

Can An Emotion Be Wrong?

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 16 September, 2003 - 22:34

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Sarah Fitz-Claridge (<http://www.fitz-claridge.com/>)

Joe has to go to bed by 9 p.m. every day, without fail. His parents have explained to him how his health will soon suffer if he doesn't go to bed early, and how he will be cranky and useless on the following day. He has accepted that he wants to do whatever is necessary to be healthy, wealthy and wise. Yet nevertheless, most evenings, he begs to stay up just a little longer.

One day Joe makes friends with another boy, Pat. When he visits Pat's house, he finds that Pat is not subject to any such rule, and often goes to bed well after midnight. Joe is surprised that this is allowed. He asks Pat's mother about it and is even more surprised to learn that she thinks that it is best to go to bed when one wants to. One day, Joe stays the night – and doesn't go to bed at all. He is relieved, but also disturbed, to find that he feels no ill-effects at all next day. No one complains that he is 'cranky' (as his parents invariably do if he ever stays up even an hour later than usual), and he has just as nice a time playing with Pat as he ever did. It also worries him that Pat, who very rarely goes "early to bed and early to rise", enjoys robust good health. And that Pat's parents, who sleep very little and obey no bedtime rule either, run a profitable business and are the wisest people Joe knows.

Joe can't help thinking about this striking difference between the two regimes that he and his friend live under. What is the reason for the difference? His family and Pat's are so alike in other ways. He and Pat are the same age and lead similar lives. How can it be that lack of sleep is no problem for Pat, and yet (he has it on his parents' earnest authority) would wreak untold harm on Joe?

For Joe, a lot hangs on this question. It always hurts him to have to go to bed when he wants to do something else. He finds it frustrating and psychologically debilitating. He knows that anything he starts in the evening must be finished by bedtime or be arbitrarily interrupted. He might, if he begs, be permitted to finish the chapter of his book (though only if it is short), but certainly not to finish the whole book, as he sometimes wants to. He can't get so absorbed in an exciting book that he would feel driven to read it in one sitting, because unless it can be finished before 9 o'clock, he knows he would be torn away from it. This "horizon effect" often makes him unable even to start things. He knows that no matter how important it is to him to continue what he is engaged in, his parents will, at 9 o'clock, issue the bedtime command and bring the whole soaring edifice crashing to the ground. So almost every evening, as bedtime approaches, Joe feels a sort of grief. Sometimes, if his engagement has been especially deep and rewarding, he cries at the thought of what he is losing.

And all that was before he discovered that there is another family, just like his except that none of that painful bedtime stuff ever happens – and they seem none the worse for it.

Joe tries to talk to his parents about how he feels. He tries to explain what he has been thinking, and asks his parents to explain how what he has seen of Pat's family fits in with what they have always told him. He is polite and tries to be tactful, but even so, his parents become angry. They won't give him a lift to Pat's place any more. Why should they? Being angry with Joe makes them not want to do things for him.

This punishment is cruel and its justification outrageous, of course, and for all the usual reasons. But let us step back and consider a prior issue: why does his expression of distress about his parents' regime make them angry? He has done nothing wrong. So aren't they wrong to be angry with him? Most people would say no, they have done no wrong by becoming angry, even for no defensible reason, because there doesn't have to be a defensible reason for feelings, only for actions. Feelings are always valid.

This is a serious mistake, one which, alone, can put a spanner in the works of any aspiring consensual relationship.

Now, of course, feelings are 'valid' in the sense that

- One cannot usually alter one's feelings by a mere act of will.
- One's feelings sometimes express unconscious knowledge which is truer, or better, than the best conscious theory that one could articulate about a given issue.
- It is usually morally wrong and harmful, as well as factually false, to deny that another person has the feelings they claim to have.

But for someone to take their adverse emotions towards another person as given, especially when those emotions stem from no justifiable grievance, and most especially when that person is a child for whom one is responsible, is a most craven betrayal. In that sense, which is the relevant sense here, these emotions are not valid.

If one has such emotions (as we all do in some situations), we can add to the above list

- It is wrong and potentially harmful to hide them.

