

# How We Learned to Suppress Feelings

Bill Gayner

[mindfulfeeling.ca](http://mindfulfeeling.ca)

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Softening and opening with kindness and gentle curiosity towards our inner vulnerabilities and pain is unfamiliar territory for many of us, because we didn't learn how to do this growing up. Many of us had parents who didn't know how to calm themselves down, let alone how to calm us down. Our parents may not have known how to identify their own emotions, let alone help us identify, express and sort through our feelings in

productive ways. Just this, let alone add emotional, physical or sexual abuse or neglect at home or elsewhere, and, rather than learning to identify and make sense of their feelings, kids learn to suppress them by tightening up their muscles, holding their breath and coming up into their heads.

This leaves us cut off from our core feelings, called primary emotions in emotion-focused therapy (EFT). Primary emotions have lots of rich implicit information that orient us to current situations, and tell us what we need and what matters to us, and motivate us to act. Being cut off from primary emotions also leaves us vulnerable to defensive secondary emotions, repetitive emotional/cognitive patterns associated with mood disorders and trauma, such as:

- Anxiety and worry (for example, “What if that happens? I could do this; but then what if that other thing happens...” and this can spin out of control)
- Depressive feelings and rumination (for example, “What’s wrong with me? Why are people so mean? When will this ever end?”)
- Self-criticism and anger (such as, “I’m such a loser! I’ve got to get my act together!”)
- Rejecting anger (such as, “Leave me alone! I’ve had enough of you!”)

Mindful experiencing enables us to decentre from these kinds of emotions and thoughts, that is, to see that they are not direct truths about self, others and world, rather, they are events happening in consciousness.

Mainstream mindfulness uses decentering to acknowledge and let go of secondary emotions and orient to present experience. This is useful, but does not include using the optimal conditions mindful experiencing creates to acknowledge, arrive at, and make sense of core, primary emotions to better understand and navigate our lives.

In emotion-focused mindfulness therapy, practitioners learn to tolerate and deepen their experiencing of secondary emotions in meditation or with a therapist in order to discern and arrive at underlying primary core emotions. Arriving at primary emotions enables a deeper letting go of secondary emotions.

For example, getting dressed for my father’s funeral, I started to worry about whether the colours in my suit, shirt and tie matched (I don’t wear a suit often). My anxiety was mounting and felt out of control. Going to this big cathedral funeral and delivering the eulogy was feeling really scary. I paused and tuned into the core of my body, asking myself what I was really feeling. I realized I was feeling grief for my dad, really missing him. Arriving at this primary grief and exploring it, the secondary anxiety about my clothes disappeared. The grief made complete sense and oriented, supported and motivated me to go to my dad’s funeral, give his eulogy and relate to our family and friends in a coherent, kind way.

This grief was a primary adaptive emotion. On the other hand, if I had discovered underneath the mounting anxiety, with both my parents having passed away within a couple of years of each other, I was feeling like an orphan in a storm, alone, small and paralyzed in a big threatening world — that would have been a primary maladaptive emotion. Primary maladaptive emotions tend to be out of proportion, paralyzing, and do not help us navigate situations. They often have an edge of helplessness to them, and, unlike primary adaptive emotions, can linger a long time. They feel like information about now, but they are not; they are actually loaded with information about the past. Exploring primary maladaptive emotions in a workable, decentered way can help us better understand our past and find and express implicit adaptive emotions that transform the maladaptive emotions.



EFT provides various ways to respond to primary maladaptive emotions. The compassionate self-soothing task is one. If you find yourself feeling an intense, paralyzing fear, shame or sadness, you could try imagining a child in front of you, someone else rather than your own younger self, who feels the same way. You could try responding to this child with kindness and compassion, hugging and comforting them, and expressing whatever adaptive emotions emerge for you, such as kindness, compassion, or adaptive sadness or anger at whoever harmed them, which can transform and dissolve the maladaptive emotions.

As Rilke wrote:

if only we arrange our life in accordance with the principle which tells us that we must always trust in the difficult, then what now appears to us as the most alien will become our most intimate and trusted experience. How could we forget those ancient myths that stand at the beginning of all [cultures], the myths about dragons that at the last moment are transformed into princesses? Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.

Rilke (1984)

To learn more about arriving at and navigating primary emotions, see my paper on emotion-focused mindfulness therapy (Gayner, 2019) and Robert Elliott & Les Greenberg's (2007) paper on emotion-focused therapy below. If you want to read in more depth about it, Robert Elliott, Jeanne Watson, Rhonda Goldman and Les Greenberg's (2004) book *Learning Emotion-Focused Therapy* and Les Greenberg's (2015 [2002]) book *Emotion-Focused Therapy* are excellent introductions.

## References

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