4 HOW YOU CREATE YOUR FEELINGS

How the devil can we understand emotion?

Hundreds of profound books and articles have tried to answer this question—none of them, as yet, with anything close to certainty. Let us now, with something short of a perfect answer as our goal, see if we can shed some light on this puzzling question.

Emotion seems a life process involved with perceiving, moving and thinking. It emerges as a combination of several seemingly diverse, yet actually closely related, things. The famous neurologist Stanley Cobb has given this somewhat technical description, suggesting (as interpreted by John Reid):

> *that we use the term "emotion" to mean the same thing as (1) an introspectively given affective state, usually mediated by acts of interpretation; (2) the whole set of internal physiological changes, which help (ideally) the return to normal equilibrium between the organism and its environment, and (3) the various patterns of overt behavior, stimulated by the environment and implying constant interaction with it, expressive of the stirred-up physiological state (2) and also the more or less agitated psychological state (1). [An emotion doesn't mean] a private mental state, nor a set of static qualities abstracted from such a state, nor a hypothalamic response with intense autonomic discharge, nor a pattern of behavior viewed in purely objective terms, nor a particular stimulus-situation, even though it has some emotogenic*

> *meaning for distinguishable things, nor the entire set of them viewed as constituting a merely additive whole. An emotion [constitutes] rather,* an acute disturbance, involving marked somatic changes, experienced as a more or less agitated feeling. *There remain associated inferences, of varying degrees of explicitness, as to the meaning of what happens. Both the feeling and the behavior which expresses it, as well as the internal physiological responses to the stimulus-situation, constitute a dynamically interrelated whole, which* [constitutes] *the emotion. Thus,* an emotion [remains] at once physiological, psychological, and social *since other persons usually [emerge as] the most highly emotogenic stimuli in our civilized environment.*

Question: Has Dr. Cobb's definition of emotion final and full acceptance by all modern psychologists and neuropsychiatrists?

Answer: No. As Horace English and Ava English point out, in their *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychological Terms*, we cannot as yet define emotion without referring to several conflicting theories. Most authorities agree, however, that emotion has no *single* cause or result. Emotions arise through a three-way process: first, through some kind of physical stimulation of the special emotional center of our brains (called the hypothalamus) and the nerve network of our bodies (called the autonomic nervous system); second, through our perceiving and moving (technically called our sensorimotor) processes; and third, through our desiring and thinking (technically, conation and cognition).

Normally, our emotional centers as well as our perceiving, moving, and thinking centers display a degree of excitability and receptivity. Then a stimulus of a certain intensity impinges upon and excites or damps them. We can directly apply this stimulus (in rather unusual cases) to the emotional centers—for example, by electrically stimulating parts of the brain or by giving the individual exciting or depressing drugs which act on parts of the brain or autonomic nervous system. Or we can (more usually) apply the stimulus indirectly, through the individual's perceiving, moving, and thinking, thereby affecting the central-nervous-system and brain pathways which, in turn, connect with and influence the emotional (hypothalamic and autonomic) centers.

If you wish to control your feelings, then, you may do so in three major ways. Suppose, for example, you feel highly excitable and wish to calm down. You can directly influence your emotions by electrical or biochemical means—such as by taking barbiturates or tranquilizing drugs. Or, secondly, you can work through your perceiving-moving (sensorimotor) system—for example, by doing relaxation exercises, by dancing, by resorting to "primal screaming,"

or by yoga breathing techniques. Or, thirdly, you can counteract your excitability by using your willing-thinking processes—by reflecting, thinking, imaginatively desensitizing yourself, or telling yourself calming ideas.

Which combination of these three means of controlling your emotional state will prove most effective in any given instance will depend largely on how disturbed you feel and in what direction and how extensively you wish to change or control your feeling.

Question: If we have three effective methods of controlling one's emotions available, why do you emphasize one of them in RET and in rational living?

