

Discarding Old Habits through Emotional Release

by Ian Watson

How habits operate

Think about some habit you have or some behaviour that keeps repeating itself, that you don't like. Next time it shows up, if you pay close attention you will notice that something inside of you literally *drives* you to follow the habit-impulse, against both your will and your better judgment. That something is a *feeling-state* (emotion) that you are attempting to avoid. In fact, most habits and unwanted behaviours are simply the things we do in order to temporarily distract ourselves from a feeling that we don't like. The problem, of course, is that the feeling doesn't go away. On the contrary, it returns again and again, triggering the same habitual response *ad infinitum*.

Why will power doesn't work

There are two common ways in which we try to 'change our habits'. The first is the *behavioural* approach, in which we try to modify the habit in some way (chew gum instead of smoking) or to substitute a new behaviour in place of the old one (go jogging instead of eating). The second is the *psychological* approach, in which we try to modify the unconscious thought pattern that underlies the habit, through the use of hypnosis, NLP or positive affirmations. The problem with these approaches is that unless the feeling-state that drives the habit is addressed as well, it will continue to assert itself and will quickly bring about a return of the old habit or, in some cases, the establishment of a new one.

How emotional release works

The third way of approaching unwanted habits is by far the simplest and most effective method, and yet it is usually the last thing that it occurs to us to consider. This is the *emotional release* approach, in which we aim to accept and release the feeling-state as and when it arises, so that it completes itself and no longer needs to be avoided by some form of self-distraction. This method is based on a simple premise of self-healing which I have found to be universally applicable:

What we resist, persists.

What we accept, dissolves.

I'll explain how this principle works in relation to feeling states.

Developing emotional awareness

Emotions are really just feeling-sensations which carry a charge of energy as they come rising up through the body. As children, we learn from our parents, teachers and our own experience that certain feelings are 'good' and others are 'bad'. The feelings we judge as being undesirable tend to get repressed more and more over time, until finally we have a backlog of unfelt emotions of a particular type.

You will notice that I used the word 'unfelt' rather than 'unexpressed'. Many of us imagine that feelings need to be either repressed, expressed or 'got rid of' in some way or other. They don't. What they require is simply to be felt as sensations in the body (which is all they are), and released (i.e. let go of). This is exactly what happens naturally if we don't interfere with the process - a feeling comes up, it passes through the body, and the associated energy charge is released all by itself. The result is that we feel at ease, relaxed and comfortable.

If, however, a feeling arises and we either push it away, hold onto it, try to contain it or distract ourselves from feeling it, then the energy charge remains within us and builds up like a pressure cooker. Sooner or later (usually sooner), the body in its wisdom will attempt to release the pressure by bringing up the feeling once again, and the cycle continues.

The power of acceptance

Once you have recognized that all emotions are just feeling-sensations passing through the body, you will realize that they are neither good nor bad. As far as the body is concerned, feelings are entirely neutral and it is only in our mind that we have decided to accept some feelings and reject others. Unfortunately, the very feelings that we reject and try to push away are exactly the ones we get to experience over and over again. How come? Because what we resist, persists!

If we are willing to temporarily suspend our idea of what we should and should not be feeling, and just allow ourselves to experience what is actually there in the body, in a few moments even the strongest emotions can be released. As the emotional charge is dissipated, so the habits and behaviours that we have been generating to avoid that feeling will literally fall away by themselves. Relaxing, accepting and releasing can achieve in a short time what months or even years of striving and efforting have failed to bring about.

Some Frequently Asked Questions

Doesn't it hurt to let myself feel those negative emotions?

Not at all. Pain is always intensified when we resist something, and relieved when we accept it. All feelings lead towards inner peace and greater freedom when we allow them to be felt and released. Conversely, when we hold on to feelings or attempt to avoid them, we experience inner tension and compulsive behaviours.

Isn't it better to just shout and scream or have a good cry and then forget about it?

Sometimes we may need to do that, but on most occasions this is not as effective as accepting and releasing for two reasons. The first is that expressing a feeling is not the same as experiencing it. Oftentimes when we express our emotions, we do so to let other people know that we're upset. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is not always effective in releasing the 'charge' that the emotion carries. The second reason is that when we have a backlog of unfelt emotion, we tend to over-react when our feelings get triggered, and our emotional reactions are out of proportion to the event that triggered them. Even worse, we end up dumping our feelings on the unfortunate person who triggered them, with the result that they feel hurt and under attack, and we feel distressed at how we have behaved. One of the best things about

accepting and releasing emotions is that no additional suffering is created either for ourselves or the people around us.

If someone has treated me badly, aren't I entitled to feel hurt and resentful?

Of course! But how will you know when you have done enough hurting and resenting? The problem is not that we feel these emotions in the first place, but that we choose to hold on to them in our bodies way beyond the time of the original event. This creates discomfort and tension for us and often has a negative impact on our relationships with other people over time.

If I release all of my anger, does that mean I will never get angry again?

No. Releasing *increases* your personal freedom, it doesn't restrict it. There are occasions when anger may be the most appropriate emotional response, and there is every likelihood that you will feel it from time to time. However, releasing your *backlog* of anger is a good idea, because these old, residual feelings are inappropriate to your life right now. Clearing out the backlog enables you to have an authentic feeling-response to your daily life.

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