

Emotional Regulation - Essential Skills for a Better Life

Welcome to Peaceful Life Radio

David Lowry: Hello everyone and welcome to Peaceful Life Radio. I'm David Lowry. With me today is my good friend Don Drew.

Don Drew: Hello, everybody

David Lowry: Don, here we are with another first of the year reminder that we want our people to love us, like us, Download our transcripts, all of that good stuff.

Don Drew: That's peacefulliferadio.com. And, we want your input. We want to hear from you.

Understanding Emotional Regulation

David Lowry: Today I want to talk about something that's so important. One of the things that messes up your peaceful life is when your emotions get the better of you. It happens because we get triggered and all of us, including people on Peaceful Life Radio can become triggered, but we can do better.

Don Drew: Absolutely, David. We've said this repeatedly that the reason we do this show isn't because we got this stuff right. Emotions certainly can be problematic. They can get in our way. They can cloud our judgment. They can do a lot of damage, frankly, to us, but also if managed well they can support and help us.

David Lowry: Now, our friends in psychology call it emotional regulation, and that's the ability to effectively manage and control one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in response to different situations. Don, all of us have situations where, hey, it's easy peasy, and other times where it is really difficult for us.

Identifying Personal Triggers

David Lowry: When I feel disrespected. I know that I trigger pretty easy and I'm not as careful as I should be. Do you have a thing that gets you from time to time?

Don Drew: One of those though is my natural impatience that I seem to have with things. And if I get frustrated and so on, then sometimes that can become emotional and be problematic for me. If somebody is yelling at me or verbally being abusive that triggers the fight in me and brings out the aggression and so forth, which is an emotion as well. So it can be really problematic if I can't regulate my emotions properly.

David Lowry: Some people have very high, high, high emotional highs and very low, low, low emotional lows. And they're traveling the full spectrum and it gets in trouble with friends and people don't know which person they're dealing with. Are you the over the top happy person today? Are you the down in the dumps person?

The Basics of Emotional Regulation

David Lowry: Let's talk about emotional regulation and start off by talking about why it's important.

Don Drew: I think what psychologists will often talk about having a baseline of emotion, a middle point, if you will, and everybody's middle point is going to be a little bit different. But if we can establish a baseline and largely be able to return and stay relatively quickly to that baseline, it can help us with our overall mental health. It helps us with our relationships and our communication. It can lead to increased overall professional success in whatever our endeavors are.

David Lowry: Absolutely and it'll give you better mental health, of course. Give you stronger relationships. More success and enhanced well being. All those sound pretty good, right?

There's three things that involve emotional regulation. There's the things that we do when we're triggered by our emotions, the things we begin to initiate, whether it's raising our voice or beginning to get unreasonable or loud. And then there's the things we do to suppress ourselves. We call those inhibiting actions, some people like clam up and just say, *I'm not going to participate in all of this*. And then there's the modulating responses we do. Sometimes we say, *okay, I'm not going to get sucked in, or I'm going to be careful how I phrase this because I know that if I phrase it a certain way, I may pass a point of no control, lose*

control of my emotions and I wouldn't like that. So we have these three components.

But Don, let's look at some of the basic elements of regulation.

Don Drew: Okay. Let me list them here and then we'll approach each one at a time.

Self-Awareness and Emotional Expression

Don Drew: First one is self awareness. The ability to be aware of our self, our emotions and all that's very important.

Then there's emotional expression, our ability to communicate those emotions effectively.

Thought management, you were just talking about that in the modulating part of how we manage our thought processes and how we think about the impact of these emotions.

Impulse control. , A lot of us make resolutions about dieting and so on and quite often we know that a lot of our bad eating habits come from a reaction to stress as a way of managing and all of that. So, learning how to manage those impulses that come from negative emotions and so on.

Stress management, something we spend a lot of time on. Why? Because stress is definitely a big problem for most of us.

Social skills is our way to respond to and manage those emotions when they are occurring or those triggers, for instance.

And then the last one is problem solving. It's how we figure out how we're going to get past . that trigger or pass that negative emotional experience.

David Lowry: Let's look at the first one here on self awareness. One of the things that's hard for us to do in the beginning is identify what we're feeling. I know that sounds weird, Don, but most people have a very limited range of expression when it comes to emotion, and I think men especially fall into this category, not to overgeneralize. But men can have a very hard time identifying their emotions. We know about half happy and sad, and we know about angry and mad, but emotions are very rich. They go well beyond all of that, right?

