

EVERYDAY MIND AND LOVE 2018

Session 8 June 28

We've been discussing **empathy** and the hugely important part of our mind that we call our **emotions**. Researchers and writers about the emotions have taken many different angles over the years so you will hear or read widely different ways of explaining what they are and what they do. I will say a bit more about this today and then try to wrap it up around the Panksepp model of the seven primary emotions from which the others are derived. The approach I take is that we should respect them as powerful subconscious forces, but also recognise that there is still much that is not known, even about which parts of the brain are producing which emotions.

In a new book called *The Empathy Instinct* by Peter Bazalgette (a famous television producer in England and Chair of their Arts Council) there is a statement that is typical of many popular books on the brain and emotions: '... fMRI researchers have proved that emotions . . . can be distinguished by brain pattern.' I looked up the reference cited for that sentence. Its authors emphasise how difficult and unproductive the quest to identify emotions by recording neural activation has been and their evidence that a new statistical technique bringing in a wider range of brain regions than ever before now makes it possible is far from convincing.

Even the most sophisticated brain scanning has limitations. It is best for surface parts of the brain like the prefrontal cortex (PFC), but not as good for the deeper regions where the primary process emotions arise from. These emotions normally occur along with some body movements, so the need to be perfectly still in a scanner creates a problem. Also the recognition of patterns requires mathematical permutations of the data so that different research groups using different algorithms come up with different conclusions.

Even so I like the theme of Bazalgette's book, which is that we can (and need to) create a more empathic society. He includes a Charter for Empathy and discusses ways of improving our health system, education system and justice system. He emphasises the role of the arts in sharpening our awareness of the need for empathy. One chapter, called *The Digital Dystopia*, contains some alarming warnings and this is a subject I want to look at more closely in the next Term of our Course.

Another good book that I mentioned briefly last time (and forgot to bring in until today) is *Emotions Revealed* by Paul Ekman. It has a lot about the facial expression of emotions, which was his main field of research, and it also provides stimulating food for thought about how to practice empathy and why it is important in our lives. There is a test to see how good you are at interpreting facial expressions. The book was published in 2003 and the thrust of research on emotions has changed over the past 15 years with more emphasis on brain scanning, but re-reading this stuff has reminded me that perhaps the most important learning comes from simple practical aspects of social engagement – noticing one another and recognising our mutual need for connectedness.

It also reminded me that this period around 2000-2002 was an exciting time in the history of research on emotions and I brought in another book to illustrate that called *Destructive Emotions and How We can Overcome Them* by Dan Goleman which also provides a lot of

food for thought. It's a narrative account of one of the series of dialogues between the Tibetan Dalai Lama (with his learned team) and various Western neuroscientists that have been organised by the Mind-Life Institute for many years. Paul Ekman is there, but the core group over several of these meetings consists of Francisco Varela (earlier the colleague of Humberto Maturana), Richie Davidson from Madison, Wisconsin, Mathieu Ricard (a French scientist who became a Buddhist monk) and Dan Goleman who chaired this meeting and wrote it up. I find it exciting to read because it's like a 'think tank' where the discussion goes back and forward around important topics and you can feel the meaning unfolding, more so than in a textbook where it has already been sorted and packaged. Much of the brain scanning research on the minds of serious Buddhist meditators that Richie Davidson carried out was planned and arranged around this time.

This work led to another way of thinking about our emotions that I did not explore very much in my book – the idea of **Emotional Style**. It is explained in Richie Davidson's 2012 book (with Sharon Begley): *The Emotional Life of Your Brain – How its Unique Patterns Affect the Way you Think, Feel and Live – and How You Can Change Them*. He defines emotional style as the consistent way we respond to life experiences – repeated patterns of emotional response – which he argues should be recognisable as patterns of activity in the brain. There is a set of questions in the book whereby you can determine your own emotional style and some suggestions about how to improve it if you want to.

