

Days of Hope

The Mood Swing by Jon Wells

I have a confession to make. My mood fluctuates like the weather. Sometimes I am happy, outgoing, excited about life. Sometimes I am discouraged, or lonely, or aggravated. I experience moments of anger, surprise, elation, jealousy, delight, shame, and everything in between. Some days I am simply flat. Perhaps I am undecided in those moments as to what my emotional state really is.

As I walk through various residential treatment programs, I get a front row seat to children and teenagers who suffer from severe emotional fluctuations. More than the typical ebb and flow of mood throughout the day, these kids experience diagnosable interruptions and fixations in their affective state. During a recent church service, one young lady was experiencing a rapid cycling event, where she would shift from loud obnoxious laughter to tears multiple times in quick succession. You can imagine how her noisy interruptions affected the service! Years ago I worked with a young man who was suffering from a manic phase. Before our encounter was over, he had stripped down completely naked and literally climbed the rafters of the building that we were in. He was agitated, to say the least! He spent that hour vacillating between hysterical laughter, and rages of fury, rambling a constant flow of nonsense at the staff below. I found out later that he had been secretly regurgitating his medication and this severe manic episode was the result. I worked with one young girl a while back who was so agitated but all she could do was hyperventilate and bounce a basketball against the wall in the

gymnasium rapidly. Strangely enough, the frenzied activity and rapid breathing helped her to be able to at least hold a conversation with me even if she was imprisoned inside of a frantic disposition. I will leave it to the clinicians to diagnose and categorize these fluctuations in emotion. It seems clear that these are severe examples of breakdowns in mental health. For the most part, we do not experience such harsh changes to our affect.

But you and I do live at the mercy of more moderate emotional tides that sweep us back and forth as we navigate our daily routines. You may not be climbing the rafters naked, but each of us allows our emotional states to color the way we go about completing our daily tasks and interacting with others. Learning how to manage my emotional self is a task we all wrestle with, for better or worse. Children in treatment programs are teaching me so many lessons on how to own and responsibly handle my own feelings in healthy ways. Through my work with them I have learned several core values that are indispensable tools in this area.

Honesty

I am learning that one of the most helpful things I can do is to bring simple honesty to my emotional states and take ownership of what is truly there. It can be tempting to whitewash emotions that I consider to be 'negative' with the cheery colors of more 'holy' emotions. Perhaps I tell myself that the pain, anger, frustration, or disappoint I am mired in is actually 'joy in suffering.' It even feels somehow like the right thing to do, papering over the truth with rosy, churchy clichés. *Continued on page 2*

Scripture provides us with so many examples of individuals who were honest with their emotions. David comes to mind; his many rants, joyous, and sorrowful poems flow with raw emotion in the Psalms. Jesus himself freely exhibited his deep emotional turmoil at the funeral for his good friend Lazarus as well in the Garden of Gethsemane. We would do well to follow these examples of sincere emotional expression. Simply being honest about where I am at emotionally aligns my spirit with the Spirit of God, because I am embracing what is true. Conversely, negating or hiding my own emotional reality is a deception, a kind of hiding akin to the hiding we see Adam and Eve engaging in after they sin in the garden. Such hiding is understandable, but courageous ownership of the truth is a much healthier approach, spiritually and emotionally.

Self-Awareness

Hand in hand with honesty comes the powerful tool of self-awareness. Those of us who are courageous enough to honestly investigate our own feelings will be able to arrive at some state of understanding about ourselves that many others never develop. The alternative is a sad (and all too common) ignorance about basic aspects of self.

People ask me all the time, "How are you doing?"

All too often the answer is 'fine' or 'great.' Both of those responses are generally lies. Perhaps I do not want to get into a deep discussion of my emotional state

in the moment. Perhaps I do not care enough to investigate my own feelings. Perhaps I have accepted the lie that I am an automaton, going about my daily routine like a robot, flat and lifeless. The sad truth is that I have lived many years of my life this way, stuffing down deep pangs of heartbreak, or sorrow, or joy. I have spent a long time convinced that I was 'just not a very emotional person.' Such assumptions can be tucked into generalizations about gender (*I'm just an average guy, not all emotional like women*). We also like to hide our lack of emotional self-connection under a fancy veil of spirituality (*my emotions are great/don't matter because I'm a Christian!*). This is such a strange dynamic, that I would lie to myself about my own feelings for God's sake, all the while He knows the deep truths about me whether I admit them or not.