Answer: For several reasons. First, we do not specialize in medicine or biophysics, and therefore do not consider pharmacological, bioelectrical, or other physical methods our field. We at times refer clients to physicians, physiotherapists, masseurs, and other trained individuals who specialize in physical modes of treatment; and we see good reason to combine some of these methods with RET. But we don't especially consider them our thing.

Second, we do not doubt that certain physical means of reducing tensions and changing human behavior—such as yoga, bioenergetics, and Rolfing—at times have a beneficial effect. But we look with skepticism on the all-encompassing claims frequently made for these techniques. They largely consist of diversion, since they help people to focus on their bodies rather than on the nutty thoughts and fantasies with which they tend to plague themselves. Consequently, they bring palliation rather than cure, help people *feel* better instead of *get* better, and rarely produce elegant philosophic changes.

We think it highly probable that biophysical and sensorimotor techniques for affecting human emotions, unless combined with thinking-desiring methods, produce limited effect. People may get helped through a depression by the use of drugs or relaxation techniques. But unless they begin to think more clearly and to value their aliveness, they will tend to depress themselves again when they stop the drugs or exercises. For effecting *permanent* and *deep-seated* emotional changes, philosophic changes appear virtually necessary.

We particularly encourage people with disturbances to help themselves and not rely too much on what others (such as biochemists, physicians, or physiotherapists) can do for them. They'd better, in many instances, seek outside help to stop over- or under-emoting. But the less dependent they remain on drugs or physical apparatuses, the better. Our rational-emotive methods of persuading them to think for themselves ideally lead to independence. Once they learn and persistently practice rationality for a while, they require little or no further outside assistance.

We do not, then, oppose controlling defeating emotions by

drugs, relaxation techniques (such as those of Edmond Jacobsen, or J. H. Schultz and W. Luthe), movement therapy, yoga exercises, or other physical approaches. We believe that these techniques may help. And we teach, as we shall show later, many emotive, dramatic, fantasy, self-management, and behavior modification methods. More than most other schools of therapy, RET employs a comprehensive, almost eclectic, multifaceted approach to treatment.

We mainly hold, however, that if you would make the most thoroughgoing and permanent changes in your disturbed feelings, you'd better use considerable reasoning and reality-testing. Because a huge element (though not the whole) of emoting directly stems from thought.

Question: Granted that bioelectrical, pharmacological, and sensorimotor approaches to emotional change seem limited. But has not the rational approach to conscious thought equal superficiality? Have not the psychoanalysts long ago established the fact that *un*conscious processes create much *emotional* behavior? How can we learn to control and change the thoughts that create our feelings, if we have these thoughts buried deeply in our unconscious minds?

Answer: A very good point! And one that we cannot answer in a word. As we shall keep showing throughout this book, what the orthodox Freudians and many other psychoanalysts keep referring to as "deeply unconscious thoughts" emerge, in the vast majority of instances, as what Freud originally called preconscious ideas. We don't have these thoughts and feelings *immediately* accessible to our awareness. But we can fairly easily learn to infer and observe them, by working back from the behavior which they induce.

We firmly believe that, whatever your emotional upsets, you can learn to perceive the cerebral self-signalings that invariably lie behind and motivate your emotions—and thereby succeed in deciphering the "unconscious" messages you transmit to yourself. Once you clearly see, understand, and begin to dispute the irrational beliefs that create your inappropriate feelings, your "unconscious" thoughts will rise to consciousness, greatly enhancing your power of emotional self-control.

Enough of our own promises! Let us note again that a large part of what we call emotion stems from a certain kind—a biased, prejudiced, or strongly evaluative kind—of thinking. What we usually label as thinking consists of a relatively calm appraisal of a situation, an objective comparison of many of its elements, and a coming to some conclusion as a result of this comparing process.

Thus, when you think, you may observe a piece of bread, see one part of it as moldy, remember that eating mold previously made you ill, and therefore cut off the moldy part and eat the rest

of it. When you inappropriately emote, however, you will tend to observe the same piece of bread and remember so violently or prejudicially your previous experience with the moldy part that you may feel nauseated, throw away the whole piece of bread, and go hungry.