There are six components of emotional style. **Resilience** (which is how quickly you can bounce back) is associated with greater activity in the left prefrontal cortex (PFC) because it balances out the negative activity of the amygdala. Richie says he formed the opinion very early in his career that happiness came from the left PFC and sadness from the right PFC. This is a bit like the idea that we do language better with our left hemisphere and pictures better with our right. There is certainly a grain of truth in it, but it is not a very accurate way of explaining brain function. The style that he refers to as **Outlook** is also reflected in the PFC together with the dopamine or pleasure regions. He says some people sustain this activity longer than others and he suggests delayed gratification for improving this. Meditation improves both of these styles after only a few months, but it is only the very serious long-term meditators who show lasting changes in the brain.

Social intuition is another aspect of style associated with activity in face recognition areas of the brain, again balancing negative effects of the amygdala. **Self-awareness** being associated with activity in the insula is not a new finding. For **Sensitivity to Context** you need strong activity in the hippocampus and good connections between it and the PFC, which is also hardly surprising. For focussed **Attention** he found more phase-locking in the PFC compared to the open awareness kind of attention. Meditation (even small amounts) improves attentional stability with less 'attentional blink' and less mind-wandering.

Davidson has a new book with Dan Goleman called *Altered Traits: Science Reveals how Meditation Changes your Mind, Brain and Body*. I've had a look at some reviews and I'm sure people who are keen meditators will find it interesting, but it doesn't seem to add to what he has written previously. He was voted one of the 100 most influential people in the world by Time magazine some years ago. Meditation is important and taps into the subconscious areas of our mind because it affects our breathing and induces relaxation. It can be done in groups, but it doesn't really acknowledge the social aspects of our mind.

I watched a new interview with Stephen Porges the other day in which he added to his earlier work on the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) as our instrument of self-regulation for our mind and body. Incidentally the title was *Connectedness as a Biological Imperative*. I couldn't agree more! He said we tend to outthink our bodies. We often focus our thoughts on 'what's wrong with me' forgetting that our mind is operating collectively, not alone. His key word was **co-regulation**. We are striving to **co-regulate our mind and body systems through our connectedness**. This begins with a feeling of safety that comes through your own vagal tone. It does not come from combatting the threat. There was a study in an American school to compare two strategies for alleviating the fears that children had at school after a mass shooting. One was an obvious presence of heavily armed guards; the other was the mingling of 40 dogs trained as companion animals. The kids said they felt much safer when the dogs were there than when the armed guards were even though the latter may have been more likely to deter would be shooters.

Stephen Porges work is becoming a natural part of many treatment programs. I brought in one of the new books last time and another has just arrived *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy – Engaging the Rhythm of Regulation* by Deborah Dana. I'll read it and bring it in next Term. Another new book that I've ordered is *The Biological Mind – How Brain, Body and Environment Collaborate to Make Us Who We Are* by Alan Jasanoff. Apparently he is arguing against all this focus on the brain as if it was the agent that determined everything about our experience of mind.

The emotions that we learn

Panksepp explains that there are three levels of emotional processing. At the **primary** level there are seven inborn, instinctual emotions, from which the rest of our emotional repertoire can be generated. The **secondary** level is the subconscious emotional learning that occurs as our self-regulation physiology interacts with that of other people and we respond to our environment, particularly to threats, in ways that we are not consciously aware of. The stability and consistency of our social engagement contributes to these fundamental learned emotions and will shape our future lives. Then there is a **tertiary** level of emotional learning that involves our thoughts and feelings, conscious decisions that we make, our awareness of life and social engagement in particular. We experience joys and sorrows, feel upset or contented, and deal with an intriguing mixture of emotional predispositions.

Whereas the primary process emotions aren't expressed all at once, the emotional repertoire we develop at the tertiary level is so multi-faceted it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern one emotion from another. We experience anger, resentment, jealousy, envy, embarrassment, guilt and remorse and feel confidence, joy, calmness and openness to love as learned emotional states. If we accept this it implies that these can always be relearned as required. For some of us **anxiety** and **depression** become emotional states of such magnitude that they crowd out the rich variety of other feelings. At the secondary level a deeper, more subconscious, emotional learning occurs to create the crucial emotions of **pride** and **shame**. These are more difficult to relearn and can be the greatest causes of our pain and suffering. I will deal with them in a later part of the Course, but it's worth noting that, because they develop at a more subconscious level, they are harder to identify than the more obvious tertiary emotions.