But that does not mean that one should act out the impulse to blame, hurt or threaten the other person, which always accompanies anger. One should, rather, admit to the child that one is angry and try to make sure that the child knows that this is a fault in oneself and not in him. Joe's parents are doing the opposite of that. They are striving to make Joe feel responsible for their anger. They feel justified in "not doing anything for" Joe because they are angry, and they are forcing Joe to keep his distress to himself, for fear that their anger might be expressed even more hurtfully if he dares to mention it again. Clearly, Joe's submission to his parents' threat is likely to cause something quite twisted to happen to his emotions. Perhaps that's how this meme gets replicated.

All this reminds me of a childhood memory of mine. I was eight years old and at a friend's house for dinner. Just before dinner, my friend, Susan, commented (accurately, I fear) that the dinner smelt disgusting. I think it was the over-boiled cabbage... Her mother was clearly not amused by the comment and said something like, "I'm not going to serve dinner to someone who won't keep a civil tongue in her head. Now go to your room". I sat there, at the table, Susan having been banished, and could hardly eat a thing. The meat was tough and gristly, and I felt compelled to eat it even though I didn't want to. As for the cabbage... well...

Suppose for a moment that we were talking about an adult child. A white woman who wanted to marry a black man, say. She brings him to dinner at her parents' house, and during the meal she asks her father to pass her the salt. Her father refuses. "I don't do things for people who bring Negroes into the house. It makes me angry, and I don't want to do anything for them", he calmly explains.

Few people reading this would hesitate for a moment to say that (1) he shouldn't behave like that even if he is angry; but also (2) *he has no right to be angry in this situation*. No one would bother to defend him with the tired equivocation that

“even a parent's feelings are valid”. (They *are*, by the way, in the senses I gave above. My standards are not ageist.)

No one would hesitate to say that *that* parent is behaving very badly (despite having ‘valid’ feelings). But if I said that about a father who was angry and refused to serve food to his eight-year-old daughter, or parents who refused to drive their six-year-old son to visit his friend, because these children expressed dissatisfaction and distress with some aspect of how they are being treated, people see it differently.

[to post comments](#)

Comments

"Can an emotion be wrong"

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 1 November, 2003 - 23:38

I find wisdom in this article. It reminds me of Brad Blanton's book "Radical Honesty". I, like many others simply accepted our present culture of distorting the simple truth of our senses, such as when the child sees his mother crying and asks her why. She replies that she is not crying and that everything is fine. She does this in the belief that she is protecting the child, but in so doing denies the honesty and the reality of the child's senses and his interpretation of simple reality. Better to say, "yes, I am crying, thank you for asking, you are a caring child"

[to post comments](#)

Emotions are not right or wrong...they just are.

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 6 January, 2004 - 06:27

I think the issue is more about taking responsibility for one's own emotions. We all have every right to feel whatever we feel. Indeed, we all have a responsibility to feel whatever we feel, since nobody else can really process our feelings for us anyways. If little Joe's parents had taken responsibility for processing their own feelings, then they might have been self-aware enough to recognize the true source of their anger, and thus, engage their higher thinking processes to choose a more mature and respectful response to problem-solving. Little Joe's right to feel what he feels has been violated, and he is further forced to carry the burden of responsibility for his parent's feelings, plus the burden of the anger, guilt, confusion, etc. Congratulations parents! A tremendous and crushing offload onto a child who, evidently, will have had little parental support for developing his own emotion processing skills, rational problem-solving skills, and ability to act self-responsibly. This is not parenting. It is a typical example of blatant emotional abuse.

[to post comments](#)

Emotions can be right or wrong

Submitted by JDR on 8 January, 2004 - 19:41

You say:

"We all have every right to feel whatever we feel. Indeed, we all have a responsibility to feel whatever we feel, since nobody else can really process our feelings for us anyways."

What if I feel that it is my right to be angry with you to the point of punching you in the nose repeatedly with or without apparent (to you) provocation by you? Or to feel angry with you to the point of totally ignoring you for hours on end when you want and need my attention or help?

