

The Six Steps to Emotional Well-being

This model of emotional well-being is based on the understanding that emotions are:

a preparation for action with an expectation that the action will meet a need.

The model uses insights from the Human Givens approach to emotional health.

Get ready – *preparation is everything*

Emotions are a vital part of interacting with our environment – they prepare us for action. To interact with our environment effectively, we need to know what to focus on and what to ignore. We are surrounded with more information (or stimuli) than we can take in, so we have something called an ‘orientation response mechanism’ to help us focus. It is driven by two basic drives that direct our attention. One watches for novelty to anticipate danger, the other looks for rewards – not just pleasure but to get important needs met.

One indicator of emotional well-being is the ability to go from a state of focused attention to one of reflection when and where appropriate. Problems arise when people can’t go into a state of concentration (such as ADHD) or when they can’t get out of it – such as addictive behaviour.

Get set – *expecting to win*

As well as preparing us for action, emotions carry an expectation of what that action will achieve. An expectation based not so much on learning and memory, but on a much more basic process of making sense of our world.

The human brain uses a process called ‘pattern matching’ – matching what it sees, hears, feels, smells, tastes, with what is already on file as a ‘pattern’ to get meaning or make sense of things. Supermarkets use a similar process. Every time the bar code is read by a scanner, it sends the code details to a data bank which finds a perfect match and identifies this unique item among thousands in the store. The human brain’s sense organs – eyes, ears, skin, tongue, nose – are like the scanner, and a special part of the emotional brain is like a databank that recognises the input from the senses. A vital difference however, is that the human pattern matching process is approximate or metaphorical (it is like) thus allowing us to make sense of things we have never seen before.

Go for it – *keeping on track*

Action, however routine or simple, is not a random happening. Even if it is done without thinking (below awareness), it is the result of a systematic process following what Anthony Robbins calls ‘three decisions of destiny’: what we focus on; what meaning or expectation we attach to it; and what we do about it.

Remember, emotions are designed for action, not thinking, in fact when the emotional arousal increases it reduces our capacity for thinking. The action resulting from a heightened emotional state follows a script using the sense-making patterns on file that are more likely suited to survival (fighting or running away) than purposeful rewarding action that promotes flourishing (learning new responses, experiencing growth in negotiating our physical and social environment).

Celebrate – *that winning feeling*

When the action meets a basic human need, there is reason to celebrate - the preparation was adequate; the expectation fulfilled; the action appropriate; and the need met successfully. This sequence allows the emotion to be discharged, freeing up the awareness part of the brain to engage with our environment. With awareness comes choice, and with choice comes a sense of control and autonomy instead of feeling powerless. An important factor in emotional well-being is getting our needs met. Not just food, exercise, shelter and sleep, but non-physical needs like love, connection, control, achievement, significance and meaning.

Humans, like all living things, interact with their environment to get their needs met. Emotional well-being allows for growth and enables people to flourish. If they are emotionally distressed it is because important emotional needs are not being met – raising the arousal and the likelihood of ‘script’ responses, and reducing the clear-headed appropriate interaction to get needs met.

Reflect – *check the game-plan*

Reflection is the capacity to pause and remind ourselves that our main game is engaging with life on our terms, not being swept along by its constant pressure. Constant emotional arousal places stress on the processing capacity of the brain, leading to poor interaction and unmet needs, ensuring the arousal remains.

A pause breaks this cycle and a routine of reflection is an essential part of building and maintaining emotional well-being. Four reflective routines known to work are:

- mindfulness - paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and in a spirit of enquiry.
- relaxation – relieving tension, replenishing energy, and re-directing it in a more alert and focused state.
- gratitude – the benefit from a pleasant memory of a positive event.
- kindness – the single most reliable momentary increase in well-being.

Good night – *ready for a new game*

Without quality sleep, emotional well-being is just not possible. The five steps already outlined each contribute to good sleep and lead to emotional well-being.

- **Get ready** – increased stimulation can cause emotions to stall at this stage. They have the preparation and the expectation, but for a variety of reasons are not acted upon. These emotions are accessed by the orientation response mechanism and discharged metaphorically during REM sleep, enabling us to wake refreshed. If however, there are too many emotions not discharged, or more particularly, too many expectations not fulfilled, the orientation response mechanism gets exhausted meaning we wake without focus or motivation next morning.

Steps to take: Watch your expectations, ask yourself are they realistic?
Are they linked to purposeful action and important needs being met?

- **Get set** – we live in highly stimulating environments. Information is vast, accessible and constant; communication tools mean the information is immediate, graphic, and loaded with advertising. This type of stimulation raises our emotional preparation and puts demands on the orientation response mechanism.

***Steps to take:** Instead of being driven, always feeling you are preparing for action, take time to pause to really be in the present, to feel the value of the moment, and feel connected in some special way with this thing called life.*

- **Go for it** – action usually involves exercise of some kind, but more than that, it discharges the emotion cycle of preparation-expectation-action-needs met, thus ensuring the slow-wave restorative sleep and high-energy REM sleep are kept in balance.

***Steps to take:** attach meaning to action, feel the joy of movement, of being in the zone even in mundane tasks, and experiment with the unfamiliar within the context of learning.*

- **Celebrate** – appropriate action usually results in effective interaction with our environment and important needs like connection, meaning, significance and accomplishment being met. The positive impact of this on our sleep cannot be overstated.

***Steps to take:** Follow through on tasks, and include rituals of completion such as a dance when an assignment is being printed. Think about how significant it makes you feel.*

- **Reflect** – routines for pausing from the constant demands of a high-stimulation environment set us up for a good night's sleep. The main benefit of this 'practice run' increases the likelihood of slow-wave restorative sleep occurring early in the night, the optimal time, much better than 'crashing' after constant pressure during the day.

***Steps to take:** explore and try a reflective routine that works for you, attach real meaning to it, feel the difference it makes so that it can be sustained without it becoming a chore.*

- **Good night** – forget the notion of 'enough' sleep, because it is the quality of sleep that matters, not how many hours. And don't be fooled that falling asleep in front of the telly counts because your brain is still trying to make sense of dialogue without the picture – working harder than ever even though your eyes are shut.

***Steps to take:** set yourself up for a good night's sleep. Be aware of switching off an hour or so before – leave the communication for tomorrow. Your fresh mind and clear thinking will mean your engaging with life will be that much more rewarding – signs that your emotional well-being is in place.*

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