

UNDERSTANDING AND HANDLING YOUR FEELINGS

BY GARY R. COLLINS



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Could you describe yourself in just a few words?

When I was your age, I would have picked three words to describe myself: stupid, ugly, and odd.

I thought I was stupid because it always seemed that the teacher asked me questions I couldn't answer. I used to wonder why everybody else in the class got the easy questions and "dumb old Gary" (that was me) got the hard ones. It wasn't long before I started to feel like a real klutz.

Maybe life would have been easier if I had been handsome, athletic, and well built, but I was overweight. I thought I was fat: I would try to slouch in my seat and hide from the teacher, but that was impossible because the girl who sat in front of me was skinny. Sometimes the other kids made comments about my size, and that didn't make me feel any better about myself. My mother thought I was beautiful. But what do mothers know about things like that? I thought I was ugly.

I also felt I was odd. As far as I knew, I was the only kid my age in the whole world who felt frustrated, criticized by others, and not smart enough to do much of anything, including answering questions.

What I didn't know then was that almost everybody feels stupid at times. Most of us—one expert says 95 percent of us—see things in ourselves that we don't like. Because of that, we get especially hurt inside when friends or brothers and sisters tease us and call us names. Even when people say nothing, it's easy to be discouraged because of the braces on your teeth, the zits that won't go away, or the fact that you seem to be a different size from everybody else in the whole school.

Feeling stupid, ugly, and odd is pretty common to young teenagers. It's also common—and normal—to feel angry, disappointed, rejected, sad, lonely, and guilty sometimes. And, as if that weren't enough, young teenagers often go through sudden and unexpected mood changes. You may feel happy one minute and sad the next, hardly even knowing why.

IT'S OKAY TO HAVE FEELINGS

When I was little, we were told that "big boys don't cry" and that nobody likes a "crybaby." Maybe you've heard this, too. Sometimes it seems that people think it's bad to express any kind of feelings, even happy ones.

After being warned for long enough not to express our feelings, most of us decide there must be something wrong with having feelings.

Let's begin, then, by reminding ourselves that everybody has emotions. It's impossible to be human and not have them. Because of feelings, our lives have variety and interest. If we didn't have



feelings, we would be like robots. We'd be blah, boring, mechanical, and not even able to understand what it means to have fun.

Emotions tend to seem especially intense when you're young. As you get older, the whole range of your feelings becomes more familiar. When you're young, though, it's easy to feel helpless and overwhelmed by emotions. When you start facing your feelings for the first time, things hit with greater force.

Let's suppose, for example, that you and your closest friend are going to be separated because of a family move. For a while it may seem that the loneliness and sadness will never go away.

Because your feelings are so strong, your reactions might be strong as well. Little irritations that might not bother an adult or even a younger child can plunge you into depression and worry. On the brighter side, adolescents have been known to do really crazy things to show their joy and happiness over something like a football victory that maybe isn't all that important: (This isn't a lot different from some adults who get really mad or who jump up and down and shout in excitement over a game on TV. But kids tend to do that kind of thing more freely and more often.)

You and I may not always like our feelings. Our emotions may make life miserable at times. Still, we need to admit that emotions are part of being human. If you try to deny your feelings, you're only kidding yourself.

EMOTIONS AFFECT OUR BODIES

Sometimes people call each other "scaredy-cat," but have you ever thought about this expression? When a cat is frightened, its heart starts beating faster, its muscles get tense, and there are changes in the chemicals in its bloodstream. Although the cat doesn't realize this, its body is getting ready for action. If the danger continues, the animal will do one of two things. It will defend itself, or it will run away as fast as it can.

Something like this also happens to people. When we are excited, angry, scared, or aroused by other emotions, our bodies go through many physical changes. Our hearts beat faster, and our muscles get tense. All of these changes make us more alert and ready to react. We, too, get ready to defend ourselves or run.

Human beings, however, have a problem that animals never face. If we give way to our feelings and let them take over, we can get into trouble. Have you ever said something in anger—or hit somebody—and regretted it later? Have you ever yelled at a teacher, told somebody you were lonely, or said you were in love, and then wished later you had kept your mouth shut? It isn't always wise to express your feelings freely.

Does this mean that it's smarter always to hide our feelings? No! If you keep feelings of anger, frustration, sadness, and bitterness hidden away or bottled up inside, your body stays tense. Physical illness can develop, and you can feel churned up inside. It can actually be bad for your health. (It isn't good to keep pleasant feelings inside either; all feelings need to be expressed.)

