



How to Become Emotionally Intelligent

By Steven L. Anderson, Ph.D., MBA

"Steve, you seem incredibly frustrated and unhappy," my friend said. "Maybe you should think about seeing a therapist."

"I'm fine!" I replied. "I don't need some dumb shrink to tell me how I am feeling!" I barked back.

Actually, I did. I just didn't have the guts to admit I was lost. That was twenty-five years ago. I wish I had listened to my friend, because five years later I finally ended up in a therapist's office. My psychiatrist, Henry Leuchter, M.D. taught me how to accept and understand my emotions and to have them work for me, not against me. It's what today is called emotional intelligence.

In the May issue of this ezine I discussed why emotional intelligence (EQ) is so important in our lives. I stated that without emotions we would not be able to function in society. So now that I have established the importance of EQ, how does one become emotionally intelligent?

The first step in becoming emotionally intelligent is to realize that emotions do not come from our environment. They come from our thoughts about our environment. This may seem like a picky distinction, but it is very important. If for instance, you saw a snake in the woods and you became panicked and ran away, that would be functional provided the snake was poisonous. But if you ran away from a harm less snake that would be dysfunctional. Your emotional reaction and behavior in this case are completely dependent upon your beliefs about snakes.

So what, you may ask, what difference does it make if I run away from a harmless snake? It doesn't, but the dysfunctional reaction becomes far more significant if, for instance, we are avoiding our boss because we are fearful of them. That type of behavior will generally adversely impact our future.

So, once we know that our thoughts impact our emotional reactions, how do we become master of them? My recommendation is that you follow these four steps provided to me a long time ago by Dr. Leuchter. First you have to acknowledge that you are having an emotional reaction. Second, you have to accept your emotions. No matter what they are. Third, you assess what is driving the emotion and form a plan of action to successfully resolve the emotion. This may seem easy, but it is not. You have 100,000,000,000 neurons in your brain, with 100,000,000,000,000 electrical connections between these cells. All of your thoughts affect your emotional state. Sorting out what is driving your emotions takes time and patience.

In my experience, the toughest step of all is acceptance. Many, many people simply will not accept what they are feeling and they dismiss their feelings. This causes emotions to pile up and drives even more dysfunctional behaviors in the future. It can also cause chronic anxiety, which is known to have a deadly effect upon our health. Lack of acceptance also seems to follow somewhat gender specific patterns. Males have a very difficult time accepting that they are afraid. Females generally have difficulty admitting that they are angry. In my experience those emotions we avoid gain control over our lives. On the other hand, when we confront all of our emotions, we become master of them, and consequently our lives.

The best way I have found to understand my emotions is to take time out regularly to be quiet, and then to write about what I am feeling, using the 4 A's listed above as a guide. I can tell you that this process has transformed my life. Twenty years ago I was very ill with an anxiety disorder. At that time, I had no idea what I was feeling at any given time. Now I am acutely aware of what I feel almost all of the time. It has had an unbelievably positive effect upon my relationships, my career and my level of happiness. If you are not already taking time out in your week to listen to your emotions, I ask that you to consider doing so. I believe that you will find that the payoff is well worth the time invested.