

## **Emotional Competence as a Way of Disease Prevention**

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Emotional competence is a relatively new topic in medical ethics and few ethicists have written about the connection between emotional incompetence, stress, and disease. However, since emotional incompetence may cause or contribute to many major diseases, it is essential that we pay closer attention to it. Many of us are emotionally incompetent regarding our bodies and therefore with respect to our health. For example, we usually ignore pain, even though it is an important physical signal that something is not quite right without our bodies. Sometimes, the body only whispers that something is wrong and, as a warning we merely receive an intuition. When we pay attention to our intuition and also to our pain levels, we can gain valuable insights into the state of our health. At no point should individuals who want to stay healthy in mind and spirit ignore such messages.

This paper will describe how a lack of emotional competence can lead to disease. Stress is an important precursor to emotional incompetence and disease since it blurs our recognition of signals from the body. When a person becomes overly stressed, (s)he may have difficulty interpreting the messages the body is sending, a state that over time can lead to a dissociation between mind and body. Each individual is called upon to develop a level of self-awareness that will defend the body and mind against the effects of stress while remaining sensitive to the messages which may signal problems in the future. Emotional competence can help minimize stress by ensuring that we maintain a healthy mind, body and spirit.

To this end, this paper will be divided into three parts: Part I will discuss stress and its impact on the body. I will differentiate between two types of stress, chronic and acute, and point out the effects of each type on an individual's physical and mental health.

Part II will outline how an individual can fulfill the conditions for emotional competence and explain how it can save him/her from serious illness in the future.

Lastly, Part III will outline five steps for developing emotional competence. In this section, I argue that when we achieve emotional competence, we will be able to recognize some of the pernicious stresses in our lives and try to eliminate them.

### **I. Stress and It's Impact on the Body**

According to Hans Selye (1974), Stress can be defined as the "nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it."<sup>1</sup> For Selye (1974), stress is usually "manifested by the specific syndrome which consists of all the non-specifically-induced changes within a biologic system."<sup>2</sup> Thus, although stress has a particular form, it does not usually have a specific cause.

Physicians have a less complex characterization of stress. To physicians, stress means exposure to forces, such as nervous tension, physical injury, infection, cold, heat, x-rays, surgery,

and so on. In other words, stress is what remains in the body after one of the above stressors causes an imbalance in one's body.

There are several types of messages that an individual can experience due to stress. First, there are bodily messages which may come to the fore in the form of pain or discomfort. Many individuals simply ignore pain. Most individuals fail to stop and rest if they experience pain. Such a lack of care for ourselves can over time cause enduring generalized stress resulting in extreme exhaustion which may undermine health. More specifically, when individuals are exhausted by stress over an extended period, their bodies will break down. An individual's body cannot exist in denial of daily experiences.

Second, there are psychological signs of extreme stress, such as feeling overwhelmed, stressed out, or experiencing bouts of insomnia. Stress is a complicated cascade of biochemical responses to external stimuli. Emotions generated by stress may impair the functioning of major organs, the integrity of our immune defenses, and the interactions of many biological substances upon which health depends. Further, there is a connection between physical and mental states. When emotions are repressed over time, this undermines the body's defenses against illness. Repression disorganizes and confuses our physiological defenses. In some people, these defenses may go awry, and rather than supporting health will undermine it.

According to Gabor Maté, many auto-immune diseases, such as arthritis, originate when an individual buries his/her stress for long periods without dealing with it directly. It is important to note that it can be very difficult to detect such messages from within the trenches of life. However, a safe rule of thumb is that if an individual is always taking care of others and not him/herself, this can be a sign of possible health problems in the future if the individual does not step-back from his/her distresses and evaluates them.

There are two types of stress: chronic and acute. Acute stress, the immediate, short-term response to threat, is characterized as a generalized alarm response to danger. Chronic stress, on the other hand, the activation of the stress mechanism over longer periods develops when an individual is exposed to stressors that cannot be escaped because either (s)he does not recognize them or because (s)he has no control over them. Over time, chronic stress can elevate adrenalin levels that may raise blood pressure and damage the heart.

When an individual loses touch with the "gut feelings" that are designed to warn him/her of imbalance, illness may set-in, before (s)he realizes it, causing physical damage and mental/spiritual deterioration. Thus, healthy individuals strive to recognize the extreme stressors in their lives and try continuously to neutralize them.

When individuals remain in stressful situations over time, they begin to lose an awareness of the messages that their bodies are sending them. Eventually, such individuals begin to disassociate from their stress and lose an awareness of their bodies, creating a lacuna between the individual and his/her pain. This disassociation between body and inner self produces emotional incompetence because most individuals lack complete emotional competence. It is essential for us to remain aware of our emotional states and alert to the body's messages.

