

2017

Emotional Disengagement

Lori L. Ellison

Marshall University, ellisonl@marshall.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://mds.marshall.edu/co_faculty



Part of the [Counselor Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ellison, Lori. "Emotional Disengagement." *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Marriage, Family, and Couples Counseling*, edited by Jon Carlson and Shannon B. Dermer, vol. 2, SAGE Reference, 2017, pp. 513-517.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Counseling at Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Counseling Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact zhangj@marshall.edu, martj@marshall.edu.

emotional components as well. Stress, separation from a parental figure, developmental delays, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are all potential factors.

Evidence-Based Treatments

Bladder training can be used for either diurnal or nocturnal enuresis. Often, children and parents want to cut back on fluids to try to avoid bed-wetting; however, this is counterproductive because the bladder adjusts to the change and holds less fluid resulting in more frequently needing to urinate. With bladder training, children are encouraged to increase the amount of fluids taken in during the day in order to increase bladder capacity. In addition, this method establishes a toileting routine in which the child uses the toilet every hour and then increases the intervals over a period of time. Combining these two techniques increases bladder capacity. The third part of this method is ensuring that the bladder is completely emptied when the child uses the toilet. This can be accomplished by counting slowly to 10 after urinating.

Conditioning therapy paired with medication to decrease urine production is the most commonly utilized form of therapy for nocturnal enuresis. Conditioning therapy consists of using an alarm system, which alerts the child when the bedding gets wet. This trains the child to become more aware of bladder fullness during sleep. This type of therapy is considered to be the most effective with the lowest rate of relapse.

In recent years, researchers have begun studying alternative methods for treating nocturnal enuresis and have found acupuncture to be a promising treatment. Specific acupuncture points are selected that lessen bladder contractions and suppress muscle activity prominent in enuresis. Acupuncture, particularly electroacupuncture, in conjunction with traditional Chinese medicine has been shown to have more positive results than the use of a nighttime bed-wetting alarm. This and other alternative forms of treatment have potential, but more research needs to be conducted.

Janna C. Ramsey

See also Attention-Deficit and Disruptive Behavior Disorders; Childhood Anxiety; Depression in Children; Parental Stress: Effects on Children

Further Readings

- Bower, W. F., & Diao, M. (2010). Acupuncture as a treatment for nocturnal enuresis [Electronic version]. *Autonomic Neuroscience*, *157*(1–2), 63–70. doi:10.1016/j.autneu.2010.07.003
- Freeman, K. A., Riley, A., Duke, D., & Fu, R. (2014). Systematic review (and meta-analysis) of behavioral interventions for fecal incontinence with constipation. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, *39*, 887–902. doi:10.1093/jpepsy/jsu039
- Friman, P. C., Hofstadter, K. L., & Jones, K. M. (2006). A biobehavioral approach to the treatment of functional encopresis in children. *Journal of Early and Intensive Behavior Intervention*, *3*(3), 263–272.
- McGrath, M. L., Mellon, M. W., & Murphy, L. (2000). Empirically supported treatments in pediatric psychology: Constipation and encopresis. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, *25*(2), 225–254.
- Moser, N. L., Plante, W. A., LeLeiko, N. S., & Lobato, D. J. (2014). Integrating behavioral health services into pediatric gastroenterology: A model of an integrated health care program. *Clinical Practice in Pediatric Psychology*, *2*(1), 1–12.
- UCanPoopToo*. Retrieved from <http://www.ucanpooptoo.com>
- Wassom, M. C., & Christophersen, E. R. (2014). A clinical application of evidence-based treatments in pediatric functional constipation and incontinence. *Clinical Practice in Pediatric Psychology*, *2014*(3), 294–311.

EMOTIONAL DISENGAGEMENT

Emotional disengagement is a pattern of response, typically to negative emotional experience, that attempts to deny, suppress, or mask those resulting negative feelings. It can be manifested in a number of behaviors, but the goal is to remove oneself from the unpleasantness of those emotions, regardless of the consequences. This entry examines emotional disengagement, its associated behaviors, and their consequences.