I have a right to feel that? If you are my child, I think the answer is that I have no right to feel that way -- even if I don't act upon my feelings in any way that could land me in jail. The very fact that I am feeling such thoughts is an indication to me that something is very wrong with what I am thinking.

If I am a child and you are my parent, I think these feelings are not wrong, only an indication that the parent has failed to provide an adequate environment for me, the child. The parent is the one who provides the environment, not the child.

Feelings are the direct result of accumulations of thoughts and decisions that we make about the world.

I cannot feel angry if I am thinking "Wow, that was a wonderful and helpful thing that you did just now!"

I cannot feel calm if I am thinking "You are deliberately making my life totally miserable when you do that and you have no right to do that and you are a major pain in the ass."

We do have control over our own emotions in the sense that we can re-examine the thoughts that lead to them and begin to see the situation, the world, our relationships with people, in better ways.

We cannot control other people's thoughts or emotions. But we (parents) can help provide environments in which other people (especially our children) are free to think and feel in the most rational ways possible. Children do not have this luxury to the same degree.

JDR

[to post comments](#)

The difference is between you

Submitted by Relsqui (not verified) on 4 December, 2004 - 06:20

The difference is between your thoughts and your actions. Being furious and frustrated is fine; punching me in the nose or ignoring me isn't. There are always going to be days when having to deal with anyone, much less someone as needy as a child, feels like too much. It's a rare person indeed who always has the energy and the warmth available to give to anyone who asks.

Believing that it's wrong to even think angry thoughts about one's child won't keep one from thinking them--it will only make one guilty when one does. The trick is, as suggested in the article, to recognize that the anger is because of you and not because of something that has been done to you. Then you can act accordingly, by making sure the child knows you're not angry at them, and adopting a mindset to find something more productive to do than be mad.

Instead of denying or feeling guilty about anger, you acknowledge it as a byproduct of being human, and then set it aside and work around it. You get distracted by doing something more useful, and the anger goes away.

(For the record, this thought originally came to me vis a vis jealousy. My boyfriend has a lot of female friends-- which makes perfect sense to me, because I have a lot of male ones. Sometimes I get instinctively jealous when he's having a particularly deep and engaging conversation with one of them and not me, for example, but since it has been proven time and time again that I have nothing to fear, I set it aside and move on.)

[to post comments](#)

Stop telling boys to be a man

Submitted by Kyle (not verified) on 27 December, 2004 - 08:35

Well, one of the things that I disagree with is people getting on the backs of men/boys being emotional and telling them to 'be a man'. Well, holding in your emotions is not being a man. Being a man, and not just a man but an adult, is holding in your emotions when they're minor and/or you know they won't build up inside you and letting them out when you have to. Some people do better with dealing with stress than others, and that's not a problem either.

[to post comments](#)

Re: Emotions are not right or

Submitted by Kyle (not verified) on 1 January, 2005 - 17:09

Re: Emotions are not right or wrong...they just are.

I definitely agree.

One of the things I would like to address about this issue is when a child today claims that he/she is miserable or seems to have emotional problems such as stress as a product of difficult events in their lives, and their parents jump down their throat, saying, "Quit whining, you think you had it so bad but when I was your age I had no playstation and we could barely even afford a house! Rah rah!" But something that many parents fail to take into account when they say this is that the reason for their child's misery may have been, for example, countless numbers of psychological scars backed up with stress, rather than a child believing he/she is not given a luxurious enough life. Psychological scars and emotional problems in a life of luxury are going to be much more of a problem and do plenty more damage than a wholesome respectful and loving yet struggling environment, where there is plenty of love and respect and essential psychological components despite a lack of plentiful food or shelter and a PS2. Parents need to consider this. This is also the reason that they should not blame other things for their kid's problems (such as the constant blame put on video games).

[to post comments](#)

Can an Emotion Be Wrong?

