our anger—which is far more about being close to it than about controlling it!—the more easily we can see the choices we are making with it.

The capacity for emotional intimacy—a greatly undervalued capacity—is essential not only to truly fulfilling relationships, but to having an uncommonly vital life in which awareness, passion, love, action, and integrity function as one. What I mean by emotional intimacy is two-fold: (1) becoming intimate with our emotions, including their arising, expression, historical roots, and relational functioning; and (2) becoming intimate in our relationships with significant others through how we express and share our emotions.

To be intimate with our emotions is no small undertaking; doing so requires far more than simply being able to openly express and talk about them.

Being intimate with our fear, for example, means getting close enough to it to see it clearly—and in detail—in its mental, psychological, and physical dimensions, but not so close that we fuse with our fear or get lost in it. So we remain *slightly* separated from our fear even as we openly feel and closely connect with it, maintaining just enough distance to keep it in focus.

To take this example further, cultivating intimacy with our fear doesn't necessarily lessen it, but it does put us in a position where we are neither identified with it nor disconnected from it. We see our fear for what it is, we sense its location and coursings in our body, we recognize its impact on our thinking processes, we become more aware of our history with it, we register its degree and quality of contractedness. As such, we become increasingly capable of working with it and skillfully sharing it. As we become more intimate with our fear, we lessen our fear of it and eventually adopt a nonproblematic orientation toward it.

The more intimate we are with our emotions, the more adept we'll be in both containing and expressing them, so that their presence serves rather than hinders us and those with whom we're in contact. In this sense, there are no unwholesome or negative emotions—only unwholesome or negative things we do with them. Emotional intimacy allows us to make the best possible use of all our emotions—and it enhances relationship.

Without emotional intimacy, relationships founder on the reefs of emotional discord or flatness—no matter how heated the sex, no matter how much we hold in common—leaving us marooned from

the interpersonal closeness for which we yearn. If we are parents, our children will pay the price of our lack of emotional intimacy, learning to normalize emotional reactivity and disconnection. All too easily, we may simply act out our unresolved wounds and mishandled needs through our emotional expression or lack thereof, while remaining unaware of what we are doing! Such *re-acting* keeps our relationships in the shallows, cut off from the emotional depth and resonance needed for genuine intimacy. When we wake up to this and begin doing what it takes to develop and deepen emotional intimacy, our relationships start to become less of a battlefield or flatland and more of a sanctuary. They become more vital, more nourishing, more authentic.



Emotional illiteracy infects many relationships, regardless of how effectively it might be camouflaged—or compensated for—by “rational” discourse, material success, erotic intensity, or spiritual practice. Despite the obvious presence of emotion in everyone, as well as the plain-to-see emotional difficulties or challenges many of us have, emotional education has yet to take a significant place in the majority of our schools. It simply does not appear to be a priority for those in charge of “educational” policy. This, of course, is not just a failing of our school system, but of our culture. Intellectual intelligence tends to get the lion’s share of attention, with moral and emotional intelligence getting far too little focus, and many relationships reflect this.

Modeling a healthy relationship to our emotions is one of the biggest gifts we can give our children. Many of us grew up suffering the consequences of our parents’ unresolved emotional wounds, and we developed an understandably problematic orientation toward our emotions. For example, we may have learned to associate the expression of anger with danger or the loss of love, and so have a reaction to anger that works against relational well-being—unless we’ve worked through this. We have an obligation not to pass on our emotional wounding to our children, or at least to minimize such transmission. This means doing our very best to face and work through that old hurt, as perhaps optimally done through high-quality psychotherapy.

How we treat our children is closely akin to how we treat the child within us. If we’re uncomfortable with our emotions, especially those

that are particularly vulnerable, we'll very likely be uncomfortable with our children's emotions, especially when they are fully expressed. If we were shamed for crying when we were young, the odds are that we'll find ourselves shaming our children for crying at least some of the time, despite our intentions to do otherwise—unless we've worked through this dynamic in us to the point where we no longer shame ourselves (via the finger-pointing of our inner critic) for our more vulnerable emotions and their open expression.

