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Presentation Transcript
Our Emotions – How They Work
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It's a rainy cold winter day here in Albuquerque, but it's toast warm here in the studio, so we're feeling good and excited to get on with a new series today.

This new series is going to be about human emotions. We'll cover such things as the role emotion plays in our lives, how our emotions can either help or hinder our mental, spiritual and physical health, and also, the connection between emotion and depression, also, some things on anger and on love as well, and then, how to manage our emotions for best results – something everybody needs to know more about. And we'll also cover some other things. So, today's title is *Emotions – How They Work*.

Let's start with our breath. I teach a breathing technique to most of my clients. It goes like this. Breathe in slowly for a count of whatever you can – 3 through 7 usually. I used to be able to do 7, but my cardio system isn't as good as I get older, so usually start around 5 now. You breathe in for a count, like this...and then you breathe out for a count. And then you hold for that same count. Okay? And then you start over. If your mind wanders, that's because your brain doesn't like to focus on boring things, like counting our breaths. So, when you find yourself wandering away, just pull yourself gently back to the counting.

When people come into my office, they're usually in some kind of crisis, they're anxious, or they're angry, and it's really hard for them to do this exercise when they're upset. So, I tell them about the kindergartner to whom I taught this method, and who, after three months of not getting into any fights on the playground, walked up to me after recess, and said, "Hey, Mr. Bill, that breathing thing you showed me really works!" "Yes, it does work, but it only works if we work it." If a kindergartner can learn it, so can we.

I also use a simplified neuro-scientific explanation to show why this exercise will help them. When we get anxious or angry, the part of the brain that does emotions – way down low in the brain, just atop the brain stem – starts to over function. That's because that's

where emotions are created. And that causes the brain to send lots of blood to that part of the brain because it's working so hard. And where do you think that blood comes from? Well, it comes from the cortex – the higher part of the brain where we do all our thinking. So this creates a state of disconnect between the two – the thinking part and the feeling part – a state of, what they call in neuro-science, *disintegration* – with the feeling part all revved way up and the thinking part way under-functioning. Did you get that? The thinking part under functioning?

I can make a lot of jokes about that here, but I think I'll just tell you about a man who came to my office some time back. He and his wife were having problems, and she told me that she made him so mad that he called her stupid. Since he was a Christian, I reminded him that the Bible tells us our mate is like our own self. So, he was really attacking himself when he insulted her. And that is exactly what's happened. He said, "She attacked me back." And then he said something really good. He said, "I guess *I'm* the stupid one."

What else happens in our brain when we get upset? Well, the feeling part of the brain sends signals when it's in high anxiety mode to produce adrenalin and other chemicals necessary to fight or run. This state has been called *low mode functioning*, because the action is down low. This is when we say and do stupid things we regret later. People commonly call this *losing it*. You know, the way some people talk about it, it almost sounds like they're proud of themselves when they're in the condition, but it *is* an impaired state. Our thinking brain is shutting down and our feeling brain has taken over. So, why am I telling you this? Well, just a couple more things and then I'll let you know.

Anxiety is about what bad thing may happen in the future. What loss might we incur – the loss of a loved one, the loss of a family dog, our job, our safety, etc. Now anxiety has a cousin called depression. They're both related in that they're both about loss. Depression is about losses in the past. We lost a loved one. Our dog died. We lost our job. We lost our sense of safety when we were in that car accident. But here is why the breathing exercise is so helpful – four reasons. One, when you think about your breathing, you're not in the past or the future. You're in the present. It's harder to be depressed or anxious there, because depression's about the past and anxiety's about the future. Two, when you count your breath, you're requiring your brain to keep some of the blood up in the cortex, because counting is *not* an emotional activity. It's a logical, left-side cortex operation. Three, one of the reasons we get so anxious is that we have focused on something that makes us anxious. The amygdalae have then dutifully produced the anxiety to correspond to our worried thinking. But when we do this exercise, we're thinking about something that's really boring and safe – non-threatening – and our amygdalae can now start assigning safe meaning to our thoughts and calling for the calm and tranquil chemicals instead of the upsetting and unhealthy ones. While all that's going on, the whole that we put in there is gently bleeding down the extra oxygen that we have hyperventilated into our bloodstream while we were upset. And this bleed off makes us feel tired, calm, relaxed, maybe even sleepy. In fact, I have sometimes used this exercise to go to sleep if I wake up in the middle

of the night. I've seldom lasted over five minutes. I kid my clients, "Better than any pill." So, do you think knowing what's going on in our brain helps people persist with the thing that's really going to help them calm down? I think it does. Most people will not persist in a behavior that's difficult if we don't understand why we're doing it. So, there's a really good use for what we've learned in neuro-science about emotions. And this is one of them. We're really just learning how God accomplishes emotions that are godly, like God's emotions, but in a physical body.