## **II. Emotional Competence**

Emotional competence enables an individual to stand in a responsible, non-victimized, and non-self-harming relationship with his/her environment. According to Selye (1984), such an

achievement is the self-transforming internal ground for facing life's stresses, for avoiding the creation of unnecessary ones, and for assisting the process of healing.<sup>3</sup> Few individuals reach adult life with full emotional competence about their health and well-being. We can develop emotional competence by bringing our feelings and emotions to awareness through psychological discriminations and perceptiveness. With such psychological discriminations, an individual can become aware of any "gut reactions" which, although minimal, may signal bodily distress. When one part of the body is experiencing pain, it is sending a clear message that something must be done to minimize stress right away. Pain is the body's way of saying "no" to the individual's specific way of coping with stress.<sup>4</sup> An emotionally competent individual pays closer attention to the body's signals and is sufficiently alert to answer this call respectfully.

For emotional competence, an individual must develop the capacity to feel emotions, express such emotions effectively, distinguish between those psychological reactions that are pertinent to his/her present situation and which are not, and an awareness of his/her needs. Each of these components of emotional competence requires an awareness of our emotional states and how they affect the body. Emotional competence does not require the development of elaborate and complicated skills. However, it requires a reflective awareness of our emotions and how the body is processing these emotions. Without such an awareness, individuals cannot control their emotions and defend the body against the effects of them. Instead, the emotions and stressors begin to control them.

### **III. Steps for Achieving Emotional Competence**

The most important way for an individual to become emotionally competent is to determine what commonly causes him/her to feel distress. To even attempt this feat honestly takes great courage. Most sour tensions and frustrations appear when an individual acts compulsively by ignoring his/her needs. We may feel pressured to please others, and go to great lengths to earn another's approval. Over time, such behavior can disconnect one's genuine needs from those imposed on us by others. Knowing what pleases us and what hurts us can ultimately help us act with emotional competence, i.e., in a way that will help us to be true to ourselves. To know ourselves also includes recognizing the messages our body is sending us and listening to them.

We can achieve emotional competence in five steps. First, we should strive to recognize and accept the circumstances in our immediate environment. We must develop the courage to permit ourselves to understand our unique circumstances and situation. To accept things is not to deny how things are. Rather, the more we know about ourselves, the more we can act on the basis of such self-knowledge. Acceptance implies having a compassionate and positive relationship with oneself. We should view ourselves as sufficiently competent to act on the basis of such self-knowledge. If we are to have a compassionate relationship with ourselves, we should accept the positive and negative features of our characters in a loving way. This openness creates health and well-being.

Second, we should develop an awareness of our beliefs, values, and long-standing commitments and to be determined to express them through our actions. Developing self-awareness helps an individual to act with emotional competence that is essential to monitor his/her emotions and stress levels to determine how the body, mind, and spirit are responding to

stress. Such determination provides important information about how we can continue to respect our emotional needs.

Third, by expressing and not repressing anger, we can become aware of what makes us angry. Repressing anger dissociates us from our true feelings and emotions. Repressed anger may advance into a fear of expressing genuine feeling. Anger has a cognitive value since usually it represents a response to some negative perception, as for example, a response to a loss or threat in a relationship. Anger may also signal real or threatened invasion of an individual's boundaries. We feel empowered when we permit ourselves to express anger harmlessly and to contemplate what may have triggered it so that we can learn about our anger in the future.

Fourth, we need to develop a sense of autonomy with respect to our behavior. We are autonomous if our actions are truly our own and that we are not influenced by others to act in a particular manner. Therefore, we must strive to govern ourselves on the basis of deeply held beliefs, values, and principles. This gives us an internal center of control that ultimately leads to emotional competence. Usually, autonomous individuals are able to say "no" to others, especially if the action proposed conflicts with his/her beliefs and values. An individual must ask him/herself what (s)he desires and values in life and act on that basis. Otherwise, an individual is merely doing what someone else wants.

Lastly, once an individual knows what (s)he values, (s)he must assert these values by continuously acting on them. Autonomy usually means the liberty to do or act as an individual wishes. Assertion is deeper in that it is not limited to the autonomy of actions. It is a statement of a positive evaluation of oneself, independent of other people in our environment. Assertion challenges us to express our authenticity in our actions. Many individuals who lack emotional competence cannot assert their values effectively. Many individuals are not fully aware of their values and beliefs, a state that can lead to nonautonomous actions.

In conclusion, despite the benefits of achieving emotional competence, it is very difficult to initially bring about. An individual must develop a specific type of awareness that causes him/her to take care of his/her needs and especially to pay attention to any physical or psychological messages that the individual experiences, and to deal with these messages early on. Only in this way can we save ourselves from needless illness and hardship in the future. Therefore, we owe it to ourselves to develop emotional competence so as to live a healthy and balanced life.

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Selye, *Stress without Distress* (New York: Harper & Row, Inc., 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Hans Selye, *The Stress of Life* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Hans Selye, *The Stress of Life* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Gabor Maté, *When the Body Says No* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada Ltd., 2003).