Emotion

When one discusses emotion, sometimes referred to as affect, the first difficulty in understanding it is to find an appropriate definition. This can be a challenge as there are many ways to describe what emotion is and not all of them align. Adding to the challenge is the qualitative classification of emotions as “good” or “bad,” which is also highly subjective. It seems that when searching for a definition of emotion, only one thing can be agreed upon—emotion is a psychological, physiological, and behavioral response to an event. As such, different emotions may be best explained in relation to combinations of these three components.

Emotional Socialization and Dysregulation

Most people are relatively adept at identifying emotions, both within themselves and in others around them. Even infants are capable of recognizing different emotions in their parents' faces. What typically occurs as a part of a child's socialization growing up is that they are taught to identify some emotions as positive (e.g., happy, content, and excited) and others as negative (e.g., sad, angry, and depressed). Parents will usually send their children either verbal or nonverbal messages about which emotions are acceptable and which are not. They may also focus particularly on the child's behaviors associated with those emotions (e.g., hitting when angry). How much parents focus on these behaviors and how they respond to them will depend largely on two things: (1) the ways in which they have interpreted the value of certain emotions and (2) how well they are able to regulate their own emotions. For example, if parents see anger as a negative emotion, and if it is, perhaps, one with which they have difficulty, they may attempt to discount or discourage its expression in the home, even if it is expressed appropriately. It could be that they are unable to recognize appropriate expressions of emotion themselves and therefore are unable to teach a child how to do so as well.

In some cases, especially in situations where parents may have some difficulty with the ability to regulate their own emotions appropriately, parents may inadvertently pass on some of that dysfunction to their children through their own, albeit poor, example. This is particularly true for those emotions that are deemed negative. In such cases, it is not uncommon to see difficulties with affect regulation in both parents and children. For example, if a mother or father is emotionally disengaged from the family, the likelihood that one or more of the children will also become emotionally disengaged is much stronger. The connection between emotional expression and attachment styles also can be used to explain maladaptive attachment between parents and their children.

Categorization of Emotion

Some researchers argue that emotion, in and of itself, is neutral but that the associated categorization of positive or negative is a socially imposed norm. However, the actual experience of many emotions suggests that there are noticeable differences in how one experiences feelings and how these experiences are categorized isn't always intuitive (e.g., is it positive or negative?). For example, feeling happy generally is a positive psychological experience, lifting the person up and producing good feelings, but some may feel guilt for feeling happy in certain circumstances. So is that positive or negative? Likewise, feeling sad or angry may elicit an undesirable state or experience that may even perpetuate the original feeling response (with more sadness or anger). In another case, that sadness or anger might be justified so there may also be a sense of vindication or contentment. The question becomes whether the emotional classification stems from the visceral, the intellectual, or a social norm. Perhaps there are components of all three, but regardless of the source, the interpretation of emotions being positive or negative is significant to the individual who experiences the emotion. This categorization can influence the choices and actions that lead to emotional disengagement.

Components of Emotion

The Psychological Component

The psychological component of emotion, some will argue, is the individual's appraisal of the event in question. The individual must recognize the event and, in some way, interpret the event with regard to whether it might pose a threat, present a dilemma, or bring a positive and/or desirable outcome. Some researchers have stated that there is a question whether there truly is a conscious appraisal of emotion or, because of the short amount of time that is necessary to elicit an emotional response, whether it might be an automatic brain response. Others have stated that without meaning assigned to an event, there is no need for emotional response. Certainly these all have their values, but there appears to be no definitive answer to which is correct. Perhaps it is not the means of appraisal but rather its result that is most important in the psychological component of emotion.

The Physiological Component

The physiological component of emotion can be found in responses to an event that trigger arousal in some way. The body will produce sweat or tears and perhaps goosebumps, flushing, or muscle tension among other reactions. Many of these responses are associated with certain emotions (i.e., fear often produces muscle tension, sweat, and perhaps tears). However, the confusion comes when those same responses can also be associated with more than one emotion. For example, sweat may be associated with fear, arousal, or anger. As a result, physiological responses may indicate a particular emotional state and signify other emotional states at the same time. This can be confusing and unpleasant and may even lead to a desire to disengage from the emotional process altogether.

