



Healthy, Truth-based Emotions and Associations

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My observation is that most intense emotional reactions in the present get much of their energy from triggered, distorted emotions and associations that are anchored in underlying traumatic memories. And my assessment is that most of us need a lot of help to be able to see and acknowledge our triggered, trauma-anchored emotions and associations. However, my experience is that some people also need help in understanding that not all emotions and associations are triggered, distorted, and anchored in underlying trauma.

Triggering requires that there is toxic content carried in the memory of a traumatic experience that has not yet been resolved. Triggering activates the underlying traumatic memory, and the distorted content and exaggerated intensity of the triggered response comes from the toxic content still carried in the trauma. Furthermore, traumatic memories almost always carry false negative interpretations (or *lies*), and distorted, dysfunctional associations, as part of their toxic content. Finally, there are many emotions and associations that are **not** distorted, dysfunctional, exaggerated, or lie-based – there are many emotions and associations that are **not** contaminated by toxic traumatic content.

I. Healthy, truth-based emotions vs trauma-anchored, lie-based emotions: Emotions are an important part of our subjective experience and serve many important functions, one of which is to provide subjective, experiential, visceral, intuitive guidance and motivation. Truth-based emotions provide important guidance and motivation *towards* things that are good, nurturing, and restorative and *away* from things that are destructive. Truth-based emotions are also an important source of guidance regarding *balance* and/or *completion* – “this is not enough,” “this is just right,” and “this is too much.”

For example, truth-based loneliness is a negative/unpleasant emotion that the Lord has given us to guide and motivate us towards relationship and connection, and it will also provide guidance regarding balance (“I’m still lonely – I think I need to spend more time with my friends”). Truth-based guilt is an unpleasant emotion the Lord has given us to guide and motivate us away from sin and towards repentance, and it will also provide guidance regarding completion – we know when we have “gotten the job done” because truth-based guilt will go away as soon as we have completed confession and repentance. Truth-based fear is an unpleasant emotion the Lord has given us to guide and motivate us away from danger. Truth-based peace and joy are positive/pleasant emotions the Lord has given us to guide and motivate us towards good, nurturing, and restorative things.

Pleasant and unpleasant physical sensations provide a good analogy to the way in which God designed positive and negative emotions to provide guidance. For example, hunger is a physical sensation the Lord has given us to guide and motivate us towards food, and if the system is healthy our hunger will go away when we have eaten just the right amount. Thirst is a physical sensation the Lord has given us to guide and motivate us towards drink, and again, if the system is healthy it will tell us when we have had enough. Pain is a physical sensation the Lord has

given us to guide and motivate us away from things that are harmful to our bodies and to guide and motivate us to protect body parts that are already injured. Pleasure is a physical sensation the Lord has given us that draws us towards things that are nurturing to the body (much distortion has come with sin and brokenness, but physical pleasure is a positive motivation towards appropriate sleep, adequate food and drink, ideal body temperature, etc). Again, if the system is healthy, we will *feel satisfied* when we have had enough.

We want to embrace healthy emotions as the blessings that they are:

- We want to accept as healthy the desire to pursue life-giving things and activities that elicit positive emotions. For example, it is appropriate and healthy to want to continue certain Christmas traditions that are associated with positive childhood memories of happy times together as a family and that evoke positive emotions.
- We want to accept as healthy both the desire to avoid unhealthy things and activities that elicit negative emotions as well as the desire to pursue things and activities that relieve and/or prevent unpleasant emotions. Several examples have already been mentioned above (loneliness motivates us to pursue friendships, guilt motivates us to avoid sin, and fear motivates us to avoid danger and injury). Another example would be the healthy, appropriate motivation to pursue healing in order to avoid a variety of unpleasant triggered emotions.
- And we want to accept as healthy the way in which truth-based emotions provide guidance regarding balance and/or completion. (Again, “this is not enough,” “this is just right,” and “this is too much.”)

In contrast, trauma-anchored, lie-based emotions will impair our discernment, motivating and guiding us *towards* things that are destructive and *away* from things that are good, nurturing, and restorative. Lie-based emotions also produce powerful *misguidance* regarding balance and/or completion. For example, if a person was neglected as a child he may have lies such as “I am all alone,” or “Nobody will ever stay with me.” This person will have lie-based loneliness that will not be relieved by appropriate friendships, and that will drive him to pursue relationships in a way that is unbalanced and unhealthy. Or a person who was sexually abused may have lies such as “It was my fault because I didn’t say ‘no’,” and “I am dirty because it felt good.” This person will have lie-based guilt and shame that will not resolve with confession and repentance. This lie-based guilt and shame will guide and motivate him or her *away* from appropriate sexual intimacy with a spouse and will drive him or her *towards* unbalanced, compulsive confession and repentance.

In contrast to embracing healthy emotions, we need to dismantle trauma-anchored, lie-based emotions by resolving the underlying traumatic memories that source them.