When emotional intimacy is all but missing from a relationship—with emotional reactivity and dissociation at the helm—and nothing significant is done about this, it might be more accurate to say the partners have an *association* rather than a relationship. There may be similar values, the overall tone might be friendly, and there may be some sex occurring, but at best what is happening is basically akin to a successful business in which both partners are doing their part to keep the ship afloat. There's nothing necessarily wrong with this, but it's a far cry from the kind of relational mutuality they could be sharing and living. It's as if we're thirsty and are relying solely on the bottled water that's on sale nearby, even though a crystal-clear river of clean water is also within reach, asking only that we turn toward it and take the necessary steps.

If we want more depth and connection and joy in our relationships, we're going to have to develop more emotional intimacy with our partners, our friends, our family, our coworkers. It's that simple and that challenging. Connecting only through our upbeat emotions is not enough—we also need to find, and keep finding, relationship-deepening connection through *all* our emotions. And there is no way we can do this if we are not significantly intimate with our emotions. How can we share our anger in a way that brings us closer if we are not close enough to it to know it well?



It is quite natural to feel uncomfortable as we embark on the journey toward emotional intimacy—given that along the way we'll very likely have to encounter whatever first drove us into emotional darkness, numbness, or dissociation—but developing this closeness with our emotions is an immensely rewarding and liberating passage, regardless of its challenges. When I began this journey, catalyzed by an extremely painful

relationship breakup in my midtwenties, I, being strongly inclined to suppress my vulnerability, was far from willing to approach my emotional hurt. Anger came easily to me, but not tears. I was tightly contained, but my circumstances were sufficiently intense to crack the container beyond repair. And so my walls crumbled and my grief emerged, flooding through my defenses, my numbness, my denial of how much pain I was actually in and had been in for a long, long time. In this process I had to encounter the early-life dynamics that had generated the construction of my emotional walls; this was excruciating at first, but after a while it felt very natural to me. I had broken down and broken open, and through that very breaking gradually emerged into an increasingly life-giving sense of wholeness, at the hub of which was my emotional life.

So many of us feel our emotions (or at least some of our emotions) only partially. We may be used to suppressing them; we may not feel sufficiently safe; we may find it just too vulnerable to feel fully. But when we become intimate with our emotions, we come alive—full-bloodedly alive—feeling with an exquisite sensitivity, depth, and breadth. And then vulnerability takes on a new meaning; we realize that it can be a source of *strength*. Our senses are heightened, our empathy deepens, our intuition sharpens, and we begin to fully know in a deeply embodied sense the uniquely essential presence that is us.

This newfound vitality is coupled with an ability to be more tuned in to the impact we have on others. We are more able to cut through our tendency to let ourselves off the hook when we have hurt others, knowingly or unknowingly. Integrity becomes not a “should,” but a given.

Deepening our capacity for emotional intimacy awakens and grounds us, connecting us with palpable immediacy to the pulse of what really matters, rendering us more able to respond optimally to life’s inevitable challenges. This is an inherently liberating process, unchaining us as it does from much of our conditioned way of being.

## WHAT CONSTITUTES EMOTIONAL INTIMACY?

Emotional intimacy happens as a result of multiple factors in synergistic combination:

1. Being sufficiently well acquainted with our emotions so that when one arises we recognize it, can name it, and acknowledge what we are doing with it.

2. Relating *to* our emotions rather than just *from* our emotions, so that we neither fuse with nor dissociate from them.
3. Listening to others deeply, both to what is being said and to what is not being said.
4. Remaining emotionally transparent and nondefensively expressive of whatever is arising in us, be it pleasant or unpleasant.
5. Being fully vulnerable.
6. Knowing our personal history well enough to be able to recognize when old survival strategies have possessed us, along with the willingness to fully share and work with this.
7. Being empathetic without any loss of personal boundaries.
8. Keeping at least some connection to our core of self as we allow our emotions as open an expression as our situation warrants.
9. Cutting through any tendencies to play victim to our emotions so that we no longer blame them for our bad behavior.
10. Being able to wake up in the midst of our reactivity and not let it run the show, at least not for any significant length of time.

All of these factors, both alone and in conjunction with each other, are considered throughout this book. I suggest that you return to this list at least several times as you progress through the chapters, so as to reinforce your overview of emotional intimacy.

## NAVIGATING THIS BOOK

This book has three parts. In part 1, I explore emotion, go deeply into what emotional intimacy is, and introduce what it means to work with our emotions in a more general context. In part 2, I take a comprehensive look at each emotion and provide practices for knowing and optimally working with each one. And last, in part 3, I explore material that helps deepen our understanding of emotion and emotional intimacy.

