

# 4.1

## THE DIRECTIONAL ROLE OF EMOTIONS

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Supplementary material for *Integrating counselling and psychotherapy: Directionality, synergy, and social change* (Sage, 2019).

Goldman (2016) states that emotions are adaptive, helping people to negotiate complex situations to produce actions to meet their needs. An example of this comes from her work with a client who is wondering about his anxiety and what purpose it serves. The therapist says:

So it seems like your worry is an attempt to protect against your feelings of anger and sadness, and this basic feeling of aloneness and insecurity. Your worry is like a sentinel that is on guard against feeling these painful feelings. If you worry, you can anticipate anything bad happening before it happens, and that seems to give you some sense of control. (p. 341)

So what is the function of emotions? First, they *signal* to us whether things are on track or not. That is, they alert us to consider whether things are going in the direction we want, or whether they are deviating from it (Carver & Scheier, 2012; Emmons & Diener, 1986; Klinger, 2013; Powers, 1973). Van Deurzen-Smith (1997) states, 'Emotions are our most sensitive barometers, and they give us accurate information about what we value' (p. 243). Emotional pain, for instance, is like someone sticking a pin in us and telling us to wake up and take notice. Mei, a client, watches her therapist's face, and she feels a twinge of anxiety as he smiles. 'Why is he smiling?' she thinks to herself, 'I was late, he should be furious with me, what's he hiding?' Later, as she starts to talk about this, she realises that it reminds her of her mother. 'When she was really angry with me,' says Mei, 'when she- She wouldn't just say it. It was all hidden. I had to guess.' Here, the emotion acts as a warning: take notice, do something different. Bagozzi *et al.* (1998) write:

[T]he function of emotions is to communicate to the cognitive system or to other people (in the case of mutual plans) which part of the goal structure requires attention. Positive (euphoric) emotions are associated with the attainment of a (sub)goal, which usually leads to a decision to continue with the current plan, whereas negative (dysphoric) emotions result from problems with ongoing plans and failures to achieve desired goals. Such interruptions then lead to problem-solving activities in which existing goal structures are revised and new plans aimed at dealing with the problem are developed (p. 3).

Second, and closely related to this, emotions *orientate* us to what needs attending to (Rogers, 1959). Mei's anxiety, for instance, focuses her on the therapist's smile. It is one 'object' in the room amongst hundreds, but the anxiety pulls it sharply forward, as figure to ground.

Third, emotions motivate us: they make us want to do something different (to get away from an aversive internal state), or to keep doing the same thing (to maintain a pleasurable internal state) (Bagozzi & Pieters, 1998).

Fourth, at a very physiological level, emotions mobilise us, organising us for particular kinds of actions (Greenberg & Pavio, 1997). So, for instance, when people experience

fear, the blood flows from their heart to their arms and legs. This, then, enables them to fight or flee more effectively – a basic, evolutionary adaptive response. Similarly, anger mobilises someone to confront an obstacle, and to ‘push’ their way through it.

Finally, emotions may also be a means of communicating to others what we are wanting. When we feel love towards another person, for instance, and gaze adoringly at them, we are communicating to them how we would like them to react, and may evoke a corresponding emotional response (*Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999*). Similarly, anger communicates to others that we are committed to a particular position, and that there may be consequences for them of going against our wants (*Eriksson, 2011*). At its extreme, such emotional communication may be a deliberate, conscious or strategic attempt to evoke a particular response in another – for instance, ‘tantruming’ to get one’s way. Within the fields of emotion focused therapy and plan analysis, such emotions are termed instrumental (*Caspar, 1995; Greenberg & Pavio, 1997*), and may be experienced by the therapist as manipulative or superficial.

So we can think of our emotions as being a bit like the crash barriers on a motorway, which keep us going in the direction that we want to go in.

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