Feelings – What’s the deal?

By Greg Fields

Some of us think we have to choose between either being emotional or being rational. Instead of choosing, we must learn to integrate emotion and reason. Leslie Greenberg (2002) offers a multi-step approach to this integration process.

First, we begin by recognizing the situation that gave rise to the emotion or feeling. We should try to recall the scenes in slow motion to identify the point at which we first noticed it.

Second, we focus on our bodies in order to determine what, if any, sensations alert us to the feeling. We may feel it in our stomachs, chests, neck, etc. Wherever it is, we are becoming aware of our emotional experience that moment.

Third, we attempt to symbolize the sensations and feelings. Some folks may say something like, “It feels like fog that swallows me”. We are identifying it as something definite and outside of us. This enables us to gain distance from the emotion so that we can explore it further.

Fourth, we note any thoughts about ourselves, others, or life in general that come along with the feeling. This process will enable us to pay attention to the evaluations, expectations, and conclusions that constitute part of the emotional experience.

Fifth, we identify the motivations evoked by the emotions or feelings. In other words, we seek to know what needs, desires, longings, concerns, etc. would emerge, if we spoke from deep within the emotion.

Sixth, we determine what sort of implicit movement flows out this emotion. For some, the feeling makes them want to curl up in a little ball. For others, the feeling evokes a need to run away. The idea here is that these emotions come with ready-made plans for the potential actions in a particular situation.

Here is the whole process in a sample scenario. Let’s say we are doing a group project and a member is not doing all that is needed. When confronting the member, the sensation of heat rises into our chest. We recognize this feeling as anger. We notice the thought, “This is completely unfair.” We then feel the need to take a stand. Lastly, the bodily movement we feel is that of pushing something dangerous away.

Finally, what do we do with the information that the emotion has provided? This is where reason comes into the picture. Greenberg (2002) suggests that, first; we need to decide what this emotional experience is telling us about ourselves, others, or the direction we are headed. Second, we must decide how to respond. We can act on the feeling, seek deeper understanding of what is behind the feeling, or look at the big picture in order to alter the feeling.

Our emotional experience has provided information about us in the world; and our reason uses this information to determine the direction we go next.