

Josh Korda
Week 3, *Cultivating Emotional Intelligence*
February 16, 2015
“Sharing Our Emotions with Others”
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So, welcome to part three. And I've changed my clothes to give the illusion that a different day and time is occurring, but in fact we're just all filming it on Friday in Maha Rose in Greenpoint, New York. But it's lovely to have you back.

And today for this talk we'll be discussing, now, developing connections with other people that help us express difficult emotions. And this is really a very core part of emotion regulation and connection, because difficult, painful emotions—contrary to what you may have heard in some spiritual circles—cannot be completely regulated alone. Meditation provides us with wonderful tools to create a safe container to hold and begin the processing of difficult emotions. But if we truly want to regulate these emotions, which means to connect with others, express them and allow other people to help us find an appropriate degree of activation, we have to learn how to develop secure connections with others.

The beginning of poor emotional regulation, in fact, starts with poor connection with other people. And it's only through restoring secure connection with others that we can truly learn to process and be with all of the feeling states of the natural, spontaneous human condition. So as we said in a previous talk, we are essentially pack animals and we establish our sense of security in life in our sense of being able to survive by connecting with others. It's through connection that we learn how to basically be with the entire range of human emotions. Now if we experience secure connections in our childhood, with our caretakers, we will feel very confident in the world. We'll feel capable of exploring and interacting with others. We won't be too anxious or distant in our interrelationships with others. We will, in essence, feel a sense of security in our endeavors.

And people who are secure generally make excellent people to seek out for emotion regulation. In other words, they will feel tolerant and open to hearing emotions without necessarily trying to change us or tell us what to do. They'll just create the space, hopefully, where we can express the emotions.

There are, however, people that are very difficult to establish any kind of secure connection with that allows us to express difficult feeling states. I've broken them down into three. Different psychologists would break them down in different ways, as would Buddhists. But for tonight's or today's discussion, I'll just break them down into three types of people that we need to be on the lookout for.

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First is what are called people who are dismissive. These are people who feel very good about themselves, but not terrifically good about others. They—in relationships—they can come on with a lot of energy, a lot of enthusiasm. They can be the types of people that are often narcissistic or feel they're very confident, but they're also not very willing to in any way become intimate in the sense that intimacy of being able to listen to other people's deeper feelings, needs. These are people who prefer to have very surface, shallow, simple non-demanding relationships. They're also very aversive towards any level of commitment. These are people who feel very easily engulfed. In fact, one of the causes of this type of dismissive personality is feeling that a caretaker was overly enmeshing or engulfing, and subsequently the adult becomes very avoidant of any demands. So the moment you might need to connect with an avoidant, they will suddenly not return the text or they'll become very unreliable in connecting. They'll be very quick to dismiss your needs as unrealistic and they will find it very difficult to have any empathy, which is the ability to mirror back somebody else's emotions. They will find it very difficult to be with people who are activated, such as sadness or anger or fear or loss, grief, melancholy, loneliness.

A second group of people I would call anxious or pre-occupied, and these are people who have a very negative view of themselves and a very positive view of others. They're willing to often trade sex very quickly for intimacy and they can become very, very dependent very quickly. These are the exact opposites of people who are avoidant. Interestingly enough, if you encounter somebody who's pre-occupied, they may at first seem like the ideal person to develop emotion regulation with, but if they are not in any way working on these tendencies, what will happen is unless you continually connect in a way that's almost impossible to sustain, they will become disappointed and they will suddenly become very shaming or rejecting, because they are essentially set up to expect abandonment and then run away from you the first moment you are not available. So these are people who are often—who don't feel capable of establishing very good boundaries. They are very anxious by nature and they tend to ruminate a lot about a relationship. They will often rehearse how to talk with other people, at length.

Finally, there's a group of people called fearful avoidant and these are people who don't feel good about themselves or others. They essentially will settle into relationships but without any expectation of intimacy. They're very pessimistic and they tend to rather than be of great help when we're feeling difficult emotions, they will in essence simply respond to painful emotions with, “Well, that's the way life goes. It's all crap. Why even bother?” They don't tend to have very much self-esteem and they tend to allow relationships to get into places where nobody's needs are met.

So the goal is really to establish a secure connection with someone so that we can begin to express and reveal—through verbal and non-verbal signals—all of the emotions that we're

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feeling. So how do we do this in a safe way, knowing that we're surrounded by people who could be dismissive or abandoning or overly caught up in their own needs and pre-occupations? How do we develop and find the people who will be secure? That's the basic goal of this talk and the exercises I'll be discussing.

The wonderful evolutionary biologist Robin Dunbar talks about how all people can basically have a group of around a hundred and fifty acquaintances. That's basically the people who are our tribe. And with those people we can safely express just what's going on in our life, but little more. Then there's a second group of about fifty people that we can not only talk about what's going on in our lives, like major events, but we could also talk about the frustrations, the emotions that we believe everybody has, such as “I'm unhappy in my job” or “I'm frustrated that I don't get to travel as much as I could” or “I'm really angry with my neighbor or my roommate.”

But then there's the inner circle of five people and these are the people that we turn to not just to express frustrating emotions, but to really reveal and talk about the most difficult and painful emotions—shaming experiences—the stuff that we've suppressed and repressed and keep far at bay, that we don't feel comfortable talking about with anyone. The goal of this exercise will be to help us move from discerning which people are capable of simply sustaining one level of emotional connection, versus those people that we can talk about deeper content. And, finally, how do we locate the people that will help us really talk about the most painful experiences, the stuff that we rarely reveal in our lives because it feels very unsafe? So we need to work through these stages.