The primary level of emotion is dominant early in life and the tertiary level gradually grows in importance to become completely dominant when our adulthood is well established – by the age of 30 perhaps. Then we tend to forget that there are primary emotional forces operating and attribute all our feelings to more superficial things that are happening at the tertiary level. We may come to associate anxiety and depression with the thinking part of our mind and what is happening at this time whereas both have developed from our years of past experience.

The primary emotion of FEAR always activates our amygdala, but it is not true that it is generated from here. Deeper brain regions very close to the brain stem, known as PAG (periaqueductal grey) are generating fear instinctively from the moment we are born. Nor is it as simple as a ‘high road’ and a ‘low road’ (using the terminology of a famous emotion researcher, Joseph Le Doux) whereby the PFC modulates the immediate fear reaction in the amygdala, which implies that you can always rely on your thinking mind to put to rest any inklings of fear. It is more aptly explained as your accumulated experience of responding to stress – to what extent you have employed each of the three levels I spoke about before (dorsal vagal freezing, fight-or-flight, or ventral vagal social engagement). You did not have much control over these responses because you came into the world requiring love and love was not always what was happening in your life.

The roots of anxiety are not simply the primary emotion of FEAR – they invariably include the primary emotion of GRIEF – or the distress that comes from separation, every break in your connectedness that has occurred in your lifetime. All our learned emotions also have roots in the primary emotion of SEEKING. Any setbacks that diminish our enthusiasm for life lead to a compounding of other negative emotions and, on the contrary, a strong seeking instinct is an antidote to other negative emotions generally. When we are depressed it is the sapping of the seeking emotion that is primarily responsible.

Too much GRIEF and too little PLAY would be one way of summing up the root causes of depression. The rates of depression seem to be increasing faster for young people today. The primary emotion of PLAY starts out as an interaction with other people, but from quite an early age it includes interaction with objects. Infants learn very quickly that people are very different from objects and are much more helpful for getting one’s needs met than any object. They also have to learn that people are not always going to be available in this way so being able to occupy yourself, especially with the most natural objects like sticks and soil and tree trunks, can also be very satisfying. They only need to be shown this by example. Nowadays the objects that adults mostly use are small metal objects with buttons to press and sparkling silver screens. It can happen, especially in the later years of childhood if personal interactions are not running smoothly, that young men and women become so infatuated with their phones and computers that they do not get as much face-to-face contact as a truly healthy mind requires. Texting or social media is person-to-person, of course, but it may not achieve the physiological co-regulation that the previous generation seemed to require to be thoroughly well. Their nervous systems will continue to evolve so we can hope that the necessary adaptation occurs before any harmful effects escalate too much.

One of Panksepp’s most telling arguments is his questioning of the way that emotional or mental problems are classified and diagnosed today. Traditionally, the medical recognition of ‘diseases’ of the mind has always been based on a subjective assessment of how you behave

and how you feel. There are no accurate blood tests or instruments to tell you, for example, that your blood pressure is high or your liver function is impaired. This led to many inconsistencies in diagnosis so the profession introduced the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) that is revised every few years with hundreds of new ‘illnesses’ added every time. Panksepp’s idea is that it would be more helpful to sort emotional problems according to their physiological basis, now that this has become more feasible. There is no complete set of measurements that could be taken, but at least it would be a more sensible guide to treating the conditions – for example, when the seeking instinct is impaired, medications should be those that strengthen it. The search for non-addictive ways of stimulating the dopamine system is heading in that direction.

The wonderful instinct of CARING.

We are born expecting to be loved. This is a biological fact. The fact that most of us survive to live adult lives is a testimony to the fact that we do receive love and that this can take many different forms. In this Course I want to say lots of things about love, but nowhere am I going to say that I know what it is because love is the ultimate beneficent mystery of our human existence. It sustains the operation of our mind at three levels – in our relationships with other people, in our attitude to and understanding of ourselves, and in how we feel about our relationship with the unknown.

