

LESSON 1 NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

There are a range of so-called negative emotions which can affect our daily lives. Negative thoughts are often linked to these feelings and situations, such as those which bring about stress, can initiate and maintain unhealthy psychological conditions. If left unchecked, negativity can slowly destabilise even the most well adjusted individuals.



INTRODUCTION

Today's world is very different, not just in terms of what we have but the way we interact with each other. Communication has changed, and is continuing to change; we are far more connected to each other (across the globe) than we ever were in the past. That connection though, is more likely to be digital, rather than face to face - as it was before. And the digital world is fast moving, it means instant access to news from across the

world; what you read in the morning news online, can change within a day, or an hour, or even within minutes. News is not only instant but far more confronting; we see graphic images of terrorism, famine or war. We have constant warnings of impending doom from wars or climate change, or the latest world financial crisis. To the average individual the news may therefore seem more stressful than it was ever was in the past.

We have more food, and have the potential to eat better, but we are

constantly being warned about what we eat. Last year's 'super food' or 'miracle diet' is this year's poison. Most processed food is packed with preservatives and other chemicals that may affect our body chemistry. We have medicines that can fight illnesses, but we have more pollutants in our environment that can cause illnesses.

We have more things available to buy, but to buy them we have to earn more hence there is a greater impetus to perform at work.

We are constantly bombarded with information and spend an inordinate amount of time gathering it. However we also have a tendency to confuse information with knowledge. And because we don't have the time to fully deconstruct, analyse and to learn from the vast amount of information we gather, we focus more on the 'gathering', rather than on acquiring the skills needed to truly understand, absorb, learn and gain wisdom from it. When we don't understand the information this rapidly changing digital world thrusts at us, we are also more likely to be stressed by it.

A rapidly changing world can cause stress, but it is how we deal with that stress that matters. We can look at change from another angle - rather than a threat to our way of life, we could see it as an opportunity for new experience and new knowledge.

Some people cope with stress by understanding and minimizing the things that stress their body. Others use medication to mask problems caused by stress, such as pain. Some people simply do not cope, and develop negative emotions.

This course is designed to help you understand the things that cause stress, the problems that can arise, and the broad range of ways people might manage their stress.

WHAT ARE NEGATIVE EMOTIONS?

Negative emotions are feelings which cause people to feel sad, upset, lonely, angry, empty, bored, and the like. The reason we call them 'negative' is because they undermine our sense of wellbeing. All emotions whether positive or negative can be said to have two components. These are:

- What we feel - the biological part.
- What we think - the psychological part.

Although it is normal and usual to experience negative emotions in response to everyday events, they become problematic if they are enduring. If the conditions or the thoughts which are producing negative emotions remain in place, then people often become trapped in a negative way of responding and they can quickly head downhill. Sometimes this happens without people realising what is happening to them. In other cases they may be aware of what is happening but feel powerless to change their circumstances or to regain control over how they feel.

Emotions are very powerful determinants of behaviour. When they are intense they can be overwhelming. Often it is difficult to make sense of them, to fully understand what they mean and why we are experiencing

them. Given their complexity many people struggle to control them and do not have adequate coping skills to keep them under control.

The Need for Control

Negative emotions are very unpleasant, and not just for the person who is experiencing them, but often for those people around them. A person who has negative emotions will often hate themselves and other people, making them difficult company to keep. They are also likely to have low self-esteem which can restrict their involvement in social activities and their willingness to try and find solutions to their problems.

Prolonged negative thoughts and feelings are one of the chief causes of mental health disorders. In particular, they can underpin conditions such as depression, stress-related disorders, anxiety, and schizophrenia. Stress can cause people to behave differently and if it is chronic then it gradually wears down a person's ability to cope with it, and ultimately with everyday life.

One thing is clear though, the longer a person is trapped in a negative cycle the more difficult it becomes to escape. When this occurs, people often fail to see things from a different perspective. If you like, they cannot see the wood for the trees. They become consumed with their negative feelings. These feelings can then cause them psychological harm.

People who have reached such a state may also respond poorly to their negative emotions because their judgement is also clouded. For instance, a depressed person may consume

excessive alcohol or an angry person may lash out at people around them. In fact, many of society's social woes may be attributed to negative emotions. It is therefore in the interest of everyone that people are not left to become consumed by such negative thoughts and feelings.



Overview of Negative Emotions

Although negative emotions are normal human responses they can become problematic when they 'take over'. Conversely, you won't hear too many people complaining about having too many positive emotions like happiness, optimism or excitement. What are some of these negative emotions?

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Suggested Tasks

Throughout this course you will be provided with suggested tasks to aid with your understanding. Remember: these tasks are optional. The more you complete, the more you will learn, but in order to complete the course in 20 hours you will need to manage your time well. We suggest you spend about 10 minutes on each task you attempt, and no more than 20 minutes.

Causes of Negative Emotions

What causes us to experience negative emotions? After all, given the displeasure and gloom associated with negative emotions, no-one would want to be at their mercy.

Negative emotions are generally understood to be feelings that are caused by “stressors”, and experts often refer to two broad types of stressors; psychosocial and biogenic stressors.

Psychosocial stressors are situations or events, real or imagined that stimulate a negative response. They don't directly cause the negativity; but they prompt a cognitive or thought process, and thinking about the situation is what causes that response.

Biogenic stressors are different in that they bypass the cognitive process and directly cause the stressful response.

Most of the things that cause significant stress for people tend to be psychosocial, where negative emotions become troublesome because of situations or the actions of others.

An individual's coping mechanisms and sometimes their genetic makeup, can determine whether they succumb to negative emotions or are able to deal with them satisfactorily.

Here are examples of possible triggers that can cause stress:

Conflict – conflicts present us with heightened stress levels. It may be temporary such as the acute stress experienced during an argument or

The following are some of the most commonly quoted:

- Stress
- Anxiety
- Anger
- Aggression
- Shame
- Guilt

- Self-doubt, low confidence or low self-esteem

- Depression or sadness

Of course, there are many others and there may be considerable overlap between different emotions. It's quite possible to feel angry and depressed at the same time. In fact, sometimes depression is caused by anger. Many other negative emotions may be caused by another. For instance, someone may feel frustrated which causes them to feel angry, they then shout abuse or lash out at a loved one, and subsequently feel shame or sadness.

Also, as with all emotions it is sometimes difficult to describe exactly what the emotion is. It may be difficult to distinguish between sadness, loneliness, grief, hopelessness, helplessness, and so forth. Sometimes people can't find the right word to express what they are feeling inside. A whole range of thoughts can underlie a particular feeling. It's perhaps more useful to recognise and acknowledge that negative feelings have become overbearing and it's time to do something about it.

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Suggested Tasks

Think back over the past few weeks. Write down as many negative emotions as you can think of which you have experienced during this time. Are you surprised by your findings?