When you emote, in this instance, you do as much thinking as when you merely think about the bread. But you do a different *kind* of thinking—thinking so prejudiced about an unpleasant prior experience that you do it in a biased, overgeneralized, and ineffective way. Because you feel relatively calm when you "think," you use the maximum information available to you—the information that moldy bread brings unpleasant and nonmoldy bread good results. Because you feel excited when you "emote," you tend to use only part of the information available—that moldy bread has unpleasant qualities.

Thinking does *not* mean unemotional; nor does emotional mean unthinking. When you think, you usually find yourself less strongly biased by previous experience than when you feel "emotional." You therefore tend to employ *more* of the available information. You then act more flexibly about making decisions.

Question: Hadn't you better watch your step? After first making a four-way division of human behavior into the acts of perceiving, moving, thinking, and feeling, you now talk about a "thinking" and an "emotional" individual as if you had never made your previous distinctions.

Answer: Right! No exclusively thinking or emotional persons exist, since everyone simultaneously perceives, moves, thinks, *and* feels. However, to use our previous terms, some people perceive, move, *think*, and feel; while others perceive, move, think, and *feel*. The latter do a kind of thinking different from the former, and hence *predominantly* feel. While the others, with their calmer and less prejudiced type of cognition, *predominantly* think. All people, however, think *and* emote.

More important: We all feel, but many of us have inappropriate feelings much of the time, while others have largely appropriate feelings. For no matter how honestly and authentically you experience intense feelings, they don't prove holy; and the encounter movement that has achieved such popularity has often misled people in this respect.

You do not *merely* feel; nor do you *just* (for no reason) feel. You feel, rather, because you evaluate things as good or bad, favorable or disadvantageous to your chosen goals. And your feelings motivate—move—you to survive and feel happy (or unhappy) while surviving.

You feel, for example, good about living and bad about dying. So you avoid, because of these feelings, swimming too far out to sea, driving your car at ninety-five miles an hour, jumping

off cliffs, and consuming poisonous foods. If you didn't have these feelings, how long would you survive?

You also feel, now that you have chosen to live, that you *prefer* different kinds of pleasures; that you *desire* productivity rather than idleness; that you *choose* efficiency instead of inefficiency; that you *like* creativity; that you *enjoy* absorption in long-range pursuits (such as building a business or writing a novel); and that you *desire* intimate relations with others. Notice that all the words in italics involve feelings and that without them, you would not experience pleasure, joy, efficiency, creativity, and love. Your feelings not only help to keep you alive; they also aid you to survive *happily*.

Feelings, then, have valuable goals or purposes—usually your survival and happiness. When they help you achieve these goals, we call them *appropriate* feelings. When they serve to block your basic goals, we call them *inappropriate*. RET shows you how to distinguish clearly between appropriate emotion, such as your feeling real sorrow or annoyance when you don't get what you want, and inappropriate or self-defeating emotions, such as your feeling depressed, self-downing, or enraged under the same conditions.

By the same token, RET helps you discriminate between rational and irrational thinking. It holds that rational thinking normally leads to appropriate and irrational thinking to inappropriate emoting. What do we label as rational thinking? That kind of thinking that assists you (1) to survive and (2) to achieve the goals or values you select to make your survival pleasurable, enjoyable, or worthwhile.

As Dr. Maxie Maultsby states, in his introduction to the pamphlet giving information on Associated Rational Thinkers (ART), a self-help group of individuals who want to learn and to teach their fellows the main principles of RET (which also stands for rational-emotive thinking):

> *Rational thinking has the following four characteristics: (1) It [bases itself] primarily on objective fact as opposed to subjective opinion. (2) If acted upon, it most likely will result in the preservation of your life and limb rather than your premature death or injury. (3) If acted upon, it produces your personally defined life's goals most quickly. (4) If acted upon, it prevents undesirable personal and/or environmental conflict.*

Maultsby also notes that rational thinking (5) minimizes your inner conflicts and turmoil.