But if you are a human being, then there are actual feelings boiling beneath the surface of your life. Your choice to develop some awareness of those emotions is often the starting point for some type of ability to recognize, own, and manage these shifting feelings within. There is a whole field of research growing in this area, the study of emotional intelligence. You and I can sit back and observe the struggling youth that I work with in treatment programs and lament their lack of emotional IQ. We would be better served to stop pitying them and get serious about developing some modicum of emotional intelligence ourselves.

Confession

Over the years in ministry I have developed a simple working definition for confession: confession is the act of telling the truth about me to God and safe people. When I confess to God, I am actually telling Him what He already knows! The act of confession is a pivotal step in healing, but not because God discovers something new about me. A huge part of the significance of confession lies on my side of the fence.

Confessing my emotional reality in prayer to God is a powerful tool of spiritual and emotional health.

"Heavenly Father, I am feeling so angry at that man right now, I fear that I will be consumed with rage!!"

"Jesus I bring to you my deep disappointment in this situation- I feel so let down by my friend."

"God, I am filled with fear about tomorrow- I literally want to run away."





Yes, it's that time of year again! Christmas is fast approaching. Many of the youth we serve have no suitable family to spend the day with, others have cases so severe that they are unable or unsafe to visit their home over the holiday.

Despite the best efforts of the staff to line up day passes and overnight passes, it seems that the vast majority of these kids end up toughing out a special holiday in a space they would rather not be. As many of you know, we work to gather supplies, assemble, and deliver stockings to children and teens who find themselves in treatment on Christmas Day.

Each stocking contains many of the things you would expect; chocolates, small toys, a stuffed animal and the like. We also give each child an age appropriate book that will encourage them in their faith.

This has become an annual event for us and for so many of you too. Thanks so much to those of you who have already called or donated to help us get ready for these special gifts!



If you have not already, would you consider donating to help us cover the costs of this unique program?

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<https://www.daysofhope.net/give.html>

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Can you see what a blessing it is to bring the truth about myself to God and trust Him to hold me (and my scary emotions) in the moment? This type of prayer is exemplified for us by David and Jesus himself in the Scriptures. It forces me to take ownership of what is mine, for better or worse. All too often we *deflect* ownership of our feelings—we literally insist that they belong to someone else (*he is making me angry!*). Other times we *dismiss* responsibility for our emotions as inescapable traits of personality (*That's just how grandpa is- he is a grumpy guy*). These kinds of dysfunctional strategies for handling emotion leave others around us responsible for managing our feelings. If people are walking on eggshells around you to try to keep your anger or sadness in check, you need to grow up! Take ownership of what belongs to you. Learn the simple skill of truthfully confessing your emotion to God and safe people.

The practice of emotional confession goes hand in hand with the core values of Honesty and Self-Awareness. Confession can be a tool that can springboard my relationships in healthy directions. When I become adept at confessing truth about my emotional states in real time, I can bring that confession to safe people. How helpful is it to share these simple truths with my spouse in a difficult moment? My ability to manage important relationships in my life is greatly improved when I learn to take a deep breath and confess my own emotional truths to those who have proven themselves able to hear and hold my confession in an honorable way.

Even when I am dealing with those I do not trust, this practice will serve me well. I may not feel safe to share such things with

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others in that moment, but a basic self-awareness of my feelings can help me to navigate an interaction with them well.

It is important to note here that sharing my emotions with others is not equivalent to giving full vent of my feelings to others. Those who have done the hard work of confessing their emotional reality to God and developing a level of self-awareness are better able to bring those feelings to others in safe ways. This is no easy task! How do I tell a friend that I am feeling betrayed by her without accusing and blaming her? How do I share my anger with my spouse without simply unloading on them? The key to healthy confession of my emotions is to walk the path of vulnerability.

It is important to understand that emotional honesty, self-awareness, and intelligence in these areas is not automatic. My chronological age does not impart to me some sage level of ability with my feelings. There are plenty of older adults who remain totally incapacitated in this area. They continue to slog through life, holding to the belief that emotions are messy and complicated. Perhaps they blame 'bad' emotions on others, refusing to take ownership. They live by the mantra 'I'm just fine.' And perhaps they are- until they are not. :)

Like so many of these kids in the programs we serve, I am tempted to avoid my own emotional reality, label parts of it as 'bad,' blame it on those around me, and lie to myself about how I am feeling. Whether or not I take my emotional life seriously, these undercurrents affect every moment of my day. I do not want to live my life driven to and fro by my emotional currents, oblivious to them all the while. I don't want to be the guy who expects his family or co-workers to 'keep him happy' all the time, blaming them for my anger or disappointment. And I cannot live my life constantly changing course every time a new mood overtakes me. God help me! The task is impossible, but one day I hope to be skilled in this area, a person who is honest, aware, and free to speak the truth to God and safe people about the elements that rage in my heart.