

CHAPTER 31

From Emotionally Reactive to Emotionally Responsive

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on an important psychological shift which happens in one's personal and professional relationship when going from emotional reactivity to emotional responsiveness. Emotions have an impact on all aspects of human behaviour – personality, thinking, decision making, relationships and everyday behaviour – and people are all unique in the way they react to their emotions. A person with emotional reactivity reacts automatically to a stimulus, especially in conflict or stress situations and may react in a strong way. Emotionally responsive individual – delays and considers a response; selects one that aligns with their values and is in line with their longer-term goals. The article discusses why this change is important for personal growth, leadership, relationships at work and mental health, and how reacting versus responding is different on a brain level and a behavioural level. It highlights the role of the amygdala in fostering rapid emotional reactions, and that of the prefrontal cortex in facilitating thoughtful response, as well as several psychological theories that explain emotional awareness and regulation, such as mindfulness, emotional intelligence and interpersonal neurobiology. Emotions need to be understood, not suppressed: When someone knows what they are, and is able to regulate his or her emotions, he or she reacts more deliberately and less impulsively. It also takes account of practical examples and the cultural determinants of emotional behaviour and finds that emotional responsiveness is a learned skill and a factor in making better decisions, building better relationships and having more control over one's own lives.

Keywords: Emotional reactivity; Emotional responsiveness; Emotional regulation; Emotional intelligence; Mindfulness.

1.0 Introduction

Emotions may be experienced as either an asset or a burden.

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They combine physical sensation, thought and impulse into internal states that motivate behaviour and shape how a person expresses themselves. In a fast-moving and demanding environment, people are regularly placed in circumstances that call for considered emotional responses rather than immediate ones.

Most individuals occupy some position along a range between reactivity and responsiveness. Reactive emotional conduct responds to external stimuli immediately and intensely, producing heightened emotional activity and unfiltered expression without significant reflection. Responsive emotional conduct involves making a considered choice about how to act once an emotional response has arisen.

For most people this relationship with emotion is unstable rather than settled. Pressures arising from work, academic competition, interpersonal difficulty and social expectation all encourage immediate reaction in preference to considered response, and arguments, misunderstandings and poor decisions follow from how emotion is handled in a particular moment. Familiar examples include an outburst of anger while driving, acute anxiety before an important meeting, or a sharp reply to a partner's casual remark. In each case a person acts on feeling rather than on reflection.

Emotional reactivity is a rapid, instinctive response to fear or discomfort in which emotion determines conduct (Lazarus, 1991). People frequently act on emotion and afterwards recognise that their reaction did not reflect what they actually intended. Responding rather than reacting represents a healthier and more mature approach: pausing, understanding the situation and the feeling it has produced, and only then acting. This supports better decisions and allows emotion to be shaped rather than merely expressed.

2.0 Concept Explanation

2.1 Emotional reactivity: The automatic mode

Emotional reactivity refers to an automatic response that proceeds without deliberate thought or assessment of the circumstances. Such reactions occur before there has been time to analyse the situation, so that conduct follows immediate feeling rather than considered reasoning. In most instances a person is not aware of reacting emotionally at all, since the response originates in instinct rather than in higher-order reasoning.

Psychologically, emotional reactivity originates in the amygdala, part of the limbic system, which responds rapidly to emotionally charged stimuli interpreted as threatening and prepares the body to act (LeDoux, 1996). In genuine emergencies this instinctive response serves a person well. In ordinary daily circumstances, however, the same mechanism may be triggered by criticism or disagreement, so that a person takes personal offence and responds with anger, defensiveness, anxiety or avoidance on the basis of feeling alone, frequently misinterpreting the other person's intent in the process.

Reactive conduct commonly takes forms such as:

- Interrupting or abruptly ending a discussion.
- Forming an immediate judgement about another person.
- Deciding on emotional grounds in circumstances that require careful thought.
- Criticising another person rather than regulating one's own response.

A person receiving critical feedback at work, for instance, may respond by becoming defensive or denying that any difficulty exists. They may experience the feedback as an attack on their character and respond accordingly, even where it was offered constructively. Emotional reactivity is not a flaw or a weakness. Many capable people react strongly, and such patterns are generally learned through past experience, unresolved difficulties or sustained stress. Repeated reaction nonetheless establishes a habit, and that habit constrains personal development, strains relationships and contributes to persistent low mood.

