

The Wisdom of Dark Emotions
Miriam Greenspan

The feelings you avoid may hold the key to a fuller, happier life. Follow these seven steps to find their riches.

Grief, fear, and despair are the emotions we humans find most disturbing - and they are the most likely to get us into trouble when we ignore them. That's the lesson of my 30 years as a psychotherapist. I call them the dark emotions, not because they are negative but because they are painful, and because our culture tends to shame, silence, devalue, and deny them.

There is no psychiatric concept of normal despair, for instance. We speak only of clinical depression, an illness that can be reduced to a simple neurotransmitter deficiency. Even grief after a major loss is diagnosed as a mental disorder if it lasts more than two months. Popular models of emotional intelligence hold negative emotions responsible for all manner of misery and mayhem, from drug abuse, failed careers, and bad marriages to mass social violence and crime. Our culture tells us to get past, get over, control, manage, and medicate these unruly, destructive forces. Indeed, author Daniel Goleman calls the ability to "squelch the . . . movement" of emotions the "master aptitude" of emotional intelligence.

The control-and-manage approach has its uses. We can all think of times we let our emotions get the better of us, leading us to behave badly, speak unskillfully, or make fools of ourselves. But this doesn't mean that painful feelings are always bad or that controlling them is always good. Beyond reining in and surviving our worst feelings, or muting them with medication, can we use these powerful energies to a good end?

This Way into the Light

"One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious," said Carl Jung. Ever the astute observer of the psyche, he wryly added, "This procedure, however, is disagreeable, and therefore not very popular." The Buddha called this all-too-human avoidance of displeasure "aversion." The common tendency to turn away from disagreeable emotions is heightened in a culture that encourages us to escape rather than pay attention to pain, and specializes in the quick fix.

Our dualistic, control-oriented way of understanding human emotion reflects a profound cultural bias: a fear and distrust of emotions in general and so-called negative ones in particular. This emotion-phobia contaminates scientific studies of emotions and even models of emotional intelligence. It has its roots in the ancient reason-emotion and mind-body dualities that guide our thinking about feelings. Reason and mind, associated with masculinity, are considered trustworthy, while emotion and body, associated with the feminine, are seen as dangerous. This patriarchal favoritism leads us to overvalue emotional control and devalue emotional flow. It keeps us from learning that painful emotions can be sources of vitality, understanding, and transformation not when we control them, but when we are receptive to them.

Finding the Gift

In *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman tells of a man strolling alongside a canal in England. Seeing a girl gazing fearfully at the water, he unthinkingly jumps in, fully clothed. Only once he's in the water does he realize why he's there: A toddler is drowning! His "thoughtless act" saves the boy's life. Impulsively jumping into a body of water in suit and tie cannot be called a rational act, and this man was anything but controlled. He was moved to act by an intuitive intelligence more compelling than rational analysis, which instantaneously gave him the information his rational mind was slower to register. What was the source of this intelligence? Fear. The man's ability to read the fear on the face of the girl gazing at the drowning child moved him to do what was needed. Fear was a messenger and a guide to action.

"The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind a faithful servant," said Albert Einstein. "We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift." Emotions are part of the sacred intuitive mind. They are an essential part of the body's wisdom, a language that precedes words and concepts. Most of us rarely experience our negative emotions fully and with awareness. When we know how to listen to them, the dark emotions can be our greatest spiritual teachers.

Grief, fear, and despair are as much a part of the human condition as love, awe, and joy. They are natural and inevitable responses to loss, vulnerability, and violation.

We grieve because we're not alone; what connects us to others also breaks our hearts. Conscious grief is a first-rate teacher of empathy and compassion. It opens our eyes to our mortality and our hearts to living each moment gratefully. Fear is an emotional alarm system that alerts us to act in the interest of life and survival. It asks us to accept our human frailty, and it teaches us humility. When we move beyond our fear of fear, we become more comfortable with vulnerability and thereby expand our capacity for joy.

Despair is part of our humanity. Its source is a hunger for meaning that - as much as the vaunted "reason" - separates us from the animals. Despair calls us to make a shift in the way we live, to renew our souls and deepen our faith.

The Three Skills

Most of us have at some time been overcome by sorrow, fear, or despair. Some of us come through to the other side, while others are endlessly bogged down. The difference between being overwhelmed by dark emotions and being enlightened by them hinges on being able to say Yes instead of No to our pain - thereby learning to ride the wave of emotion on the surfboard of awareness. This process requires three basic skills: attending, befriending, and surrendering to emotional flow in the body.

Attending to emotion is not endless navel-gazing and second-guessing ourselves. It is a mindfulness in the body, an ability to register its emotional language without judgment or suppression.

The Latin root of "adversity" means "to turn" or "to pay attention." In adversity, our dark emotions ask for our attention. To do this properly, we need to know how to read the body's emotional signals closely and with precision.

Befriending takes us a step further. As with the long, deep breath of yoga, we breathe in and out a little more than we think we can. We breathe through painful or challenging emotions without trying to analyze, change, or end them. We just let them be and let them speak to us.

Surrender to emotional suffering is generally the last thing we want to do - and the most rewarding. When we let the dark emotions flow, something unexpected, unpredictable, even miraculous, happens. Where there was a hole in our hearts, there is now wholeness. Where there was the constriction of fear, there is an expansive sense of allowing ourselves to be fully human. From the apparent stasis of despair, something shifts and moves us to change our lives for the better. Unimpeded and mindfully experienced, the energy of the dark emotions flows toward healing and harmony. I call this the alchemy of the dark emotions, a process in which emotional pain is transformed into spiritual power.

When we are adept at these three skills, we learn the language of emotion. And we find that painful emotions need not constrict, isolate, or devastate us; they can open and expand us, and strengthen our empathic connections to others and to the world.

The Easiest Way

Some years ago, I heard the Dalai Lama say: "In turbulent times, the best protection is peace of mind." When we learn what the dark emotions have to teach, we are graced with the gifts of peace, courage, gratitude, joy, and a hardy faith in Life. We grow in compassion for ourselves and others - and compassion is the strongest force for good, the best antidote to hatred, and the power we most need in this benighted age. As Henry Miller put it: "In this age, which believes that there is a shortcut for everything, the greatest lesson to be learned is that the most difficult way is, in the long run, the easiest."

Come on in, the dark emotions beckon. The air may be turbulent, but not unhealthy. We just need to know how to ride the currents.

Miriam Greenspan's pioneering book *A New Approach to Women and Therapy* (McGraw-Hill, 1983) helped define the field of women's psychology. Her latest book, *Healing through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear, and Despair* (Shambhala, 2003), was selected as a Spirituality & Health Best Book of 2003.