

Emotional Intelligence and Emotional Maturity

By Peter Vajda, Ph.D

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is one popular emotions-related subject, and not only in the world of business. The EI approach to living life supports folks to identify their emotions as they happen, and manage their emotions in their interactions with others. EI is one approach to social coping.

What I experience personally and professionally with folks who have done "emotional work" is many of them learned the concepts well, can readily discuss the ins and outs of emotions but who, in real-time situations - at work, at home, at play and in relationship - fail to effectively manage or cope with their emotions, quickly reverting to old patterns of self-sabotaging emotional reactivity. Why?

First, many folks who do "emotional work" assume they were "born yesterday" - i.e., giving scant focus to the deep nature and evolution of emotions - insights, which once understood and integrated, support folks to see the "root cause" of emotional reactivity. These insights are necessary to understanding a "that was then; this is now" paradigm - a meaningful context that supports them to not "futzurize their past," to be in the moment, unencumbered by their history, able to move to a positive, neutral response rather than negative, judgmental, fear-based reactivity.

Secondly, few folks actually "process" their emotions - allowing their emotions, move through (not around) and befriend their emotions to see what their emotions are teaching them. Many folks "bury" their emotions - alive. And they return - again, and again and again in unwanted ways and in inopportune moments.

Rather than focus on emotional intelligence, our well be-ing might better be served focusing on emotional maturity.

Emotional maturity moves beyond "intelligence" to a higher state of consciousness, guided by what one senses, feels and intuits, and one's heart.

Five principles underlie emotional maturity:

- 1 - Every negative emotion we experience right here and right now is actually a childhood reaction applied to a current person, circumstance or event.
- 2 - Most adults are 3-4-5-year-olds in adult bodies wearing adult clothes.
- 3 - No one can make you feel a way you don't want to feel.
- 4 - An adult can be emotionally mature and child-like or immature and child-ish.
- 5 - Mindfulness, focus and presence are the keys to emotional maturity

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First, emotional maturity begins with an exploration of how emotional make-up forms early on in life, based on interactions with our primary caregivers, then with extended family, teachers, friends, clergy, etc. Around seven, our psychological and emotional "programming" is set. Our reactivity (e.g., anger, sadness, fear, shame, hurt, guilt and loneliness, etc.) to people, events and circumstances that triggered us early in life is stored in our cells, and arises when "related" triggers appear later in life.

The emotionally mature adult identifies and experiences emotions without acting out, or stuffing or suppressing them. Some emotionally intelligent, but "immature," adults, "knowing about" emotions, are often unable to appropriately identify or manage emotions. Rather, they resort to "defended" reactivity, sidestepping their emotions: intellectualizing, explaining, analyzing, disagreeing, attacking, flattering, joking, apologizing, evading, going silent, becoming aloof or suspicious, rejecting, criticizing, judging, etc. These emotionally intelligent, but *immature*, folks come across as: superior, arrogant, stubborn, defiant, hostile, people-pleasing, wishy-washy, phony, resentful, intolerant, self-pitying or victimized, etc. - not mature behavior.

When we explore the nature of our emotions, we move towards a "that was then; this is now" perspective, becoming less triggered by current events and circumstances. We don't "futurize" our past.

Secondly, not exploring the developmental nature of emotions, many aren't aware that childhood emotions play out in "adult" life - that we bring our "family" to our adult interactions - at work, at home, at play and in relationship. Our adult reactivity to people, places, circumstances and events that push our buttons is actually an "unconscious" reminder of childhood people, places, circumstances and events. For the emotionally immature individual their paradigm is "that was then; this is still then." Their past leaks out on to current situations.

Third. When we "work" to understand the nature of our emotions, we "get" that, as a child, we reacted the way we reacted to either feel safe and secure, or to receive acknowledgment, approval and love. The emotionally mature adult is not a child in an adult body, wearing adult clothes and does not react as a child.

The emotionally mature adult understands "my emotions are not me, but mine - I'm in control, not my emotions." In this place of non-judgment, we experience an event with

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greater objectively, optimally with no emotional charge or at least with less emotional charge. Emotional maturity teaches us how to detach from a person, place, event or circumstance that would normally trigger reactivity. Here, we can remain in a state of equanimity or manageable or aware arousal. In this place, we don't choose to blame a person or thing for "making me feel" a certain way.

Fourth. Our behavior is always vacillating between the ends of two continua: (1) the child-like, emotionally mature adult and (2) the child-ish, emotionally immature adult. What do these look like?

The "child-like" qualities of an emotionally-mature adult include: lively, excited, alive, juicy, adventurous, joyful, happy, open etc. The "adult" qualities of an emotionally-mature adult include: nurturing/supportive, firm/fair, helpful, respectful, self-responsible, non-judgmental, heart-felt, honest, sincere, allowing, accepting, focused on well-being; one serves, coaches or mentors.

On the other hand, the "child-ish" qualities of an emotionally immature adult include: reactive, acting out, throwing tantrums, fearful, scared, needy, angry, resentful, pushy, bullying, jealous, envious, shut down, quiet, withdrawn, defensive, argumentative and grandiose, etc. The "adult" qualities of an emotionally immature adult include: non-loving, overbearing, micromanaging, controlling, disrespectful, fearful, angry, negative, judgmental, critical, abusive (mentally, emotionally, psychologically, physically), dishonest, insincere, narcissistic and focused on the self and the ego. The question, "How old do I feel right now?" can support one to experience where they are on the continua in any given moment.

Fifth. The most visible and effective outcome of emotional maturity is our ability to be in the moment, in our body and present (non-reactive, non-judgmental). We track our emotions in our body. We don't "do" anything, "fix" anything, or change anything as we witness and observe our emotions rise and fall.

Being present to our emotions allows our True Self (not our mind) to drive as our Heart and Soul inform us of "right knowing," "right understanding" and "right action." We have the emotion without "becoming" the emotion. We understand the "trigger" for my reactivity may be "outside" me, but the "cause" of my emotions is within. So, we watch, witness and observe as we're triggered and allow our True Self to support our inner

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journey and exploration, with curiosity, not efforting or mentally changing our experience. Mindfulness, presence, focus, trust and surrender to our emotional experience bring about whatever is needed in the moment. Our Heart and Soul never call for negativity or reactivity, but a considered, emotionally mature response.

In our never-ending journey of unfolding our infinite potential, emotional maturity can be thought of as a next step in the evolution of our humanity and the opening of greater, conscious awareness to our self and to others.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- Do you ever feel you need to change the way you respond to others?
- How do you feel when others challenge or disagree with you?
- Do you find yourself feeling fearful, angry or anxious? Do you know why?
- How do you respond to others' feedback?
- Are you ever taken back by the way you react to others?
- Do you ever feel afraid about exploring your emotions? Why?
- Do you consider yourself to be emotionally mature? What would others say?

---ABOUT THE AUTHOR---

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Peter facilitates and guides leaders and managers, individuals in their personal and work life, partners and couples, groups and teams to move to new levels of self-awareness, enhancing their ability to show up authentically and with a heightened sense of well-being, inner harmony and interpersonal effectiveness as they live their lives at work, at home, at play and in relationship.

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