2.2 Emotional responsiveness: The conscious choice

Emotional responsiveness is defined as identifying an emotion and then taking a pause before responding. Time to think before acting affords the opportunity for impulse regulation and more effective choice. That pause provides a clearer perspective of the situation and enables a person's values and longer term goals to be reflected in the response (Gross, 2015). Responsive conduct usually manifests itself in the following ways: Focusing on making time for responding. Communicating emotions in a direct and explicit manner. Listening without emotional upset and attentively. Someone criticized and emotionally responsive can be still upset/disappointed. They stop and listen, think through what they are hearing, and ask questions to get a better understanding before determining their response. Emotion is recognised and dealt with instead of released at once. Emotional responsiveness is not about hiding your emotions or being "cold" all the time. It involves making a considered response, even when feeling is high, so that feeling is now a source of insight, not a barrier.

2.3 The transition from reactivity to responsiveness

Emotional literacy and emotional regulation are combined, so that an individual can act with emotions, rather than be acted upon by them. The transition makes three changes, in particular:

- Impulsive action to deliberate action. Immediate reply to considered reply.
- From treating emotional discomfort as wholly negative to treating it as an opportunity for learning.
- Emotional responsiveness is in this sense an indication of emotional maturity and of psychological resilience.

3.0 Applications and Practice

3.1 Emotional regulation and stress management

Several practices support the capacity to regulate emotion:

- Slow, deliberate breathing.
- Physical activity, which assists in discharging accumulated tension.
- Mindfulness practice, which develops attention to present experience (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).
- Cognitive reframing, which reconsiders how a situation is being interpreted.

Where people manage emotion successfully, they are considerably more likely to respond to a situation constructively rather than reacting to it.

3.2 The role of emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence is the capacity to connect what one feels with how one acts. Those who possess it in high degree identify their own emotions and those of others and respond appropriately to both (Mayer et al., 2004). Leaders who respond rather than react build trust within their teams and earn greater respect in consequence. Collaboration improves and conflict diminishes where a leader is emotionally responsive. In educational settings the same capacity supports concentration, resilience and adaptation to change. Emotionally intelligent people treat their feelings as information rather than as instruction. They interpret emotional signals as messages to be understood rather than as directives to be obeyed.

3.3 Effects on relationships and communication

Emotional responsiveness strengthens relationships. Reactive communication tends to escalate conflict, whereas responsive communication supports understanding and makes resolution possible.

Responsive communication characteristically involves:

- Listening without interruption.
- Expressing one's own feelings without attributing blame.
- Seeking a solution rather than seeking control.

An approach of this kind establishes emotional safety, which is fundamental to relationships that endure.

3.4 Illustrations from everyday situations

Three ordinary situations illustrate the difference between the two modes.

Family disagreement. Child comes home late. The reactive parent reacts right

away, starts accusing the child of being irresponsible, always late, never listening, etc. and the child feels attacked. The responsive parent expresses anger, but stops their speech, and asks, “I was worried, what caused my delay, and how will I avoid it in the future? The second one begins a discussion that the first one ends.

Workplace meeting. Multiple interruptions by a colleague in a discussion. The reactive response is the public rebuke, a sudden one, everyone around is uncomfortable. The alternative is to say quietly that one would like to finish the point and will be happy to hear the colleague’s perspective. The action is the same, the impact on the working relationship is not.

Friendship. A friend calls off an appointment at the last minute. The reactive response is accusation – the friend is “unreliable” and “poisoning the well” for everyone. The more responsible option is to inquire into what has occurred, accept the situation and offer another opportunity. The first response ruins a friendship by a single incident and the second keeps it.

4.0 Conclusion

One of the biggest shifts that a person can make is from reacting emotionally to responding with awareness. Emotional reactivity is both natural and acquired and if left untreated, it will hamper development and extend suffering. Emotional responsiveness is a different kind of interaction with emotion. To respond is to allow emotions to serve as a guide to action and not a commanding force. Making this transition does not require that a person cease to feel, or achieve perfect composure; it requires time, attention and sustained effort. Emotional awareness fosters clarity and stability in the face of challenge. In today’s emotional world, the ability to stop, to think about how they want to respond and to intentionally make a decision is not just a benefit, but a skill they need. When someone chooses to respond to a feeling, rather than feeling a feeling, then emotional challenges are opportunities to learn, to get connected, and to change the way he or she lives.

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