Here's another example. Neuro-scientists have been watching what happens in a person's brain when they talk about serving others selflessly. And guess what? It actually turns off the selfishness centers. Isn't that good to know? I think it is. For example, if you've always held yourself back, riding Job's horse, and feeling like the victim, if you make an effort to take care of others, you won't feel like the victim for long. We all have a lot more control over our lives than we'd like to think.

Here's something else. This intentional kind of effort to take control of our thinking and behavior actually changes the shape of our brain in the same way that genetics does. In other words, if a person is born with a predisposition to be negative, they can override it by taking control of their thinking. A person doesn't even have to go out and serve someone else. They only have to focus on it in their mind.

Now, I'm a blessed person because I have a job where I get to help people overcome terrible things in their lives. I get to serve them. And I get to make a living doing that. Is that great or what? So what does this have to do with emotions? Well, it makes me happy. Happiness is an emotion. And it came from doing something helpful for others.

Let's look at a scripture. It's in Philippians 4:8 and 9.

Philippians 4:8-9 – *Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things and the God of peace will be with you.*

So, it's been there all along. You know, we have our positive psychology now – kind of a new thing in the world – but, it's been in the Bible all along. We really don't have any excuses. If we control our thinking, things get better rapidly. Jesus said, in John 14:1:

John 14:1 – *Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe, also, in Me.*

And that term that Jesus used there – *let not* – that means, don't do it! Don't let it happen. Well, what does that imply? Well, it implies that we have a choice. We have control over where we put our mind. We can let negativity be our mental diet, or we can think something else. The over-arching reason it's possible for Christians to think positively is

just like it says: because God and Jesus – not our own ability – make good things happen. If you get upset, fearful, anxious or angry, just start breathing and counting. And when you're calm enough to talk rationally to God, then do that. He'll help you.

Let's define emotions. We're in the beginning of this series and we need to be able to nail down exactly what we're talking about. So here's a dictionary definition of emotions – Merriam-Webster: *a strong feeling, such as love, anger, joy, hate or fear*. And then they give a more complex definition: *the affective aspect of consciousness*. So that word, *affective*...in psycho-babble, the word for emotion is *affect*. So that means – pertaining to emotion – *the affective aspect of consciousness: feeling; a state of feeling; a conscious mental reaction (as anger or fear) subjectively experienced as strong feeling usually directed toward a specific object and typically accompanied by physiological and behavioral changes in the body*. You know, people get red in the face, or they get down, or whatever. So, it affects our bodies as well as our minds. Most of us know emotions by the big four: mad, sad, glad or afraid.

Here's a neuro-scientific definition...well, I say it is...I tried to find a definition by looking for it in neuro-scientific writing, and I could find big long write-ups with words like *basal ganglia*, *hippocampus*, and *amygdalae*. So these people study the brain scans, so they know where emotions come from and how they work in the brain. That kind of makes some of us uncomfortable, because we don't like to think about love being the result of some sort of biological or bio-chemical process. So, when God has an emotion, it obviously can't be that way, because He's not physical. But He – brilliant Creator that He is – has found a way to cause us to feel, in our physical bodies, what He feels in His spirit body. And how does He do that? How does He pull off that miracle? Well, neuro-science is now nibbling around the edge of it currently. Wouldn't you want to know more about that? I think Christians should. So, the third definition we have here is from psychology. Their definition says: *a complex pattern of changes, including physiological arousal, feelings, cognitive processes and behavioral reactions made in response to a situation perceived to be personally significant*.

So, I think there's something useful in our everyday lives for us to learn about our emotions from all three of these definitions. And I'll point that out as we go along.

The second big thing I want to do today, besides defining what emotion is, is to make the point that emotions come from the way we think about things. We talked about the amygdalae already. Let's consider more about these two little psychic organs that we have. They sit right atop our brain stem and all incoming information from the senses passes through them, and they scan for threat, and thereby assign meaning to our experiences. We know that children raised in abusive, neglectful environments will have an over-size pair of amygdalae because they have over-functioned for so long – kind of like working a muscle. If you work it enough, it's bigger. Once the records of experience pass through the amygdalae, they are processed in the hippocampus and sent to the cortex for storage –

that's memory. That's how that works. There's a little thing there – the amygdalae – two of them – that create the emotions, and there's the hippocampus that takes the memory, along with all the other incoming data, and stores it.