Don Drew: Yes, absolutely. And helping us expand our emotional vocabulary can also help us pinpoint exactly the emotion that we're experiencing. And you're right, David, men are socialized largely to guard or hide their emotions or manage them very tightly, and that can be problematic.

David Lowry: It's like the primary colors. We believe there's five or six basic emotions. But when you mix them all together, it's amazing how many gradations and different types of feelings there are out there. And the more we can identify precisely what we're feeling at any moment, it's good for us. And Don, surprisingly, there are emotions that we feel in our body. Do you feel stress in a certain part of your body?

Don Drew: Yeah. So I've always had very acute stress, manifestations, physical manifestations from stress. Tight neck, things of that nature. Tightness of muscles in me is a body sensation that I feel. And I can actually feel my body tightening up as the stress is occurring and I'm having an emotional response.

David Lowry: We all carry our stress in different places. I, sometimes feel it around my kidney area. I feel tightening around the kidneys. There's some muscles back there. We all carry our stress in different places. Some people carry it near their heart or chest. Some people carry it in their stomach and everybody's a little different, but we can learn to identify, *Oh, I'm feeling stressed*. Is our body telling us something? And if it is, we got to pay attention to it.

Don Drew: A part of that paying attention is to learn how to identify triggers. These triggers can be external and internal. Recognizing what those triggers are. Negative thoughts like I'm not good enough, or I'm not smart enough or whatever. Messages that we give ourselves internally that are negative tend to drag us down.

And there's also external triggers. There's certain people, frankly, in our lives, sometimes that, that trigger things in us that trigger negative emotions.

And then there's also traumatic events that we're going to have in our lives. Big things, small things, whatever they are, any kind of an emotional pull on us that causes us to negatively react and learning what those are and understanding how they operate allows us to better respond in advance to that.

David Lowry: Well, our second basic element is what we call emotional expression. And that's the ability to express our emotions appropriately. Now, the word appropriate could probably be different from one person to the other. It

could be culture bound to be sure. But there is a standard in our society and culture about like, *Hey, you've really crossed a line in what you've said or how you're expressing it, that sort of thing.*

Don Drew: It seems today people feel more free to express their emotions. But in large part, David, they're doing it in social media, they're doing it in grocery stores when they get upset about something, they seem to feel freer about expressing their emotion, thinking, or feeling like they have a right to say or do whatever they want and that everybody else should have to take it. And that can be pretty tough.

David Lowry: There's a constructive way to express emotion. And that's what we want to go for. Anybody can mouth off and swear and be really angry and show anger and that sort of thing, but it takes a self-controlled person to learn how to learn how to express constructively when we let our feelings out. It's not just about venting and exploding, it's about expressing a respectful emotion.

You and I've had programs on peaceful assertiveness and I believe everybody should be peacefully assertive and speak up for themselves. But there's a difference between being assertive and overly aggressive. |

Don Drew: Overly expressive communication tends to shut down the other person. If you're the one communicating, emotionally and very aggressively, you can cause somebody to believe rightfully, probably that you're not listening to them.

David Lowry: It's important to be peacefully assertive because if you're suppressing your emotions, that just creates more stress and anxiety in you, and that's not good. So you've got to learn how to get those things out without, causing a scene but I also believe, Don, that sometimes when we are peacefully assertive, we can't always know how another person is going to react to that, and that's on them.

Sometimes we have to tell the truth, or we have to put a boundary up and say what we need to say. But as long as you're being, emotionally intelligent in the way that you're saying things that's okay. And our program isn't, trying to, anticipate all the moves that the other person is going to make.

We're talking about you having a peaceful life and knowing how to express yourself so that you can put your head on your pillow at night and say, *I had a pretty good day or when this came up, I think I handled it the best way I could.*

Don Drew: You know, since we're talking about emotional expression, I had a conversation today with a dear friend of mine who was sharing with me how he's had a very, very. rough year and has been through an awful lot and his therapist helped him with this, but he's learned, how to journal and express himself in the journal ways that are constructive and keep him from, leaning too much on verbal communication, where things can get fairly messy and complicated.

