Gray Matters on Emotional Intelligence: Part 2

by Leslie Gray, LCMHC

In last month’s article, we began exploring the inner workings of emotions. I encouraged readers to begin paying close attention to the various emotions they experience. The key is in doing so from a place of curiosity. What makes this approach so effective can be better explained through an example.

Imagine your partner is in a bad mood and you feel inclined to respond to them. You have a choice on how to go about doing so. You can ask with a raised voice from a place of frustration and impatience, “What is your problem!?” Or you can get curious and ask, “Hey, what’s going on? This isn’t like you.” The first example typically closes the door of communication; the latter opens it. If it makes it easier to conceptualize this, try putting yourself in their shoes. How would *you* rather be approached when you’re upset? (Please do use your judgment and keep in mind that this does not apply to verbally or physically abusive/violent behaviors. In those cases, get yourself and others to a safe place and get some help.)

Let’s bring it back inside. By responding to our own emotions from a place of curiosity, the emotions feel more receptive to revealing what they are trying to do *for* us. As a result, we gain clarity and are able to express our emotions in a way that is more proportionate to the situation.

This brings us to the emotional *over*-reaction. Take, for instance, anger. Maybe you did not sleep well, and your fuse is a little short as a result. You lose your temper at someone but are quickly fraught with regret, guilt, even embarrassment for your behavior because you know deep down, they did not deserve your wrath. What started as one emotional expression (impatience) due to fatigue was then bombarded with several others because you went too far. What are those follow-up emotions trying to do? They are letting you know, like a friend nudging your elbow with theirs, “Hey, that was not ok. Get back in character.”

Let’s take it further to better understand why this happens. If you ignore your physiological needs such as sleep, hunger, thirst, etc., you lose some executive functioning (ex: impulse control, emotion regulation, reasoning). Maybe your emotions have been invalidated throughout life or you missed out on healthy modeling of emotional expressions from caretakers. You may have been shamed for your emotions resulting in ‘stuffing’ them which creates a pressure-cooker effect. When the pressure becomes too much, an emotional explosion occurs followed by regret, guilt, etc. (Not to mention words and actions that cannot be taken back.)

Past trauma can be a significant factor in *over*-reactions. Your brain was designed to keep you safe and get your needs met. Unresolved trauma can re-wire the brain causing you to perceive danger in places it might not actually exist, or at least not to the degree that you perceive it to be. This translates to over-reactions that others cannot understand. Why? Because they are looking at the situation through their lens, not yours.

If you have had a practice of being critical or dismissive of your own emotions, consider where you learned to do that. We often tell children to stop feeling one way or another. But the truth is, it’s not up to others to decide how someone should or shouldn’t feel.

So, what now? Begin by practicing mindful self-awareness of your thoughts and feelings. Pay attention to your emotions *on purpose* and validate their presence. In other words, create a little space to say, “Yeah, it makes sense that I am feeling this way.” Then, and this is important, invite the emotions not to overwhelm you so that you can understand what they want for you. Notice how the emotions relax a bit inside as you stay curious about what is going on in there. Whether you are responding to your own emotions or someone else’s, what has become ingrained through life lessons and experiences can be reversed, starting from the inside-out.

Leslie A. Gray is a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor and operates Gray Matters Counseling & Wellness, LLC in Laconia NH. Feel free to submit requests for subject content of future articles to: askgraymatters@gmail.com.