Submitted by ruth (not verified) on 8 January, 2006 - 17:54

I suppose my issue with this story is that, fact is, sleep routines are very important for health and success. If an activity must be disrupted (turns out this child is 6!!!) that is a disappointment one must live through as part of growing up. What adult is never interrupted in an engrossing activity? What opportunity do any of us have for limitless pursuit of our dearest interests? And who is to say that finishing a book or activity in one sitting is the most enjoyable and/or most profitable (puzzles, for example, are easier after a break--the brain works on things subconsciously). Families are systems where each member has to limit their full individual desires for the health of the group--parents need children to go to bed for an end to the day's neediness. I am all for strict bedtimes and I would not bend even for the sake of the feelings of my son. The fact that the boy in this story weathered a night without sleep (at 6! I find that incredible) does not mean that regular, long sleeps are not integral to good health.

to post comments

Can an Emotion be Wrong?

Submitted by [a reader \(not verified\)](http://p075.ezboard.com/btcscommunity) (<http://p075.ezboard.com/btcscommunity>) on 19 January, 2006 - 15:36

Although the story is about emotions and not about sleep I'd like to address the above comment.

“sleep routines are very important for health and success.”

How does that account for the other family's health and success? Is this true only for some people? Only for people of certain ages?

“ If an activity must be disrupted (turns out this child is 6!!!) that is a disappointment one must live through as part of growing up.”

So 'growing up' means living through disappointment? Is this another “fact?”

“What adult is never interrupted in an engrossing activity? What opportunity do any of us have for limitless pursuit of our dearest interests?”

Both of these can be autonomous choices.

“And who is to say that finishing a book or activity in one sitting is the most enjoyable and/or most profitable “

I suggest the person who will profit and enjoy is to say.

“Families are systems where each member has to limit their full individual desires for the health of the group—“

This is precisely the problem that TCS addresses. TCS improves on this very limiting and anti-learning approach. It allows for individuals to be part of a family with neither aspect losing out.

“parents need children to go to bed for an end to the day's neediness.”

The day's neediness? I'll assume you mean the child's neediness. If the parent is not in a position to help the child meet his needs he has a moral obligation to find helpers who will. Children, I'm sorry to inform you, don't come with an on/off switch for the parents' convenience. It is the parents' responsibility to arrange things in such a way that they are able to help their children.

“ I am all for strict bedtimes and I would not bend even for the sake of the feelings of my son.”

What about for the sake of morality? Rationality? Trust? Your son’s learning? Your own learning?

“ The fact that the boy in this story weathered a night without sleep (at 6! I find that incredible) does not mean that regular, long sleeps are not integral to good health.”

The fact that people make it through childhood with others in control of their actions and thinking does not mean that autonomy and self-directedness are not integral to good health.

[to post comments](#)

What about circadian rhythm?

Submitted by stellarmama on 21 January, 2006 - 06:22

Ruth,

One of the reasons I choose to parent the way I do is my desire for my children to develop their own circadian rhythms. Long sleep may be beneficial, but no matter what the age, a person should decide that on his or her own. By all means, sleep when you're tired! You will be setting a tremendous example of following your own bliss. It doesn't take long for a child to figure out that sleep feels nice. But, man, I love those memories of reading a book through in one sitting. I am glad no one told me it was not in my best interest.

Didn't you ever sleep over at a friends and stay up late? Was it fun? Was it sad to hear, "Go to sleep right now?" from the voice in the other room?

Sarah Anderson-Thimmes

[to post comments](#)

Self-regulation

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 24 September, 2006 - 04:59

It seems to me that one of the principles of TCS is allowing children (and adults too) to be self-regulating as much as possible. In my experience, when people are self-regulating and also part of a group, a space is created that allows everyone's needs to be met most of the time. I find that this is a good way to live.

When it comes to emotions, judging them is not likely to be useful. How people act as a result of their emotions is another thing altogether. To me it is not desirable to try to "control" emotions. It is more important to have self-awareness and behave in a way that is not likely to cause harm to myself or others.

[to post comments](#)

Sleep routines are important

Submitted by *Andy (not verified)* on 27 January, 2007 - 00:25

Sleep routines are important biologically. Children's sleep routine should be dictated by their individual circadian rhythm, not their parents' work schedule.

to post comments

But don't the parents also

Submitted by *reader (not verified)* on 15 January, 2008 - 16:25

But don't the parents also have rights? What if the child only sleeps from 4am until 11am? But the parents need to be at work by 9? I don't agree that the parents should have to pay for a helper to come in for two hours to make sure they don't have to coerce their child out of bed to go to daycare! That's ridiculous to the extreme.

to post comments

ridiculous extreme?