Perhaps it will make things a bit clearer if we note that much of what we call *emotion* mainly seems to include (1) a certain kind of forceful thinking—a kind strongly slanted or biased by previous perceptions or experiences; (2) intense bodily responses, such as

feelings of pleasure or nausea; and (3) tendencies toward positive or negative action in regard to the events that seem to cause the strong thinking and its emotional concomitants.

In other words: "Emotion" accompanies a kind of powerful, vigorous, or prejudiced thought; while "thinking" often involves a relatively calm, unbiased, reflective kind of discrimination. Thus, if we compare one apple with another, we may thoughtfully conclude that it has more firmness, fewer blemishes, and better color and therefore will more likely please. But if we have had very pleasant prior experiences with blemished apples (if we, for instance, successfully bobbed for one at a Halloween party and, as a prize, kissed an attractive member of the other sex); or if we have had unpleasant prior experiences with unblemished apples (if we ate too many and felt ill), we may excitedly, rashly, and prejudicially—meaning, *emotionally*—conclude that the blemished apple has advantages and may start eating it.

It would appear, then, that thinking and emoting closely interrelate and at times differ mainly in that thinking involves a more tranquil, less activity-directed mode of discrimination; while emoting comprises a less tranquil, more somatically involved, and more activity-directed mode of behavior.

Question: Do you really contend that *all* emotion directly follows thought and can under *no condition* exist without thinking?

Answer: No, we do not believe or say that. Emotion may *briefly* exist without thought. An individual, for instance, steps on your toe and you spontaneously, immediately get angry. Or you hear a piece of music and you instantly begin to feel warm and excited. Or you learn that a close friend died and you begin to feel sad. Under these conditions, you may feel emotional without doing any associated thinking.

Perhaps, however, even in these cases you do, with split-second rapidity, start thinking to yourself: "This person who stepped on my toe acts like a blackguard!" or "This music sounds wonderful!" or "Oh, how awful that my friend died!" Perhaps only *after* you have had these rapid-fire and "unconscious" thoughts you *then* begin to feel emotional.

In any event, assuming that you don't, at the very beginning, have any conscious or unconscious thought accompanying your emotion, you virtually never *sustain* an emotional outburst without bolstering it by ideas. For unless you keep telling yourself something on the order of "That blackguard who stepped on my toe shouldn't have done that!" or "How could he do a horrible thing like that to me!" the pain of having your toe stepped on will soon die and your emotional reaction will die with the pain.

Of course, you may keep getting your toe stepped on and the continuing pain may help sustain your anger. But assuming that your pain stops, you sustain your emotional response by some kind of thinking. Otherwise, by what magical process could it endure?

Similarly with pleasant feelings. By continuing to listen to certain music and having your sensations thereby prolonged, your feelings of warmth and excitement may get sustained. But even then you will have difficulty *perpetuating* your feelings unless you keep telling yourself something like: "I find this music great!"; "Oh, how I love those harmonies!"; "What a wonderful composer!"; and so on.

In the case of the death of one of your close friends or relatives, you will find it easy to make yourself depressed, since you have lost a relationship with someone truly dear to you. But even in this instance you will find it difficult to sustain your emotion of depression unless you keep reminding yourself: "Oh, how terrible that he has died!" or "How could she have died so young?" or something of that sort.

Even then, when thinking does not immediately precede or accompany feeling, *sustained* emotion normally requires repeated evaluative thought. We say "normally" because emotional circuits, once they have begun to reverberate to some physical or psychological stimulus, can also keep reverberating under their own power.

Drugs or electrical impulses can also keep acting directly on emotion-carrying nervous circuits (such as the cells of the hypothalamus and autonomic nervous system) and thereby keep you emotionally excited once arousal has started. Usually, however, continued direct stimulation of the emotion-producing centers does not occur. You *make* it occur by restimulating yourself with exciting *ideas*.

Question: Granting that thinking processes usually precede, follow, and sustain human feeling, must these thinking processes literally consist of words, phrases, and sentences that people "say to themselves"? Does *all* thinking consist of self-verbalizations?

