

Emotional Literacy

By Ilene Dillon, MSW

Most people live from their brains, rather than from their emotions. By listening to what we say, this becomes obvious. For example: I lost control when I felt sad and hurt or The reason I was angry was.... or It's stupid for me to be afraid.... These statements reflect that the brain is usually in control and getting out of the brain is a lack of control. The real reason anyone is angry is because they **are**. The brain is what makes judgments like "stupid".

Because of this, when a person comes to begin a course of psychotherapy with me, I engage in what I call feeding the brain. As I share with my client what I perceive is causing him or her to stay stuck in emotional mire, I also give explanations about how things work, the purpose of which is to feed the brain reassurance that its dominant position is not being assailed, so it does not automatically block the needed change. The brain does not have to be so actively involved in making change; yet to overlook it can block change totally. Real change comes through decision and change of perception, is immediate, and is more experiential than mental.

In the newly-energized field of Emotional Literacy, writers appear to be following a similar course. Most articles feed the brain information about what Emotional Literacy is, along with exhortations about what "needs to be done" to create emotional literacy. Most people believe themselves motivated to change, yet often say I don't really know how to make this change on a practical level. (I really believe we all do know how to make change. We usually cannot see the "how" until we make a clear decision to change. Then the how is revealed.) For all of us, it is usually most helpful to have someone give us a technique or direction, making the shift easier. At the risk of operating prematurely in this time of "feeding the brain," I offer here some how to's in Emotional Literacy.

Emotional Literacy is a big topic. To achieve it, most of us need to change the way we perceive the world, the way we react to challenges, and the way we deal with emotions as they arise in us. The Buddhists remind us that the longest journey is begun with a single step. Therefore, even though emotional literacy is an enormous undertaking, it is still time to begin. Following are some practical steps.

1. Understand the nature of emotions.

- A. Emotions are a form of energy. Energy is, by nature, compelled to move. Emotional energy which doesn't move acts as a poison in the system. Thus, blocking and suppressing emotions sets up problems for our future. We need to establish ways to get them out of us (yet not onto others). The spoken and written word have power. To get emotions out, the most effective ways are, therefore, to speak them out loud or to write them down

B. Emotions are tools with which we are born. Emotions act as signals for guiding our choices and behavior. Anger signals a violation of the way we believe our world is supposed to be; love signals us to come close together; and hurt often signals manipulation. In childhood, most people are taught to disqualify or ignore their true feelings, rendering impotent these most valuable tools.

C. Emotions are opportunities for growth and learning. When we accept the earth as a giant school, wherein we get our homework assignments in childhood and “do our homework” as adults, then an emotional reaction draws our attention to experiences in our present which are opportunities for healing our past (finishing our homework assignment). Finding out the earliest time we remember feeling today’s emotion, then healing the experience in that long-ago past by envisioning taking adult power in childhood, creates personal growth.

D. Emotions are points of connection--negative and positive--between people. At the time we experience emotions while relating to others, we demonstrate that we have impact on one another. These points of impact can be used for mutual growth and relationship building.

2. Learn and practice techniques for recognizing and feeling emotions. Practice one of these exercises daily for three weeks. If you already are good at doing this, the exercises may help you to find subtle nuances of feeling you have not previously noticed. Note: Once embarked on a quest to feel emotions, there is no turning back! Mark your sessions on a calendar so you don’t trick yourself into thinking you have done your program when you did not!

A. Recognizing: Choose a time interval (depending upon your daily schedule, it can be 15 or 30 minute or 2-4 hour intervals). At each interval, stop your activity and ask yourself: “What am I feeling right now?” Accept whatever comes up as your response. You may find one of the many familiar human emotions. “Nothing” and “neutral” are also acceptable responses. The important part is not the particular answer, but the act of paying attention to your feelings. The principle is: “What you pay attention to, you tend to become.” Special notes: 1) As you pay attention to emotions in this way, you may feel strongly and like you are “losing control”--just allow your emotions to wash through you like a breaking ocean wave; and 2) you may surprise yourself by finding your real feelings about friends, work or behaviors are different than you thought!

B. Feeling: Make a list of feelings you would like to explore. Pick one feeling for each three week exploration period. For 3-5 minutes of each day, preferably close to the same time each day, get alone in a quiet place. Then using the feeling you selected, repeat aloud in a cadence the words “I am <feeling>.” For example: “I am angry, I am angry, I am angry....”

When a thought, picture or color presents itself, state this out loud, too. I’m angry, I’m angry, I’m angry.....I see red...I’m angry, I’m angry, I’m angry, I’m angry, I’m angry at my friend for not keeping his/her appointment and not calling, I’m angry, I’m angry..... Continue this for at least 3 minutes before stopping. Special notes: 1) You may become more angry by the end of your time. This happens when anger has been repressed. As you start to allow it expression, it

all begins to crowd out. 2) It's okay if no color, thought or picture reveals itself. The exercise is about facing fact, looking at your feeling squarely for what it actually is. Facing fact sets us free. 3) If this exercise proves frightening to you, get help from a qualified counselor or therapist.

Understanding, recognizing and feeling emotions constitute the early steps of the journey we're all on as we follow our intention to develop "Emotional Literacy."



Ilene Dillon has dedicated her life to helping others become all they can be. She is internationally known as authority on Parenting Consciously, Emotional Mastery, and Co-dependence. Ilene is also a founding mentor for Accessing Universal Intelligence, US, helping parents and children discover their innate ability to get individualized help from Universal Intelligence. She is also a Founding Expert of CCFL Global Academy. Since 2004, she has also been creator/host of Full Power Living (Internet radio, www.emotionalpro.com), focused on awakening people to the power and importance of human emotions. Ilene has been a Family Therapist in California for 42 years, a Professional Speaker since 1984, and a Coach since 2002. Her greatest joy is to help you and your children live empowered and soul-filled lives.

Affectionately known as "The Emotional Pro," Ilene is author of more than 20 books, workbooks, and CDs, including *Fledglings Return: How to Stay Sane and Loving When Adult Kids Come Back Home to Stay* (Kindle), *The ABCs Manuals* (on Anger, Loneliness, Hurt, Fear, Jealousy, Guilt, Love, Shame & Remorse, Grief and Intimacy) that teach parents how to help their children master emotions, and *The Exchange Student Model for Parenting* ((in progress).