Submitted by *emma (not verified)* (<http://www.childrenarepeople.blogspot.com>) on 19 January, 2008 - 15:55

No, not ridiculous to the extreme, but a problem which that family are better off solving with consent than by the agenda of the parents automatically trumping the child's desires.

Child might prefer to read late, pack a bag of clothes, and go to day care all drowsy in a sleeping bag, ready to keep zizzing there till 11.

Or maybe something quite different.

to post comments

Sleeping when you are tired...

Submitted by *Angela Horn (not verified)* on 25 September, 2008 - 22:37

I love the theory, but I've got a couple of issues with this, arising from personal experience of being the child who WAS allowed to go to bed when she wanted!

My parents believed in allowing me to sleep when I was tired, and to get up when I was ready (except on schooldays... but I was also given the choice of whether I wanted to go to school or not). I have mixed feelings about it, and have not taken the same path with my own children. I did value the fact that my parents gave me the autonomy to make my own decisions, but I didn't make the decisions which made me happiest or healthiest. I still don't. I don't know if an alternative parenting philosophy would have been better. I do feel that sometimes those of us who are idealogues can fall in love with a theory so deeply that we are, perhaps, a bit blind to any downsides in the results. I'm that sort of person, anyway...

I was a very active child, spending lots of time outdoors. I would get tired, and collapse in a chair, and lie there, too tired to move, but wishing and wishing that I was already in my bed. And then I'd get grumpy and start crying. This would normally continue until my dad said "You look like you need to go to bed."- he'd never insist I went, but I would perhaps argue, and then would go, and would wish I'd been there ages ago. And I never learned. I was behaving the same way at 8 years as I was at 15. I was always exhausted in the mornings. The reason, I think, is that by the time I was truly tired at night, I was beyond thinking straight.

I think as an adult, I make better decisions when I am rested and comfortable, and I have eventually learned that I tend to feel over-emotional when I'm tired, and I avoid making decisions then. But it's taken so long, and I really think it was a lot to ask of a child, to take on that responsibility of knowing what was best for myself. I **was** fiercely proud that my parents trusted me to make this decision, but having no routine and being free to do as I felt wasn't actually fun or enjoyable when I was grumpy and exhausted and weepy.

I always had very fond memories of the times when I was really little, I think 6 and under, when my parents used to take me to bed - before they decided I was big enough to make my own decisions. Looking back now, I wonder why I didn't ever say to them "Please, I need more help with this - please can you take me to bed and give me a bedtime?" but then, that would have taken quite a lot of self-awareness and emotional sophistication which, frankly, I struggle with NOW, let alone then! I suppose you could say "Ah, well, your parents should have been more aware, they should have offered to take you to bed, and that's not autonomy you had, it was neglect" - well, maybe - but I think that few of us live up to our ideals and often put them into practice in an imperfect way, and we do have to compare what actually happens on the ground, not just look at the theoretical ideal.

I really don't like the examples given in this story, and I feel that the sheer implausibility of it detracts from the argument. eg: "One day, Joe stays the night – and doesn't go to bed at all. He is relieved, but also disturbed, to find that he feels no ill-effects at all next day." Who IS this 6 year-old, who stays up all night and yet is fine and happy the next day? Possibly a robot? I know a lot of kids who are allowed to go to bed when they want, and when they've been here on a 'sleepover' and have stayed up partying all night, not one of them so far has been happy in the morning. Has **anyone** ever stayed up all night, without vast quantities of drugs, and not felt bloody awful the next day?

Part of the problem in my family was that my parents would stay up until all hours, and they too would always feel awful in the mornings,. Every single day it still comes as a total surprise to them that, if they stay up till 4 AM, they don't get enough daylight the next day and feel groggy and can't do whatever they need to do. So I guess they were modelling a situation where you're not actively making a choice for a late bedtime, but are rather just not thinking about it until you drop from exhaustion.

