

USING THE COMPASSIONATE MIND WITH EMOTION UNDER REGULATION – WORKING WITH BLOCKED OR ‘TOO LITTLE’ EMOTION

Although initially less common, it often turns out that struggles with too little or blocked emotion sit at the heart of many of the problems that bring people to me for therapy. Blocked or too little emotion also happen to reflect some of my own personal difficulties in this area. The term ‘too little’ in relation to emotions is a simplification, a catch-all phrase to help describe experiences that include:

- Avoiding, suppressing or blocking yourself from experiencing an emotion
- The inability to express an emotion
- Denying to others that you’re experiencing an emotion
- Experiencing an emotion infrequently, when it may be helpful to experience it more frequently
- Experiencing an emotion with low intensity, when it may be beneficial to experience it more intensely

Sometimes it’s in just one of the above areas that we experience difficulties with emotions, but for some people, these are highly interrelated. One way of looking at these difficulties is to separate them into three domains, which in CFT are referred to as the fears, blocks and resistances (FBRs) to emotions. We looked at these in terms of compassion in Chapter 11 of the book, but will focus here on FBRs of emotions more generally. It’s helpful first to consider what each refers to.

Fears of emotions are when we might quite like to experience or express more of a particular emotion (e.g. anger or sadness), but we are anxious or fearful about doing so. There can be

various types of fears around this, including how we might be overwhelmed by the emotion if we allow ourselves to experience it (e.g. sadness), how we might become weak or vulnerable by letting it in (e.g. anxiety), or that other people won't like us if we show more of an emotion (e.g. anger). Let's look at an example:

Vanessa came to therapy raging at the world – she was angry at her family, her friends and at me (even though she'd only just met me!). She angrily dismissed the room we were in, the chairs we were sitting on, and my initial attempts at finding more out about her life. She was even angry that she was such an angry person. However, as we spent time exploring her anger, it turned out that it had only really become a problem since her partner had left her recently, after ten years of being together. While it was understandable that this had made her feel angry, she was completely blocked from feeling sad and grieving for the loss of the relationship and her dreams of a future full of marriage and children. In fact, while the idea that 'anger is sad's bodyguard' resonated with her strongly, she was terrified of allowing herself to feel sad. For Vanessa, sadness involved feeling vulnerable and weak, and could lead to being taken advantage of. Moreover, she had a fear that if she allowed herself to experience her sadness, she might fall into a 'pit', and never find her way out again.

Blocks to emotions are when we'd quite like to experience a particular emotion more, and are not scared or afraid of doing so, but are lacking the opportunity to do this. For example, we live or work in contexts that run counter to a particular emotion (such as anger or sadness), or feel we don't have the ability or competency to know how to do this for ourselves. Here's an example:

Kerry came to see me for help with anxiety – she described feeling on edge, anxious and panicky much of the day, particularly at work. She had a tricky boss, who often

talked down to her and set difficult tasks that she had no experience or training for. As we worked together, it was clear that anxiety was undoubtedly a problem, and we used the emotion regulation model and compassionate mind training skills to help her manage this. However, we also recognised that part of Kerry's struggle was in being completely blocked from angry feelings about how her boss was mistreating her. As a result, Kerry realised that without anger, it was difficult for her to stick up for herself; in fact, she went on to understand that not being able to bring healthy, assertive anger to her boss was at the heart of what was making her anxious. In her own words: 'It's like I'm trying to see with my eyes closed'. For Kerry, it wasn't that she was scared of being angry, but rather, she did not feel that she had the competencies, ability or context to know how to do it – a little like wanting to be able to fix a punctured tyre on your car, but without the knowledge or tools to do so.

Resistance to an emotion is when we simply don't want to experience it. Here, we may deny being frightened of it and feel that we have the ability to access it if we wanted, but we just don't want to. Sometimes this is a type of angry 'I don't care' or 'Why should I have to', but it can also come out of a lack understanding (and therefore motivation) about why it might be helpful. Let's look at an example:

Steve came to therapy describing feeling 'pretty rubbish' but that this was 'normal' and that he was only coming to the session because his mum had told him he had to. When we started to explore some of the difficulties that he might like support with, and in particular, identify emotions that he was struggling with, he was direct and clear: he did not feel afraid of any emotion, they were all 'fine'. And he didn't feel blocked to them – 'if I wanted to, I could' – but rather, he was completely shut down on any motivation of why he would engage in this type of work. What's the point? Nothing

changes. I've got better things to do than be here, and it's not like anything will change anyway.

While some blocks turn out to be fears, and some resistances are really fears or blocks, the point is that there are a variety of reasons why we can find it hard to experience and express emotions. For example, sometimes people can be cut off from their emotions as part of a reaction to something traumatic that has happened. This is sometimes known as dissociation. Dissociation can involve a variety of experiences, but these usually include feeling detached or disconnect from the world around us, or from ourselves (e.g. from our own emotions, thoughts and so forth). So, dissociation – and blocking or suppressing of emotion more generally – can have important protective factors for us at the time difficult things might have been happening, but these may not serve us so well any more. In a different way, some types of depression also come with a sense of feeling numb and cut off from one's mind and emotions. Although some of the ideas in the coming chapters may be helpful for these experiences, it's important that you seek appropriate professional support from a GP, psychiatrist or experienced therapist to help with this.

So, in the following chapters, we're going to spend time exploring how we can get in touch with emotions that are blocked or not experienced regularly. I'm not suggesting here that you should always experience a balanced mix of emotions – it might well be that there aren't appropriate situations in which you might experience (for example) sadness, anger or anxiety. And it may well be, given the situation, not feeling a certain emotion is completely appropriate (mostly you wouldn't expect to experience sadness when you win the lottery, or anger when you're successful in getting the job you were going for). Rather, we're going to look at emotions that are blocked or absent when they may actually be quite fitting and helpful given a situation or what is happening in life. We will explore three emotions that people commonly

struggle with experiencing: anxiety/fear, anger and sadness. Take your time to read through any chapter that reflects the emotion you struggle to experience or express, and in conjunction with the knowledge and skills you developed from the main book, use this to find ways to feel more comfortable in your emotions.