Very often people will fall into the unfortunate habit of—either due to sex or drugs—will meet up with somebody and reveal too much too quickly. And then somebody will not tolerate or hold very well what is being disclosed to them and as a result will feel rejected or abandoned. The point of working through stages of friendship is to help us feel secure, and when we feel secure we'll be willing to disclose and reveal more about ourselves without essentially being easily re-traumatized or feeling unsafe.

So the first stage when we meet someone or we're moving into a new relationship, whether it's a friendship or a romance, is to simply reveal the events that are going on in our life and to note how the other person responds. What we're looking for is somebody who can pay attention, which is called attunement. We're looking for somebody who can understand what we're talking about, which is sympathy and we're looking for empathy, which is somebody who can mirror back what we're expressing. If somebody cannot provide these three, if they immediately start

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telling us what to do or they become bored and look away or they start becoming rejecting, like, “I don’t know why you feel that way or why you’re sticking at that job or why you’re still in that relationship.” If they can’t simply listen, sympathize and empathize, what they’re basically saying is that that stage is all that they are safe to be kept at for us. They’re not going to be someone who we can move to a deeper stage of disclosure and intimacy.

We can be very clear with our needs if somebody just doesn’t get it. We can say, “No, I don’t need you to tell me what to do. I simply need you to listen to my experience.” But if they cannot simply sympathize, empathize and offer attunement, which is attention, then we’re pretty much given an immediate message that this is not somebody worth pursuing as what the Buddha called a wise friend. It’s worth noting that the Buddha said that the entire spiritual path rests on finding and securing wise friends. As he said, “Ananda, it’s the whole of the path.” And, as he said throughout the Pali cannon, we can’t move into a deep understanding of the eightfold path and spiritual practice unless we have wise friends, *kalyanamitta*, in Pali, that help us develop the security and the support we need to work with all of the states that we’ll experience.

So we’ve so far talked about just expressing the events of our lives and looking for attunement, sympathy and empathy. The next stage is to move into some of the more difficult, awkward feelings. So, for instance, suppose I’m telling somebody that I’m entering a new job. Most people might simply, with people they don’t know very well, say, “Yes, I’m excited. I’ve got a new job,” or “I’m co-habiting,” or “I’ve taken on a new project,” but as we move deeper into intimate connections with others, we’re now going to reveal some of the less anticipated, more challenging emotions. So, for instance, I might simply say, “I’ve started a new job and not only am I excited, but I’m also feeling worried. I’m not sure if I have the skills for it, if people will like me there or if it’s the appropriate job for me.”

If I’ve taken on a new project I might say, “I’m excited but I’m also concerned if I have enough time or ability to do it or if my skills are even suitable.” So as we move into this deeper stage of connection we’re revealing emotions and feelings that are largely unanticipated, and once again we’re looking for the same three signals, which are: somebody’s paying attention without interrupting; they’re not thinking about how to reply, just listening; they are being sympathetic, and they are being empathetic. So that means they’re mirroring, again, back the emotions. If we ask for advice, they might offer it. But we don’t need to hear somebody say, “Oh, everything will be okay. Everything will be fine.” What we need is simply the safe container provided by our friend that allows us to talk about difficult emotions.

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Now, we're moving into the deepest stage of human connection and bonding, which is the inner circle of five. The five people that we can share anything with no matter how difficult, painful, or shameful. This is perhaps, in terms of emotion regulation and establishing sanity through life, the important people we can locate. Very often in our lives we tend to hook up with one person—a girlfriend, boyfriend, a spouse—and we use them as the single person to whom we reveal all of the challenging and difficult and painful experiences of our life, and this doesn't work because if we only use one person, they'll become quickly overwhelmed. They'll feel claustrophobic, crowded. They'll feel too much is being asked of them. Additionally, if I use my wife or a friend, only one friend to talk about frustrations, then I won't have anybody to talk about my frustrations with them.

So we need to have a circle of somewhere at least four or five or six people that are our core support group. When we locate somebody that we suspect might be able to hold these experiences—we've already moved them through the first two states—what we do is we find some experience, memory, impulse that has been very painful that we haven't or we don't regularly share with anyone, and we express it and, once again, we're looking for the signs of the safe container, the signs of attention, understanding, even emotional empathy. If we start to experience judgment or rejection, the important thing to do is to stop wherever we are in the sharing experience and to simply note that this person is not capable of hearing these experiences. Very often people I've worked with have had experiences ranging from physical and sexual abuse all the way through different extremely traumatic experiences in life and extraordinarily suppressed and repressed painful emotions. And it's very important if we feel that somebody is not capable of holding these experiences as we start to disclose them that we pause and we give ourselves permission to stop.

A very important key tool to developing connections is boundaries, which means knowing what makes me safe around other people and being able to communicate my boundaries without justifying them or apologizing for them. Nor do I expect you to maintain my boundaries. My boundaries are for me to maintain. So if I'm expressing an emotion or an experience to you and begin to feel that you're trying to be controlling, rejecting, judging, intolerant, I'll simply say, “That's not what my needs are,” and I'll end the conversation. I'll take care of myself.

So as you go through the following week, I'd encourage you to try to see if you can move one person through one stage that we've talked about. So if there's one person that you've simply been using to talk about the events of your day, such as somebody at work or a new acquaintance or somebody that you're just meeting, see if you can move them to a deeper level of connection. Again, it's through this ability to express our emotions that we learn to regulate, we learn to help

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each other adjust the activations so that we can feel secure with our emotions rather than continue to repress them, which creates so many disastrous long-term results.

So I hope you'll find this of use and we'll move on next to the fourth and final talk.