A note on the practices that you'll find throughout part 2: Read each one through before beginning it. Make sure that you have paper and pen handy, because some of the practices require a bit of writing. Also, make sure that you won't be disturbed during a practice and that you have adequate time to rest and reflect at the end (ten minutes minimum). I also ask that you consider doing at least some of the practices more than once, especially those that most deeply affect you. And learn

the meditative practice described in the appendix; doing so will help ground and deepen your experience of the various practices.

Putting this book together has been a joy for me, a richly rewarding labor of love. In my uncommon bond with my wife, Diane, and in the healing/awakening work we do together, emotional intimacy plays a central role, whether we're working with a couple stalled at a relational crossroads or with those in the throes of their core wounding or are training a group of psychospiritual practitioners. We don't treat emotion as something to simply talk about and analyze but as something to directly explore, to be nonconceptually known from the deep inside, finding that once it is thus known, fitting insights and meaningful connections spontaneously emerge, often with equally spontaneous awakenings to one's true nature.

Everything in this book is rooted in the intuitive integrative work I've been doing with clients worldwide during the past thirty-five years—work that has, from the very beginning, been strongly focused on emotion and emotional well-being. Along the way, my personal path and the direction of my work became increasingly focused on developing intimacy with all that we are—high and low, dark and light, dying and undying—with a special emphasis on emotion. So throughout these pages, I speak from both direct experience and from an ever-fresh appreciation for the mystery that is emotion.



Cultivating intimacy with our emotions is a deeply rewarding odyssey, which we are invited to embark on by our circumstances. We don't have to enlist for emotional boot camp; life will do that for us! Whenever an emotion arises—an *extremely* common occurrence—we have an opportunity to deepen our intimacy with it and to respond to it in ways aligned with the highest good of all involved.

Emotion implicates us as a totality. This means that emotion is not just something stored somewhere in our body but is a vital process—more verb than noun—that includes all that we are. Emotion is feeling, but not just feeling; emotion includes cognition, conditioning, social factors, and arguably also spirituality in its more developed stages. So in emotion we have biology, biography, behavior, perspective, and bare awareness all coexisting and interacting for better or for worse. What

complexity, what an exquisitely alive interplay always in motion—and yet such easily felt, rapidly registered immediacy! Becoming conscious in the midst of this without distancing ourselves from it is the essence of emotional intimacy.

Becoming intimate with our emotions is a challenge that we'd do best to wholeheartedly welcome. There's some risk involved—the risk of getting more vulnerable, more emotionally raw, more hurt—but the far greater risk is in not developing such intimacy. When we truly befriend and make wise use of our emotions, we benefit ourselves and all those with whom we are involved, directly and indirectly.

However uncomfortable they may be, our emotions are our guests. Let us treat them as such, neither rejecting them nor letting them run roughshod over us. Let us learn from them and learn deeply, for the benefit of one and all.



*Part 1*

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# Orientation

# 1

## The Anatomy of Emotion

Emotion is far more verb than noun, being not some entity or thing we can get out of our system but a vital process always in some degree of flux.

GIVEN HOW FUNDAMENTAL our emotions are to our very being and how frequently they arise in us, it is remarkable how little intimacy we may have with them. We might, for example, feel shame quite often and yet have almost no in-depth sense of its actual nature and impact on us.

Why are our emotions fundamental to us? Because without them our capacity to engage in meaningful communication would be all but nonexistent. Emotions are evolutionary phenomena—present only in warm-blooded animals—that make possible a greater complexity of relational savvy and contextual sensitivity, as well as a more creative use of both our outer and inner world.

It is common to take our emotions for granted, as if they are no more than innate forces of nature that come with being human. Our language often points to how these “natural” forces move through us: we “storm” out of the room, we are “flooded” with sadness, we “erupt” with rage. But just as we may not be students of weather, despite its ubiquitous presence in our life, we may not be students of emotion. We all get angry (whether or not we are conscious of it), but we might know very little about anger, having spent no quality time in Emotional Literacy 101’s classrooms.

Our only normal break from emotion is during deep dreamless sleep, when consciousness is withdrawn not only from the senses but also