I respect Sarah's desire to allow her children to follow their own rhythms, but I think they might need a little help to do so. If there is still activity, noise, excitement etc.. going on in your house in the evening then this may interfere with the child's awareness of their own tiredness. Or it may be that the appeal of the music or TV that the parent is enjoying, is just too attractive. The feeling that one is making a statement by staying up late with the adults was certainly attractive for me. If you support your child choosing his own bedtime, maybe it's fair to try to make the house very quiet and calm, so that he **can** listen to his own body. Otherwise, maybe it's like putting someone in a sweetshop and telling them to regulate their own diet; there are some situations which make it very difficult to make the choices which are best for us. And do **you**, the parent, have a healthy approach to your own sleep needs? Are your kids going to see first-hand someone taking a proactive approach to this?

to post comments

Angela, I love your post. My complaint was that I never had chores! LOL! I'm sure I would have hated them if I did.

Perhaps what is needed is more ... discussion with kids about how to make decisions. More talking about consequences. Because that is eventually what we learn as adults, that choices have consequences.

As it turned out, I never had kids. But what I intended to do was: when my kids turned 13 (or showed signs of being able to think about future), to turn over to them all of the decisions about what they would do, at the same time saying we would discuss all of the options together. In other words, if they want to skip school, up to them. If they want to stay up all night, up to them. On the other hand, here are some consequences that I see that they may want to consider. Of course, it helps if kids have had ample chances to make some of their own decisions along the way before 13, rather than having had their lives dictated to them.

to post comments

As someone who has strict

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 24 December, 2010 - 04:11

As someone who has strict bedtimes enforced from a young age till about 11, I think you are assuming much more control over your child than you have. I hated and loathed having to go to bed at my bedtime because I was not tired. I have as long as I remember been a night person. I literally could not fall asleep for hours every single night I was put to bed early, as long as I remember. I felt angry, frustrated, bored, and scared, lying in my bed alone in the dark, waiting for sleep. I would stay up for hours thinking about the fact that my life was slipping by. Realizing how everything in my memory ran together, I would obsessively picture the terrifying moment right before I was going to die and the way I would remember this very instant the same as something earlier that day and wonder where all my time had gone. I would worry about going to Hell, or imagine what the nothingness of death must be like. I would imagine someone breaking in to my house and murdering me. By the time I was having these sorts of thoughts, I would want nothing more than to fall asleep, because I was so scared and worried. But it still would take me hours.

You can make your child go to bed and turn the lights off. You can't make them go to sleep. I still have frequent insomnia, especially if I try to make myself go to bed when I am not so tired that I can sleep almost instantly. If I don't get a feeling telling me I will be able to sleep soon, I start to worry that I won't be able to for hours and this is often a self fulfilling prophecy, since then I am nervous instead of relaxed. This often keeps me up the night before important morning events.

Only recently have I started to make significant progress on the problem of getting myself to sleep when I do not feel able to. I do this by recognizing my desire to stay up based on my fear of trying to sleep and failing and the resulting horrible feeling of having wasted hours tossing and turning, and convincing myself that even though the last thing I feel like doing is trying to sleep, that sleep is what I rationally desire then. I try to calm myself mentally and let go of the loose ends of my thoughts that are crying out to me to be continued. I tell myself: its okay if you can't sleep, even if you have this super important thing tomorrow. If I try and fail, instead of getting stressed out about it, I get up and do something else.

I recognize the importance of a good night's sleep, I just wish I had been left alone to work things out, so I wouldn't have developed such an anxiety about having insomnia.

Oh and finally, it was clear to my mom that I hated going to bed, but I never went into all the gory details I just did here, because it seemed obvious to me that she was not going to take my concerns seriously, and was set on enforcing a strict bedtime.

Once again, you can make your child lie in bed, with the lights out. You can't make them sleep. They can't even make themselves sleep. Don't make sleep a negative factor in your child's life. Going to bed should feel great, like the ultimate relaxation after a complete day.

to post comments

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