Feelings that you keep all bottled up inside don't just go away. It's as if you bought a bunch of bananas and stuck them in a cupboard. You might not be able to see them, but before long you'd smell them. And if you opened the cupboard, chances are you'd see little fruit flies hovering all over them. They'd be rotten.

You can try to treat emotions as if they were bananas in the cupboard. You can hide them and you can pretend they don't exist, but they'll still be around. And eventually you'll have to deal with them, just like those bananas.

Whenever feelings come along, then, we have to decide whether to let them out or hold them in—and to what degree.

SO WHAT DO WE DO WITH FEELINGS?

Sometimes feelings can make life more exciting; they can also make us miserable. Whenever feelings come along, then, we have to decide whether to let them out or hold them in—and to what degree.

Sometimes that decision can be easy. If your team is winning, you don't hesitate to shout wildly. But what if the team is losing and you feel like crying? How do you act when you're really angry at a friend, a teacher, a parent, or your brother? How do you act when the person who makes you most angry is yourself? What do you do when you're feeling disappointed, excited, lonely, or guilty?

The answers to these questions depend on two main things. First, where are you? Sometimes I cry if I'm really sad, but usually that only happens when I'm alone or with someone who accepts me and doesn't laugh. Crying at a funeral is appropriate. Crying in an ice cream store because they're all out of mint chocolate chip is not appropriate, unless you happen to be three years old. If you're at a football game, it's okay if you shout or laugh like crazy. But you'll get a little static if you do this while you're listening to a sermon in church.

How you show your feelings, therefore, depends on where you are.



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How you show your feelings also depends on the kind of person you are.

Some people are expressive, while others like to play it cool and be self-controlled, at least in front of their friends. How, when, and where you express your emotions is a personal thing. A lot depends on your background, your culture, your family's way of expressing feelings, and what makes you feel comfortable. Everybody has feelings, but we express them in different ways.

HOW TO HANDLE YOUR FEELINGS

Can feelings be controlled? This is an important question—and the answer is yes. Feelings can almost always be handled.

I remember one time when I was part of my junior high school choir. We must have been pretty good because our choir was invited to sing in a big concert hall. We were competing with choirs from other schools for some sort of prize. Everybody was nervous; nobody wanted to make a mistake. When our turn came to sing, we filed up to the platform, stood up straight, and waited for the choir leader's signal to start singing. Everybody began at the same time.

Except me.

I made a mistake and started about half a second before everybody else. I really felt dumb, singing the first word all by myself in front of several thousand people. I can laugh about it now, but at the time I was really embarrassed and decided that we had lost the contest because of me. I kept thinking about it for weeks afterwards, and I had the feeling that everybody else in the choir remembered it just as vividly as I did. Maybe you've felt the same kind of embarrassment.

Feelings are like that. They often stay around and bother us for a long time. They drag us down and even affect the way we think. The first step in handling these emotions is to admit you have them. If you're mad, sad, glad, or having some other kind of feeling, admit it—at least to yourself.

Then think before you act. Do you remember the old idea that when you get mad you should count to ten before exploding? That isn't a bad suggestion. Sometimes a few seconds is all the time you need to stop yourself from saying something harmful or doing something you could be sorry for later.

Of course, it isn't always easy to control your feelings and actions. Have you ever worried about having to talk in front of the class or playing well in an important game? Maybe you were really anxious about what was going to happen, and then along came somebody who wanted to help. "It's okay," your friend may have said. "You don't have to worry about this."

Did that stop you from worrying? Absolutely not. Feelings don't go away just because you or somebody else decides that they should.

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The best way to deal with feelings is to think about what caused them in the first place. Then we can try to do something about the causes. This leads me to another suggestion that may seem a little strange, but it works: talk to yourself about your feelings.

Lots of us talk to ourselves all the time. Usually we don't do it out loud because we don't want to look crazy and we don't want others to know what we're telling ourselves. When I was your age, I used to talk to myself about my lack of ability in sports. I have to confess that I'm a terrible athlete. That always made me feel inferior. A lot of kids in my school thought people who couldn't run fast or hit a baseball weren't worth much. At the time I pretty much talked myself into believing that this was true. Now I know that some people are good in athletics and some, like me, are better at other things. I guess I had to talk myself into believing that, too.

Not long ago I was watching a state track meet. When the starting gun sounded, one guy took off like a bullet and soon was ahead of everybody else in the race. The kids from his school cheered like crazy. He was a certain winner, even before the race was half over.

Then he tripped.