Now, many of us have terrible memories of our childhood. And most of our values, our view of self, others, the world are based on those memories. Maybe we learned that we were defective in some way, because our parents were never satisfied with us. Or, maybe we learned that we were not loveable, because they did not express love to us in a way we could receive it. Or, maybe we believe that we're inherently bad, because our parents kind of implied that we were. Or, maybe we learned that asking for help doesn't work, because we never got any help when we asked for it. Well, those are all lies fostered by the adversary and passed through the generations – from one family to the next. And, if we think that way, we would all have the corresponding depression, anger, anxiety and discouragement that goes along with all those memories. But God tells us what science is now proving. If we will change how we think, everything will change – even the shape of our brain.

Let's look at a scripture. It's in 1 Corinthians 2:16.

1 Corinthians 2:16 – *For who has understood the mind of the Lord, so as to instruct Him?* Well, the answer to that question is, “Nobody.” And he says: *But we* – we Christians – *have the mind of Christ.* How does that happen? Well, it's via the Holy Spirit. God gives us the very mind of Christ *in us* to help us think what He wants us to think – to focus on the ever present power of God with us and the future He offers us.

We're going to have a lot more to say on managing our emotions, but that's the core of it. Our emotions are faithfully produced according to the thoughts we think and the perception of what is going on in and around us. You know that old saying, “He made me mad?” No truth to it – not when we understand how God made our minds work. We're all free to choose how we will think and emote – how we react to the things going on around us.

Now, I said the two big points were the definitions and how emotions work, but I have a caveat as well. This is the one last thing I want to explain. Some people will listen to what I have said and believe that something is wrong with them. They'll say, “I've been trying to think differently, but I can't. I'm stuck. It's just keeps going around and around and it never changes. I can never get over being angry, or sad, or vindictive, or whatever.” Well, if that's the case, that isn't your fault. That's what happens to us when we are traumatized by what has happened in the past. When the information coming up the spinal column – about what's going on right now – is judged terrifyingly dangerous by the amygdalae – the part of the brain that stores memory – do you remember what part that was? Right, the hippocampus – that's on the emotional right side – it leaves some of it in the amygdala, where it was never meant to be left. And once it's left there, it's very hard to get it to

process, because now we have another brain disintegration – this time, not from the top to the bottom – not from the cortex to the emotional center – the limbic system – but from the left to the right – side to side – between the emotional right side and the logical left. The emotions created by the trauma are going to be emotional and they can be felt in the emotional right side of the brain, but they can't be processed by the reasoning side because they're stuck. They're stuck in the right side. They can *see* this in brain scans.

There was an experiment where they put somebody in a scanner. I say, "put in." It's not really like that, but they scanned their brain and they talked to them about a traumatic event in the past, and they could see it firing way down deep, on the right side in the brain. And they took them out, so to speak, they did EMDR with them on that event, and then they scanned their brain again, and now they saw it in the left side cortex. Now they were thinking about it in a completely different way. It was much more in perspective and much more benign in its content.

So when that happens – when it's stuck – it's hard to trust people, to love people, be kind to people, be calm, to move past upsetting events, and to change our thinking about them. And usually, in my work, I notice that when that happens to people, that's usually involving an event with some other person that did something to them that was upsetting. And it's *not* something that they caused or desired or wanted. It's not because they're mentally lazy, or a weakling, or too sensitive, and there isn't any way – as they're friends have told them – to "get over it."

So, having said that – now that we know that that is what happens to people – it also behooves us to something about that – to find the help that we need, so that we get unstuck and can move forward, and let go of things that have happened to us in the past, and forgive those that did it, and enjoy our life and move forward toward Jesus Christ.

It's so difficult that when Jesus first spoke in public, He read from the synagogue scroll, and said that one of the things that He was going to do when He returns is to *heal the broken-hearted*. And of course, that promise is for all the people when He returns, but it's also for the church now. If you feel like your negative emotions are stuck, there are things that can be done. And God will help you, if you do your part. He promises.

So, what did we learn today? Well, we learned that our emotions are created according to the way we think – that they're *not* created by others. We learned that it can be helpful to Christians to understand how God makes us work. And what a wonderful thing that is – to understand how brilliant He is! And we learned that, for the most part, we're free to control our own minds. We can't blame other people for the attitudes that we have. We learned that sometimes, if emotions are too upsetting, they can get stuck, and we can get help for that – there's a way to move that improperly encoded material to a more healthy type of condition.

That concludes this presentation. In two weeks, we going to look at how our emotions serve as our brakes and accelerator. So be looking for that on our Website, liferesource.org.

Until next time then, this is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.