Answer: Perhaps not. We certainly do not want to take an absolutist position. However, practically all of us, by the time we reach adulthood, seem to do most of our important thinking, and consequently our emoting, in terms of self-talk or internalized sentences.

Humans, as uniquely language-creating animals, begin to learn from early childhood to formulate thoughts, perceptions, and feelings in words, phrases, and sentences. They usually find this easier than to think in pictures, sounds, touch units, or other possible methods.

To illustrate this human propensity, let us take the example of a man who gets interviewed for a job (at point A, his Activating Experience). Before the interview, he will often start talking to himself (at point B, his Belief System) along the following lines:

"I wonder if I'll get this job. . . . I wish I didn't have to face the interview, because I don't enjoy it and they may reject me. . . . But if I don't face the interview, I certainly won't get the job. . . . Besides, what difference does it make if they do reject me? I really have nothing to lose thereby. . . . While if I don't try for the job, I may have a lot to lose. . . . I'd better, then, take the interview, get it over with, and see whether I get accepted."

By telling himself these kinds of sentences, this man thinks. For all practical purposes, his sentences *constitute* his thinking. And we may call his thoughts rational Beliefs (rB's) because they help him to get what he values or wants—the job which he seeks. He therefore feels appropriate emotional Consequences (at point C)—*determination* to get the job; positive *action* to go for the interview; and feelings of *disappointment* and *annoyance* if he gets rejected.

If, however, this same individual creates for himself inappropriate emotional Consequences (C), he does so by telling himself different sentences that include irrational Beliefs (iB's):

"Suppose I go for this interview, make a fool of myself, and don't get the job. . . . *That would make life awful!* . . . Or suppose I go for the interview, get the job and then prove incompetent. . . . *How horrible*! I would rate as a worm!"

By telling himself these kinds of sentences, and including the irrational negative evaluation "*That* would make life awful!" or "How horrible! I would rate as a worm!" this man changes his rational thinking into irrational evaluation of his job-seeking situation. We can see, then, that for all practical purposes, his evaluative internalized sentences *create* his emotional reactions. He feels in his gut, in his body; but he largely creates his feelings in his head.

It would appear, then, that positive human emotions, such as feelings of love or elation, often accompany or result from positive internalized sentences, such as "I find this good!" and that appropriate negative human emotions (like feelings of displeasure and disappointment) accompany or result from rational sentences, such as "I find this frustrating and bad," and that inappropriate negative emotions (like depression and anger) result from irrational sentences, such as "I find this awful! It makes me a worm!" Without employing—on some conscious or unconscious level—such strong sentences as these, we would simply not feel much emotions.

Question: If what you say holds true, why do so few people, including few members of the psychological profession, clearly see that thinking and emoting go together and that they largely stem from internalized sentences? Pure ignorance on their part?

Answer: In part, yes. Many people, including psychologists and psychiatrists, just don't bother to look very closely at so-called

emotions and therefore remain ignorant of their ideological basis. Others look closely enough, but only in the light of some preconceived dogma, such as classical psychoanalysis. Some rigid Freudians will no more consider the possibility that you can understand and change your emotion by observing and changing the sentences that create it than will some religious fundamentalists consider anything other than their rigid interpretation of the Bible.

We unreligiously contend: You can change your thinking and the emotions associated with this thinking by observing and changing your strong beliefs that underlie them. We hold, more specifically, that you needlessly create inappropriate emotions—such as depression, anxiety, rage, and guilt—and that you can largely eradicate such sustained feelings if you will learn to think straight and to follow up your straight thinking with effective action.

Question: Can you eliminate *all* negative emotions by controlling your thinking?

Answer: Hardly. Many emotional outbursts, such as fits of grief or fear, almost spontaneously follow pronounced frustration or loss. Thus, if your beloved parent or child dies, you immediately tend to feel great sorrow or grief.

These kinds of emotions, based on distinct threats to your satisfactions, tend to have biological roots and probably have their source in primitive pleasure-pain processes. We could hardly survive without such negative feelings.

