

# Are you response able?



You can't control your emotions; however, .....

Emotional control is one of the key elements of Mental Toughness; but what does emotional control really mean? For many, it conjures up images of “gritted teeth”, “stiff upper lips” and total denial of the slightest trace of anything resembling an emotion!

There are a lot of web sites proposing such things as: “6 Steps to Controlling Your Emotions”, “5 ways to gain control of emotions”, “How to become better at controlling emotions”, etc.

Although there is no commonly accepted definition of an emotion, I use the following *“An emotion is any relatively brief conscious experience characterized by intense mental activity and a high degree of pleasure or displeasure”*

We do not decide to be happy, sad, angry, disgusted, frightened, etc. it just happens to us; something happens in our “external” world and our “internal” world conjures up an emotion.

Let's imagine that you are lost in your thoughts walking down your local high-street; suddenly, from a shop doorway, your best friend (who you haven't seen for years) jumps out and shouts B00!

In a split-second you will probably experience surprise, fear, joy and anger. Surprise as you are jogged out of your

thoughts, fear as you see a large shape coming towards you, joy as you realise it is your best friend and then anger at your best friend for frightening you.

Adrenalin will probably have started to pump through your veins, your heartbeat will have increased, you may have started sweating and there will probably be some Dopamine thrown in for good measure.

All of that without making the slightest conscious decision.

In fact, in my humble opinion, we cannot control our emotions; we can try to pretend that they are not there, we can dismiss their usefulness, we can explain them away with rational thoughts, but at the end of the day, they are still there – Our emotions are there for a reason, emotions are information; surprise is telling us “watch out! pay attention! Fear is telling us “beware there is danger! Anger is telling us, “fight against wrong and injustice”. Our decisions must incorporate emotions to be effective.

So, we cannot (and maybe should not) control our emotions; however, we can do something about the “manifestations” of our emotional “experience”

There are four elements of an emotional experience that can be more or less seen:

- **Bodily symptoms:** these are the physiological components of our emotional experience linked to hormone release; blushing, changes in heart & breathing rates, muscles tensing up, etc. We can spot some of these in both others and ourselves.
- **Action tendencies:** these are our behavioural responses that accompany an emotional experience; moving towards or away from someone or something, hands clenching into fists, shuffling of feet, changes in body posture, etc. Again, we can spot some of these in both others and ourselves.

- **Expressions:** these are the facial and vocal expressions that almost always accompany an emotional experience; a scowl, a smile, a sigh, a cry of joy, the open mouth, etc. As with bodily symptoms and action tendencies we can spot some of these in both others and ourselves
- **Thoughts:** these are the subjective thoughts that an emotional experience generate once it has occurred; dark thoughts, self-doubt, existential questions, etc. Much more difficult to spot in others.

Although we cannot do much about our emotions, we can do something about the associated “emotional signs”; this is what we can control – the impact of our emotional experience on our bodily symptoms, our action tendencies, our expressions and our thoughts.

In fact, it is probably what you would have done if it was your friend springing from the shop doorway; at the same time as the emotional experience (and the Adrenalin rush, increased heart rate, etc), your “rational brain” would be trying to understand what’s going on and “calm you down” by reducing hormone release and returning you to your “normal” state.

I like to think of it as a kind of interplay between our emotional response and our rational response to an external event; it’s not about denying that we are frightened or angry it’s about how we use the information contained within our emotional experience in order to help us “here & now”.

It’s what people like the SAS, the Navy Seals, the GIGN and other “elite forces” are trained to do; it’s not that members of the above groups do not have emotions – they have simply learned how to manage the manifestations of their emotional state.

If I go back to our best friend in the shop doorway, the extreme “negative” emotional response could be panic and reflex defence that we would later regret – clearly something

that the elite forces have been trained to avoid.

Even if we are not part of some elite force, we all face “difficult” day-to-day situations that put emotional strain on us; the project review meeting for missed deadlines & overspend, giving feedback to someone on poor performance, presenting something we are not completely sure of to senior management, having to give bad news to someone, violent images on the news, etc. etc. and there are a lot of etc. etc.

One of my all-time favourite quotes is from Viktor Frankl, *“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom”*. Stimulus being some kind of external event, and response being how we respond to that event. The “space” for the likes of the SAS is extremely limited; a figure, (hostage, terrorist, colleague) in a smoke-filled room with what could be a broom, or an assault rifle – a microsecond to decide to shoot or not.

Dr. Alan Watkins in his book “Coherence: The Secret Science of Brilliant Leadership” writes about becoming “response-able,” that is, able to respond in the way you choose. Being able to somehow “analyse” one’s emotional experience and decide consciously “what is (at least for oneself) the most appropriate way to respond?”

This is not as difficult as it might seem; most of us are not faced with the equivalent of people pouncing on us from shop doorways every five minutes. Most of the situations we have to face are “relatively known”; we know that the project meeting is going to be difficult and that people will start shouting at us and blaming us for things that are not our fault; we know that the person that I have to give performance feedback to will be in denial and get angry; etc.

I recently coached a manager who wanted to talk about one of his meetings that went horribly wrong, a lot of shouting, name

calling and people storming out of the room.

When I asked him what he had done to prepare the meeting, he gave me a kind of surprised look; “err, I booked the room, put together an agenda, invited everyone .....”.

Did you know that the meeting would be potentially difficult, I asked? “For sure”, he replied, “touchy subject and previous meetings were quite emotionally charged”.

I asked him, again, what he had done to prepare the meeting?

He gave me a bit of a quizzical look and seemed to have realised where I was going.

With hindsight there were a lot of things he could have done to prepare himself for the emotional experience part of the meeting; he knew who would be angry, he knew who would accuse him and, most importantly, he knew pretty well how he was going to feel and probably react.

He could have visualised someone shouting at him and seeing himself calmly looking at the person and waiting for him to finish. He could have imagined the names they would be calling him and say to himself “they don’t really mean that”, he could have taken a walk outside to “focalise” before starting the meeting, he could have prepared himself to concentrate on his breathing when feeling attacked, etc.

Without becoming Zen monks or Jedi Knights; there are a lot of relatively simple, conscious, things that we can do to help us control or manage or emotional responses; and, with practice they can even help us in those more unplanned or spontaneous situations.