The Behavioral Component

The third component, the behavioral response to emotion, may be the best predictor or identifier

for emotional disengagement but is also not a completely reliable measure. Behaviors that stem from emotion are usually termed as expressions of emotion and are usually deemed appropriate or inappropriate. These may be aggressive types of behaviors, or avoidant behaviors, or they may be neutral behaviors but may also be associated with emotions in some context. For example, an angry child might lash out at a peer or family member (aggressive), a sad event may cause a person to withdraw from those around them (avoidant), or a happy event may cause a person to jump up and down in excitement (neutral). The concept of avoidance, which is primarily associated with emotional disengagement, is also part of the behavioral component.

Disengagement

To disengage is to move away from something or to detach oneself. In this case, one avoids an experience with the hope that the experience will subsequently cease to exist. However, this course can have both interpersonal and intrapersonal costs. For example, when an unpleasant event occurs, such as a death in the family, an emotionally disengaged person may be determined not to be involved in the funeral arrangements or perhaps not even attend the funeral in order to eradicate the idea that a painful loss has occurred. It is this pushing away or suppressing the distressing emotion that is the key. They may be completely oblivious to the consequences and detrimental effects the resulting actions (or inactions) may have on others around them. And their own lack of acknowledgment of the loss could prevent them from ever reaching a sense of closure with the grief process. If carried through, the process would lead to growth. What is often not understood is that such avoidance can further perpetuate one's dysfunction and even prolong the pain one is trying to avoid. Although emotional disengagement is most often understood as a behavioral component of emotion, in therapy, psychological and physiological components also need to be taken into account.

As noted previously, the need to disengage, or retreat, from one's emotions is born of the discomfort that one feels in the experience of negative emotion. Psychoanalytic theory traces the use of defenses to avoid unpleasant emotions and circumstances. The avoidance of negative feelings is a strong motivator for behavior. With disengagement, however, it goes a step beyond mere avoidance. Whatever must be done to divert attention and energy away from the negative is what one will choose over the healthier option of just facing something and dealing with it. The ways in which this may happen vary. Disengagement can begin with simple denial, but typically it is much further advanced. It may involve deliberate distraction or rumination on some unrelated topic to keep the mind occupied elsewhere. It will often involve whatever one sees as a potential way to relieve the anxiety that the negative emotional experience may present. Emotional disengagement will seek to deny or even suppress those emotions to get the experience completely out of the mind so as not to have to deal with those negative emotions. It is almost an "out of sight, out of mind" proposition. While, to the average person, that may sound like a perfectly legitimate way to deal with negativity, there can be some serious consequences to the one who has disengaged.

Consequences of Emotional Disengagement

When one is emotionally disengaged, they are essentially cut off from their emotional experience. They have a very difficult time connecting with their own emotions as they are very nearly incapable of allowing themselves to feel anything at all, particularly so when it is deemed a negative emotional experience. When that happens, one is deprived of key communication tools that allow them to relate to those around them including significant others and family. For example, without the ability to acknowledge, let alone share, one's emotional experience, it will be very difficult for them to enter into the emotional experience of their significant other and thus block the potential

for intimacy. A shared emotional connection is the foundation for an intimate relationship. For the emotionally disengaged partner, this will seriously impede attempts to connect and to remain connected with a significant other.

Likewise, intergenerational consequences can occur with an emotionally disengaged parent and his or her children. Many of these parent-child dyads will spawn dysfunctional interaction patterns that may continually perpetuate a pattern of emotional disengagement in the children from as early as infancy and into adulthood. As stated previously, the pattern is easily passed on from parent to child via behavior modeling. In addition, there is also some evidence that there may be a genetic propensity to engage in this type of emotional avoidance. In such a case, the individual would need to learn strong behavioral skills to overcome that propensity toward disengagement.