David Lowry: That is so creative. That is really good. We can learn to express ourselves in many ways and journaling is a wonderful one. Some people use art and music. Those are great ways of doing it. And good old physical activity, just taking a walk or going to the gym or lifting weights or getting on the treadmill, whatever you need to do, those are good ways of letting your emotions out as well. I can vouch for all of those things.

Don Drew: Okay.

Managing Thoughts and Impulses

Don Drew: So the third element we want to talk about today is thought management, and this is challenging our own negative or unhelpful thought patterns and replacing them with more positive and realistic ones, frankly. What are some of the things you can think of that might help us identify negative thought patterns?

David Lowry: We have to recognize when we're actually doing something that's not helping us. There are many negative thought patterns out there, and you talked about a few of them earlier in the program where you talked about the self talk that we give ourselves where we're running ourselves down saying, *Oh, I was such a stupid person to do that.* Sometimes we say things to ourselves inwardly that we would probably slug another person if they were constantly saying those things to us in person. But we can be quite brutal to ourselves with our self talk.

There's some thought patterns that we got to be careful about.

And viewing situations as being black and white. I'm either succeeding or I'm a failure. Instead of realizing that we live on a spectrum where we're going to be good in some things and miserable in other things and learning to accept ourselves for where we are.

Don Drew: That's sometimes called all or nothing thinking and it can be really problematic, you know?

David Lowry: Sometimes we discount what we call the positive. That just means that when somebody says, *Hey, Don, really, you're a great guy. Think of all you've accomplished.* You go, *No, not so much. I was two years ago. I haven't had a break lately.* We've got to be a little more generous and say life is more than what's happened to you in the last two weeks.

Don Drew: I call that the Eeyore Syndrome. I don't know if anybody knows who Eeyore is from Winnie the Pooh, but that sounds an awful lot like him.

One of the things I catch myself doing, and I really work to not do it is what's called overgeneralization.

David Lowry: Yeah,

Don Drew: I do that when I get mad at somebody or something's going on. I'm in a heated conversation and I say, you always do that or you never do that. And as soon as those words are out of my mouth, I go, *that's not true. That's not true at all.* I may be upset with something they did or said or whatever, but I'm in a relationship because we have positive things in our lives.

So, being aware, this is part of the thought management, increasing our awareness of when we're violating or breaking these rules, it's really, really critical.

David Lowry: I think the last one I'll bring up is personalization. That's where you blame yourself for things beyond your control. I am more and more learning that I have to control where I put my attention, Don. If I put my attention on things happening in society that I have no control over, maybe I don't like the way the government is doing something, or the way that my church is doing something, or my employer. It's really strange. None of those three organizations ever come and say, *Hey, Lowry, what do you think we ought to be doing?* Most of us have very little control over these major things and we personalize them to a point where we ruin our peace and wellbeing, but really we have to learn to say, *I'm going to turn my attention to the things I can control.*

Don Drew: Let's move on to basic element number four, which is impulse control. We already referred to that. What is impulse control?

David Lowry: We need to delay our temptation to act. This is the reactive part of us. For those of you who are fighters, instead flight people, if you're a fighter, you may have an impulse to speak up really quickly and talk very sharply or act threateningly or to get aggressive with people, to raise your voice, to shout, say unkind things without thinking.

We have to resist the temptation to act immediately because sometimes when we act too quickly, we say things we regret and sometimes you can't take it back. So, we want to avoid the negative consequences that come from being reactive. Reactive are those overly aggressive actions that causes problems for us later on.

Don Drew: When we're heated or when we are emotional, we tend to feel an emotion and react on that emotion. What we're trying to do here is to be more aware, and learn to slow down and not jump to an action that's going to lead to more emotional response.

David Lowry: We can learn to hold ourselves a bit more accountable for the things we're saying when we're by ourselves. All the things that happen to us every day, where we lose our peace because of what's going on around us.

Let me give you an example, when you're driving, overly critiquing people in front of you. If we hold ourselves more accountable and say, *People are going to drive the way they drive, I do it myself*. As we learn to develop that impulse control privately, it shows out in other ways as well.

Don Drew: Absolutely.

Stress Management Techniques

David Lowry: Number five, Don, stress management.