Love for the unknown is perhaps the most mysterious of the three and therefore probably the most powerful. I say that because I think questions are more important than answers. It’s helpful to have some answers, but if we knew the answer to everything life would become meaningless. It is an awareness of the unknown that gives us context and meaning. Later this year there is a gathering in Ireland to celebrate the life of John O’Donohue, one of my favourite writers and spiritual teachers. I brought in his book *Eternal Echoes – Exploring our Hunger to Belong* which is dedicated to ‘the ones who inhabit lives where belonging is torn and longing is numbed.’ He refers to the soul as ‘a divine echo that whispers in every heart’ through which we can experience the way that ‘the shelter of belonging empowers you.’ His idea of prayer is as ‘a bridge between longing and belonging.’

Our relationship with self is where the ego and its attendant selfish **pride** so often wreak havoc with our lives. Because of this pride we are all subject to the debilitating weight and suffering that come with **shame**.

The practical manifestation of love occurs most obviously in our relationships with other people so we will look at what the primary emotion of CARE might mean in this regard.

Shared meaning

I want to remind you of an important principle for understanding how our mind works – that meaning is not transferable. Many people forget this, assuming that what you meant when you said something was what another person took it to mean when they heard you – as if you handed it to them on a plate. My words come from my meaning, but you must make your own meaning and it will be built on a framework of your own lifelong story and emotional experience, which is not the same as mine. The more time we spend together the more likely it is that we will feel that we have meanings in common.

Our striving for connectedness is a quest for shared meaning. We enjoy the bits where your meaning and mine overlap. We support one another's feeling of self-esteem as we find common ground – it is reassuring to be dancing together or singing together rather than walking down a road alone, wondering whether anyone else feels the same way about what is happening. Having confidence in ourselves (without the need for the egoic self) gives us the ability to empathise, allowing our feelings to marry up with the feelings of others. It also equips us to show compassion for others, which includes an awareness that another person is seeking relief from their suffering and perhaps we could help to achieve this. Both empathy and compassion require us to open our minds and reach out to others in a non-judgmental way. The ultimate example of this attitude is what we call love.

The art of loving

The Art of Loving by Erich Fromm is **the** book for this Course in many ways. Fromm was a psychologist, but he does not write like a psychologist in speaking about love. Unlike other psychoanalysts of his time he never really studied medicine. He writes in a person-to-person style. He was born in 1900 into a pious Jewish family in Frankfurt, Germany, and emigrated to the United States in 1934. He had several failed marriages and had strong political views, both of which *The Art of Loving*, published in 1956, seems to transcend. He does lament the fact that political and economic structures are not conducive to love and is very clear about misunderstandings and misuses of love while emphasising the point that love is an art requiring much practice and learning, which we are not very good at doing. I find it hard to think of another book that was written more than 60 years ago that seems so pertinent to the situation that we live in today. It was, and is, a wake-up call for humanity.

Many of his ideas are paraphrased in my book and I won't try to repeat them all here. His central idea is that 'love is the answer to the problem of human existence' which is, in a word, separateness or disconnectedness. He wrote that 'without love, humanity could not exist for a day.' The fact that we do still exist is a testament to the power of present-day love, despite it being often neglected. This is because of its crucial role in the subconscious part of our mind where the emotions are operating. In the final Chapter Fromm speaks about a certain kind of *discipline, concentration and patience* that are required and the role of *reason, humility and faith*.

He makes it very clear that love is generated by giving it to others and the more we give away the more we will have. Selfishness is the opposite of self-love because it isolates us. He says 'the main condition for the achievement of love is the overcoming of one's narcissism.' He argues that the awareness of human separateness, without reunion by love, is the source of our shame and guilt and anxiety. We create a fake sort of togetherness in many ways that does not serve our mind well.

What we call romance enlivens many aspects of our egoic self through reactive exchanges, but these do not satisfy our minds in the longer term. Robert Johnson, a Jungian scholar and therapist in California wrote many good books including *We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love* in which he uses the mythical story of Tristan and Iseult to explain the difference between a superficial version of love and a deeper, more spiritual bonding.

Barbara Fredrickson is an American psychology professor and a leader in the Positive Psychology movement. She wrote *Love 2.0 – How the Supreme Emotion Affects Everything*

we Feel, Think, Do and Become. Her main idea is that love has been misrepresented and we need to recognise it in what she calls the micro-moments of connection with everybody we meet. There is a lot of interesting discussion here about love as ‘the emotion of connection.’