And still a third consequence is the physiological effects of disengagement. The experience of emotion, as stated previously, has a physiological component. When that aspect is ignored or suppressed, there is a physiological change that occurs. There can be substantial change in the ability of the brain to regulate arousal, thus making it more difficult for a psychotherapeutic intervention to be of help. There are significant cardiovascular and immune system effects, which can lead to serious physical illness if left unchecked. And there are several mental health diagnoses for which the person will become more vulnerable. There is a stronger propensity toward mood disorders, anxiety disorders, binge eating, and substance and food addictions. All of these diagnoses can present serious challenges to a person's well-being, their relationships, and their livelihood without appropriate treatment.

Emotional disengagement, to summarize, serves a purpose. It is a means of coping with stressful or painful situations that some people adopt in order to avoid rather than address difficult situations. Some researchers maintain that people who consistently choose emotional disengagement do so due to the genetic and/or behavioral example they were given in their family of origin. However,

there can be both the desired results (e.g., the temporary avoidance of situational pain) and, as discussed throughout this entry, a number of more permanent undesired results.

Lori Ellison

See also Affect Regulation; Attachment; Avoidance; Conflict Styles; Parent–Child Communication

Further Readings

- Campos, J. J., Frankel, C. B., & Camras, L. (2004). On the nature of emotion regulation. *Child Development, 75*, 377–394. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2004.00681.x
- Cumberland-Li, A., Eisenberg, N., Champion, C., Gershoff, E., & Fabes, R. A. (2003). The relation of parental emotionality and related dispositional traits to parental expression of emotion and children's social functioning. *Motivation and Emotion, 27*, 27–56.
- Eisenberg, N., Champion, C., & Ma, Y. (2004). Emotion-related regulation: An emerging construct. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 50*, 236–259.
- Eisenberg, N., Cumberland, A., & Spinrad, T. L. (1998). Parental socialization of emotion. *Psychological Inquiry, 9*, 241–273.
- Gross, J. (1998). The emerging field of emotion regulation: An integrative review. *Review of General Psychology, 2*, 271–299.
- Hill, D. (2015). *Affect regulation theory: A clinical model*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Rice, J. A., Levine, L. J., & Pizarro, D. A. (2007). “Just stop thinking about it”: Effects of emotional disengagement on children's memory for educational material. *Emotion, 7*, 812–823. doi:10.1037/1528-3542.7.4.812
- Weeks, G. R., & Treat, S. R. (2001). *Couples in treatment: Techniques and approaches for effective practice*. New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, CHILDREN

Intelligence is a term people often associate with one's cognitive abilities. However, there are multiple

forms of intelligence, including emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is a multifaceted term used to describe people's emotional abilities and skills related to cognitive abilities and disposition. For example, it is used to describe an individual's ability to exercise good judgment and guide their thinking and behaviors based on emotions and further used to describe the ability to correctly identify other people's emotions. An additional component of emotional intelligence is the individual's ability to register and understand conflicting emotions, such as feeling excited and scared at the same time. The ability to differentiate and label various emotions appropriately demonstrates the intersection of the cognitive and emotional systems. These systems create the entirety of emotional intelligence. Though the term is applicable to all individuals, it is especially relevant in the discussion of children and their developmental process. This entry briefly introduces emotional intelligence as an ability and as a trait. In addition, two theories of child development and their relationship to emotional intelligence are discussed. Finally, the influence of attachment and parenting styles on emotional intelligence is reviewed.

Background

The idea of emotional intelligence can be traced back to E. L. Thorndike's construct of emotional intelligence in the 1920s; Howard Gardner's work on personal intelligence (intrapersonal and interpersonal); Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer's model of emotional intelligence in the 1990s; and Daniel Goleman's perspective, which he introduced in his 1995 best-selling book and subsequent work. In addition, there is a foundation of research that points to the importance of emotional intelligence in learning, decision-making, creativity, relationships, and health. Over time, it has been concluded that emotional intelligence contains three central ideas: (1) perceiving emotions of self and others, (2) understanding emotions, and (3) managing emotions. If people are able to perceive their emotions and understand them, they are also better able to manage emotions.