

How to Transform Negative Emotions by Viral Mehta

It was a cold night in a wooded area, extremely dark, with no moon in the sky. I must've strayed off of the path at some point. I shuffled my feet around, trying to feel for the smoothness of the trail. But there was just wet grass. The moment I realized I was lost, there was an immediate surge of fear. In situations like these, where we suddenly experience an intense emotion, we often find ourselves facing a storm of "what-if" scenarios: "What if I don't find the trail? What if I can't find my way back? What if I have to be outside in the freezing cold all night?"

Before we know it, we are feeding these negative thoughts, which in turn strengthens the emotional response, and the vicious cycle intensifies. The problem isn't in the thoughts themselves, or even in the emotion. The word emotion comes from the Latin *emovere*, meaning to "move through or out." So in its original form, there isn't any trace of clinging to, or rejecting, these movements. But instead of allowing emotions to move through and out of us, we often feed them with negative thoughts and end up giving them long-term residence. In short order, the guests take over the house, leaving us reeling and unable to truly be in control.

So how do we turn this unhelpful pattern around? The key to any pattern is repetition. But in the case of such reactivity, this repetition is actually happening below the radar of our conscious mind. By the time a situation escalates to the point of emotion, we often find ourselves overpowered. The challenge, then, comes in sharpening our awareness so that we become sensitive to smaller versions of these same emotions.

Luckily, such micro-emotions bubble up in everyday experiences. Take an unrelated example. Say someone makes a snide remark in a meeting at work, and though it isn't a direct attack, I find myself a bit bothered. Just by having become conscious of that feeling arising, I put myself in the position to then see how it has started influencing me. What I'm thinking about is different, I'm no longer as attentive to the actual meeting and I'm feeling a bit resistant to other things that person is saying. All because of one small comment.

By consciously taking our attention to subtler levels of everyday experiences, we start to fine tune our awareness. We become increasingly awake to what's happening inside: perceptions, thoughts, feelings and sensations are constantly arising and passing. Luckily, this kind of attention is like a muscle: it gets stronger with use. The more we focus in this way, the more we start to see, but the real benefit isn't in just having more information.

The true value actually lies in understanding all the connections between these multiple aspects of our reality. We see that our interpretation affects how we feel and that, in turn, affects what we think, say and do. We start seeing the small ways in which we're "off," and more importantly, we experience their immediate effects. This becomes the basis for a powerful feedback loop and shows us where we have choice.

Initially, this choice won't shift things completely. But as we start to actually make more micro-decisions the momentum turns, and those everyday moments help in breaking our unconscious patterns. Perhaps before, that snide remark might've led to spending the next 10 minutes on coming up with a smart rejoinder. Then, it's down to two minutes

before I realize what's happening. Soon, we find that our emotional reactivity has decreased, and we are catching things before they build up. Eventually, instead of getting lodged, these mini emotions flow right through us. As a result, we buy back our own time, as well as the space to re-engage with what's actually happening.

It might seem the antagonism that arises in meetings has nothing to do with the fear that arises when we're lost. But they actually share the same fundamental building blocks: a lack of deeper awareness, and therefore, an inability to make choices in how we respond. In the words of Victor Frankl, the great psychiatrist who survived the horrors of concentration camp: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances"

No one can take away that freedom, but no one can give it to us either -- we have to practice it. We can make every situation a gateway to shift our patterns, knowing that the effects of this change ripple beyond just that moment. Then, as we find ourselves facing a tricky situation, we recognize that experience as a series of smaller, consecutive moments, each with its own choice. When these choices become more and more conscious, the cycle of negativity never gets a chance to kick in and intense emotions don't get a chance to set up shop.

On that cold night, soon after I'd gotten lost, I experienced how this process played out. Though I have far from perfected the art, in that moment, the fear came and didn't find a lasting foothold. I soon found my way back onto the trail and also stumbled onto this little truth along the way: choice is the practice and its own reward.