Certain negative emotions seem especially to aid survival. Thus, if you did not feel displeased, sorry, regretful, annoyed, irritated, frustrated, or disappointed when you suffered hunger, injury, or defeat, would you feel motivated to keep out of harm's way and to continue your existence? Or would you favorably compete with others who did feel *very* displeased when they didn't get their way?

Many emotions, moreover, add appreciably to human health and happiness. Your joy at hearing a beautiful piece of music, watching a lovely sunset, or successfully finishing a difficult task does not exactly preserve your life. But an existence bereft of feelings like these would indeed seem drab and nonrewarding.

Anyone, therefore, who attempts to control human emotions out of existence tackles a goal of dubious value. Succeeding at such a task helps dehumanize men and woman and makes their lives meaningless.

The ancient philosophers who wanted humans to achieve a state of pure "soul" or pure intellect, devoid of all "crass" emotions, actually asked us to behave as super-robots. If we achieved this "superior" state, we could, like some of our modern electronic computers, effectively solve certain problems but would not feel any pleasure or satisfaction. Who would want such a super-"human" existence?

Question: Then ridding the world of emotion, or substituting intellect for feeling, definitely does not send you? Correct?

Answer: Quite correct. If anything, we mainly want to help many inhibited and apathetic individuals to achieve *more* honest-to-goodness feeling, *higher* pitches of emotion. We definitely favor highly emotional experiencing. We merely oppose unduly negative, self-defeating, highly exaggerated emotionalizing that tends to sabotage the goals of survival and joyfulness.

We also favor your honestly, openly, and nonjudgmentally getting in touch with your feelings—as long as you forgo perfectionism. For what you *really* or *truly* feel you often cannot precisely determine. You make yourself angry, for example, at a friend who has let you down. Then you make yourself feel guilty because you hate him. Then you deliberately remember, again, the wrongs he has done you and thoroughly incense yourself at him, thereby covering up or driving away your guilt. What do you *really* feel in this case: anger? guilt? defensive hatred? What?

Who can, with absolute precision, say? Yes, you act, as a human, highly suggestibly. Yes, you can easily escalate or cover up your own feelings. Yes, your moods show susceptibility to alcohol, drugs, food, others' words and moods, and a host of other influences. These facts tend to prove that you can feel, from moment to moment, almost *any* way you choose to feel, and that *all* your feelings (just because you honestly feel them) have reality and authenticity. But none of them emerges as super-real or absolutely "true."

Anyway, you'd better recognize, as honestly and as accurately as you can, your basic feelings. Do you, at a given time, feel loving, hating, or indifferent? angry or determined? concerned, anxious, or unconcerned? How can you tell? Mainly by accepting yourself fully with whatever feelings you do have; by distinguishing clearly the "goodness" or "badness" of the feeling from the "goodness" or "badness" of *you*.

RET notably can help you get in touch with your feelings, and acknowledge their intensity, by helping you stop rating yourself for *having* (or *not* having) them. Using a rational philosophy, you first can choose to accept yourself *with* your feelings—even the crummy ones of depression and hatred. You can actually, then, show *interest* in and *curiosity* about your feelings. You can say to yourself: "How fascinating I find it" (instead of "How awful!") "that a basically intelligent person like me keeps acting so damned foolishly and negatively!" You can see that you choose to create your self-downing feelings, and that you can choose to *change* them if you really want to work at doing so.

You can also *discriminate* your appropriate (self-fulfilling) from your inappropriate (self-damning) feelings. You can see the difference between your healthfully feeling *displeased* with your

acts and your unhealthfully feeling *horrified* about them. You can distinguish between your feeling *disappointed* with others' behavior and *asserting* your disappointment, and your feeling *angry* at their behavior and your *commanding* that they change it.

Rational-emotive thinking, in other words, helps you to more fully and openly observe your feelings, acknowledge that they exist, accept yourself with their existence, determine their appropriateness, and eventually choose to feel what you want to feel and what will help you get more of what you want out of life. Its highly rational methods, paradoxically enough, can put you more in touch with your feelings and help you react more emotionally than you ever could previously allow yourself.