II. Healthy, truth-based associations vs trauma-anchored, lie-based associations: The mind is designed to make associations (both negative and positive), and this process is the basis for much *experiential* learning.¹ Healthy, *truth-based* associations are the basis for a lot of helpful experiential learning, whereas trauma-anchored, *lie-based* associations are the basis for many dysfunctional, unhelpful learned reactions.

For example, on the healthy, truth-based side, we make associations between staying out in the

¹ I say that associations are the basis for *much* experiential learning as opposed to *all* experiential learning because interpreting the meaning of an experience is another source of experiential learning, and this can be more than just association.

sun too long and painful sunburn, and thereby appropriately learn to wear sunscreen. We make associations between staying out too late and missing dessert, and thereby appropriately learn to get home in time for dinner. We make associations between completing our chores and getting an allowance, and thereby appropriately learn to complete important-but-unpleasant tasks in order to obtain rewards. We make associations between spending time with friends and both the positive experience of joy as well as relief from painful loneliness, and thereby appropriately learn that friendships are really important.

We want to embrace healthy associations as the blessings that they are:

- We want to accept as healthy the desire to pursue life-giving things and activities that are associated with pleasurable and positive emotions. For example, it is appropriate and healthy for a couple to want to play a certain song that reminds them of special occasions together – a song that is associated with memories of happy romantic times together as a couple.
- We want to accept as healthy both the desire to avoid destructive/toxic things and activities that are associated with pain and negative emotions, as well as the desire to pursue things and activities that are associated with relieving and/or preventing pain and negative emotions. Several examples have already been mentioned above (the desire to avoid sunburn pain motivates us to wear sunscreen, the desire to avoid missing dessert motivates us to get home in time, and the desire to stop feeling lonely motivates us to build friendships). Another example would be the healthy, appropriate motivation to avoid speeding, since it is associated with the unpleasant experience of paying \$100 to the state of Illinois instead of using that money to take your family out for dinner.
- And we want to accept as healthy the way in which truth-based associations provide guidance regarding balance and/or completion. For example, not having enough food is associated with unpleasant hunger, eating just the right amount of food is associated with pleasant satisfaction, and eating too much food is associated with the unpleasant experience of being over-full.

In contrast, trauma-anchored, lie-based associations will impair our discernment, motivating and guiding us *towards* things that are destructive and *away* from things that are good, nurturing, and restorative. Lie-based associations also produce powerful *misguidance* regarding balance and/or completion. For example, a girl who is molested by her father and uncle may make associations between men and sexual abuse, “learning” that men are dangerous and will violate her boundaries. This lie-based learned association will cause her to fear and avoid being close to all men. Or a boy who is verbally abused by his parents, his first grade teacher, and his baseball coach may make associations between authority figures and verbal abuse, “learning” that authority figures are dangerous and will attack him if he doesn’t do things perfectly. This lie-based learned association will cause him to be over-intimidated by all authority figures. Or a girl in an abusive situation where she experienced tenderness and affection only when she was being molested may make positive associations between affection and sex, “learning” that she will only receive affection when she is being sexual. This lie-based learned association will impair her judgment with respect to sexual relationships. Or a child who only receives affirmation when he performs may make positive associations between the affirmation and achievement, “learning” that he is only “good enough” to be affirmed when he is performing well. This lie-based learned association will cause him to feel like a disappointment and failure unless he is performing well. No matter how well he does, he will never feel securely loved and affirmed, and will be driven to a workaholic life style in pursuit of certainty that he will always perform well.

In contrast to embracing healthy associations, we need to dismantle trauma-anchored, lie-based associations by resolving the underlying traumatic memories that source them.

III. Distinguishing between *healthy, truth-based* emotions and associations as opposed to *trauma-anchored, lie-based* associations and emotions: It is, of course, important to distinguish between *healthy, truth-based* positive associations and emotions and *trauma-anchored, lie-based* associations and emotions. As mentioned in the introduction, most of us need a lot of help to be able to see and acknowledge our triggered, trauma-anchored emotions and associations. Fortunately, there are relatively simple principles and tools that are tremendously helpful in distinguishing between healthy, truth-based emotions and associations, and trauma-anchored, lie-based emotions and associations:

- When we are triggered, with emotions and associations that are trauma-anchored and lie-based, we will be in non-relational mode with relational circuits that are offline.
- In contrast, when we are free of triggering, with emotions and associations that are healthy and truth-based, we will be in relational mode with relational circuits that are online.
- Furthermore, it is reasonably easy to learn to recognize the difference between being in relational mode with our circuits online and being in non-relational mode with our circuits offline.

For a thorough discussion of these principles and tools with respect to triggering, relational circuits, and how to recognize the difference between when you're in relational mode as opposed to non-relational mode, see chapters twelve through twenty-three in *Outsmarting Yourself*.²

²Karl D. Lehman, *Outsmarting Yourself: Catching Your Past Invading the Present and What to Do About It*, second edition (Libertyville, IL: This Joy! Books, 2014), pages 109-235.