For some reason he lost his balance and fell flat on his face in the middle of the track. By the time he got to his feet and ran the rest of the distance, everybody else had crossed the finish line. It wasn't hard to see that this guy was disappointed, disgusted with himself, and fighting mad.

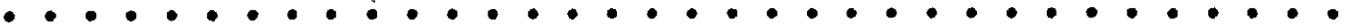
I don't know how he handled his feelings after the race. He could have spent the next few hours—or months—condemning himself, criticizing the "stupid track," and generally making himself and everybody else miserable.

Feelings are like that. Sometimes they take over our minds. But that doesn't have to happen. The runner could have asked himself several key questions. So could you in a similar situation:

- Why do I feel the way I do? (Because I made a mistake that caused me to fall in front of all those people, embarrassing me and letting down my school.)
- What can I do about it now? (Probably nothing, although it might help to talk to the track coach. He might have some suggestions to keep me from making the same mistake again.)
- Does my mistake mean I'm stupid and doomed to be a failure forever, or can I learn from it and move on? (Everybody makes mistakes, but you can learn from your experiences and do better next time.)

It's important to be honest with yourself in answering questions like these. Otherwise, the only person you're fooling is the most important person as far as your feelings are concerned—yourself.

The best way to deal with feelings is to think about what caused them in the first place. Then we can try to do something about the causes.



SOME OTHER TIPS ON HANDLING FEELINGS

Once you realize the importance of learning how to handle your feelings, you'll start to get into the habit. Next time you're struggling with some emotion, ask yourself the following two questions and try to come up with honest answers:

1. What is causing this feeling?
2. What can I do about it?

If you don't have any good answers, talk with a friend, parent, youth leader, counselor, coach, or teacher. When we're honest enough to share our feelings with another person, we've made an important step in handling how we feel. The sooner you learn this, the easier it will be to deal with your feelings.

Another important idea is to express your emotions without losing your cool. How do you do that? Tell others how you feel—honestly, but without ranting, raving, and making a fool of yourself. Sometimes it helps to not only tell someone how you feel, but why. Here are some examples:

- "When you take my things without asking, I feel really mad. Please ask me before using my stuff."
- "I feel really hurt when you walk away while I'm talking. I have something important to tell you and I wish you'd let me finish."

And if you sometimes forget all of this fine advice and blow your top, be quick to apologize. I'm a psychologist. People come to me to talk about their problems. So I'd like to be able to tell you that I always handle my emotions beautifully, that I never get discouraged, that I never yell at my kids, and that I'm a model of self-control. Well, don't believe it. Nobody can be perfect, and I'm no exception. At times all of us get carried away by our feelings, including me. The important thing is to be able to admit our mistakes and say we're sorry.

There's another thing you can do: don't let your mind make matters worse. A young friend of mine told me how he'd felt recently when he was rejected by some of the kids in his youth group. "We were pretty good friends for a while," he said, "but they kind of cooled off to me. Then they started ignoring me. I guess they decided I wasn't good enough for their group."

Did my friend sit around moping, thinking how awful he was, or planning how he could get



revenge? No, he didn't. He admitted to himself that he felt hurt and sad because of what the other kids had done. Then he made up his mind to do two things. He would continue to be friendly to the people who were rejecting him. But he'd also get involved in other activities where he could find new friends. He didn't spend time brooding over his feelings so that matters got worse.

This brings us to one last suggestion for handling feelings: be willing to reach out to somebody else. Is there someone you know who is sad, discouraged, lonely, or feeling rejected? By taking a couple of minutes to encourage such people, you can really be a great help to them. What may surprise you is that this can make you feel pretty good as well. Some day you might find that another person will reach out to help you when you feel down.

Everybody has feelings. Emotions are an important part of being human. The more we recognize this—and understand our own and other people's feelings—the better off life will be for everybody.



FACTUAL QUESTIONS:

1. When Gary Collins was a teenager, what were some of the problems he faced?

2. What were some of the emotions he felt as a teenager? What triggered those emotions?

3. What emotions does he say are common to young teenagers?

4. How can emotions affect our bodies?



5. According to the author, how can our emotions get us into trouble?

6. Gary Collins mentions several things we can do to handle our emotions more effectively. What are they?

7. What two questions can we ask ourselves the next time we're struggling with an emotion?

INTERPRETIVE QUESTIONS:

8. The author tells us that emotions are okay. What does he mean by this?

9. What are some ways we can help others when they're feeling sad, discouraged, lonely, or rejected?

10. Why does Gary Collins think that everybody will benefit if each of us has a better understanding of our emotions and can express them in positive ways?

11. What does the author say about having a positive attitude toward possibly negative situations?
