Emotional Management: Part I
By Wei-Chien Lee, PhD, clinical psychologist

Emotions are innate protectors. When we have emotional responses, it indicates that something requires our attention. Just like traffic lights - red means stop, yellow is a warning, and green tells us to go ahead. Emotions are like signal lights, and understanding and responding to these signals is emotional management.

Emotions are signal lights
If we want to understand a different language, we take the time to learn, comprehend, and listen. However, we often don’t have the opportunity to learn, understand, and listen to the "language of our heart" - our emotions.

Just as our bodies use sensations like pain, heat, and itching to tell us, "Pay attention here!" our minds use emotions (joy, anger, sadness, surprise, and more) to say, "Pay attention here!" When we experience emotions, we can imagine these are like signal soldiers from our minds running to report, "Commander, there are obstacles ahead. How should we handle them? Please instruct."

Emotions are inherent in protecting us. When we have emotional reactions, it means there’s something we need to pay attention to. Like traffic lights, red means stop, yellow is a warning signal, and green means proceed. Emotions are signal lights. Managing emotions involves understanding and responding to these signals. When we can listen and understand our emotions, we can grow and progress.

Understanding Emotions: Do You Have these Myths?
Myth: If I have emotions, it means I'm not mature enough.
We feel pain when we're kicked. No matter how mature and wise we are, we will have emotions. Our maturity and wisdom are more related to how we handle emotions (just like when we're kicked, we must decide whether to kick back, shout out, or handle it differently).

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Myth: Emotions should be simple.

Emotions are incredibly complex. Emotions are often intertwined, meaning we rarely experience just one emotion. So, many times, describing or understanding our own emotions can be very challenging.

Myth: There are "right" or "should" emotions.

Every emotion is a signal, and everyone’s response is different, so there are no right or wrong emotions. Believing in right or wrong emotions can hinder our emotional and mental well-being. Emotions should be understood, not judged.

It means that we should avoid telling ourselves or others, "You shouldn't/shouldn't be angry."

Instead, we can practice asking ourselves: "Why does this situation make me so angry? Is it because of the current situation? Or is it due to accumulated stressors? Or is it because of my current state? Or is it because of my expectations for this person?"

Myth: Emotions are irrational.

Emotions are signals. The size of the signal doesn’t mean we are losing control; it’s just a signal. When emotions are strong, it’s even more crucial to use our wisdom and maturity to decide how to use this signal to take care of ourselves and address the issue.

You might wonder, "Why am I reacting so strongly to something so trivial?" This is a vital question in emotional management. Sometimes our "irrational" reactions stem from not having learned how to handle past wounds and current challenges.

Myth: Emotions are always a genuine reflection of how I feel.

Just like learning a language, sometimes emotional reactions are learned behaviors. Some people learn that they can’t cry but can be angry. Others learn they can’t feel pain but can suppress themselves. You may have heard the saying, "Once bitten by a snake, you are scared of a rope for ten years."

Sometimes, our emotional sensors see something that looks similar to what hurt us in the past, and they start yelling, "Captain, there’s a snake, a snake!" Very often we must recalibrate our emotional sensors or use our wisdom to understand what our emotional sentinels are really reacting to.

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Why are there emotional fluctuations?
People's emotions fluctuate, and ways of dealing with emotions are influenced by various factors:
• Learning: How emotions are expressed & managed is influenced by learning and experiences.
• Genetics: Just as people have sensitivities to physical pain, the sensitivity of emotions is also related to genetics.
• Physical Health: Factors like illnesses, lack of sleep, and high stress levels can make it challenging to control emotions.
• Mental Health: When someone's mental health is compromised, emotions can be harder to manage.
• Sleep: Poor sleep quality can affect emotional control and fluctuations.
• Interpersonal Relationships: Interactions with others, including experiences of being hurt or neglected, and societal values can impact emotional responses and fluctuations.

Emotional management goals
The goal of emotional management is definitely not the absence of emotions but rather the choice of appropriate and healthy ways to process emotions and deal with issues.
Practice: Think back to the last time you had difficulty controlling your emotions. What were the reasons that made it difficult to control your emotions? Did you use different coping methods?
Examples:
External Factors
• Being scolded by someone outside.
• Lost my wallet.
• Didn't eat for a whole day.
• Haven't had a good night's sleep for several days.
Psychological Factors
• Feeling very depressed.
• Feeling misunderstood.
• Feeling mentally exhausted.
• Negative thoughts: should, always, blaming.
Historical Factors
• This isn't the first time.
• In the past, it had bad results.
• He never helps!
• How many times do I have to say for him to understand!

Coping Methods
• Don't speak first.
• Tell him I'm not feeling well and ask if he can help.
• Change my own way of thinking.
• Find time to rest.

To learn more, you can watch the recording of the webinar on emotion management here.