Don Drew: Of my favorite areas of stress is everywhere. We all feel it. We all have it. We feel it at work. In our relationships. Sometimes we just feel it in life. In recent history here, I had to get enrolled in Medicare. Okay. That was fun. That, administrative process of going through all of that was creating all kinds of stress. I kept getting notices that if you don't do this by this time, then, the earth will end. At one time, I was talking to a therapist who was describing one of the ways that we respond to stress.

And she said, what happens is that most of the time we can handle a significant amount of stress. The problem is that they usually it's just not one that occurs. It's multiple layers and they stack on one another. And we have to learn how to unstack some of that. The deck is never going to be cleared. There will always be stress. If we can learn how to manage stress events and our response to it, then we're in much more control. And that feeling of control, whether it's real or imagined, that feeling of control helps to relieve stress and helps to lower the emotional negative emotional response to stress.

David Lowry: The truth is, sometimes you're just going to go through a lot of stress. You may be dealing with trouble in your relationships, stressful situations at work where there's too much work piled on you for the time that you have, money troubles, stress is a part of life and our reaction to it is really the only thing we can control.

Don Drew: Yeah.

David Lowry: That's really hard to hear sometimes. Do we want to be at the mercy of the stressor do we want to hold our head up high and walk through it as best we can and be compassionate enough to ourselves and others to say, we're really doing the best we can, given the stress that we're under.

Don Drew: You mentioned just a little while ago, physically, the importance of physical activity, for instance, and I'm really big on that. A lot of different things that you can do.

Developing Social Skills

Don Drew: Our basic element number six is social skills. How does social skills play into this idea of managing our emotions?

David Lowry: We have to learn how to be emotionally intelligent with the people around us. Social skills are things that we can constantly learn to develop, whether it's learning how to react to other people when they say something unexpected, or be a good and supportive friend. To learn how to be a giver when it's time to give, and to receive when it's time to receive. It all comes down into these three areas of learning to be a better communicator those are all some social skills that we can learn to develop. And of course, entire courses could be taught on that.

Don Drew:

Effective Problem Solving

Don Drew: Let's move on to our final basic element which is problem solving, let's talk about what all problem solving means when it comes to do with emotional regulation.

David Lowry: Problem solving always begins with something that's unsolvable or something we've got to figure out how to make it better. Right now I'm trying to help my sister who's in a nursing home get the money that she's entitled to from her late husband's estate. That is not something that happens in an afternoon. You have to figure it out and I'm absolutely confident that I'm going to get it done, but I cannot tell you exactly how or when it's going to get done. So it's tied into that stress we were talking about earlier. It's also tied into social skills. I can't yell and scream at people and get it done. So, we're always working towards solutions. Even if we're not consciously aware of it, Don.

Don Drew: Professionally, David, in a previous life. I was a strategic planner. And I taught management science for the last 25 years. I find great value in having a plan. One of the things about having a good plan on how you're going to deal with something, whether it be some emotional trigger, some body, some event or whatever, that's causing you stress on your emotional regulation. One of the things I found really works is to go through the thought process of having a plan.

What that does is that makes you slow down, think through a process, think through the of outcome that you want. Focusing on the outcome that you want, not the problems that you have, but the outcome that you want. By designing that in your head, or maybe even on paper, maybe even through journaling, if you can design what it is that you want in terms of an outcome and how you intend to get there and maybe some specific actions to take. If you go through that thought process, then along the way, what you're going to find is things will change.

No plan that I've ever seen has ever worked out. Perfect. There's always things that are going to happen. Changes that have to be made, things will change and they're going to change rapidly and so on. But if we think about what we want and plan how we're going to do it, that actually works better for many people than just sort of winging it.

David Lowry: You use the term winging it and I think that while we want to be flexible and spontaneous in the way we live our lives at times, it is arrogant to

think that I'll make my very best decisions off the top of my head as life comes to us. That's just not true.

Don Drew: Absolutely.

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

David Lowry: We've had seven areas here today.

Don Drew: Yeah, we've covered a lot of territory and I hope it, is useful to our listeners. I think this is an area that we could all use improvement in our search for a more peaceful life. If we can learn how to better manage and regulate our emotions, understand our emotions, then we will be able to come at the world from a more peaceful perspective.

David Lowry: Don, it sure is good to see you, and I look forward to seeing you again next week,. Tune in to Peaceful Life Radio. Your place on the internet for learning to how to live more peacefully.