Strengthening Self-Awareness & Self-Compassion in Mediation Using an IFS Lens with Tsipora Dimant, Jill Goldsmith & Mariann Hyland

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Some of the Science Underlying our Emotional Reactions (by Jill Goldsmith)

Emotion Regulation Systems

Paul Gilbert explains that humans have three emotion regulation systems: (1) the threat defense system (fight or flight) (body produces the hormone cortisol, among others), (2) the drive system (body produces dopamine) and (3) the soothing/affiliation system (body produces oxytocin).

Understanding our evolutionary development is important to understanding how and why we have the emotional responses we have when under stress. Nature designed us to perceive a threat, and to then experience a surge of emotions (e.g., fear) and then to experience a surge of hormones which make want to fight, flee or freeze. All of this happens in a split second.

When we are in the fight or flight state, we experience an increase in blood pressure, adrenaline. The hormone cortisol is released which mobilizes our strength and energy and focuses every particle of our attention on the thing we fear.

When we release cortisol and adrenaline and are in a state of fear, our executive functioning goes off line. As Paul Gilbert explains, if you are being threatened by a lion:

> "You don't want your smart-thinking brain slowing you down, weighing up whether the lion is a threat or not, whether it's eaten already, or whether your karate moves would be up to the task of stopping it! This type of thinking needs to be taken "off-line" so that the impulse to action is urgent. So some emotions come with a sense of urgency, and they can knock out the smart brain because they are designed to take control in these types of situations" (Gilbert, 2009).

We also know that this system – the threat defense system – can be called into action by psychological threats, not only physical threats. This includes emotional attacks by others (think about the last time you were in a heated argument. Was your heart beating? Was your breath shallow? Were your palms sweaty? Were there any other physical signs of being in distress?).

The thing most of us don't know is we can also evoke the threat defense system by being self-critical and unkind to ourselves. This response can also be evoked when someone pushes our buttons (makes us angry) or even triggers a past trauma. In all of these situations, we prepare for a fight, flight or a freeze, and our executive functioning goes off line and our body can be overloaded with hormones designed to help us respond to a physical threat like a lion. None of this is helpful when you are the mediator and you need to stay calm, centered and hold the container for the participants.

We also know that humans co-regulate with each other when in close physical proximity because we are also designed to empathize with each other. We co-regulate with each other because we have mirror neurons, which can cause us to experience an empathetic reaction in response to seeing what happens to another person. For example, if you see someone trip and fall, you hurry over, filled with apprehension and worry for them. Or you might even wince and rub the part on your own body where the other person was hurt.

> "Mirror neurons are a type of brain cell that respond equally when we perform an action and when we witness someone else perform the same action. They were first discovered in the

early 1990s, when a team of Italian researchers found individual neurons in the brains of macaque monkeys that fired both when the monkeys grabbed an object and also when the monkeys watched another primate grab the same object.

"Neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti, MD, who with his colleagues at the University of Parma first identified mirror neurons, says that the neurons could help explain how and why we "read" other people's minds and feel empathy for them. If watching an action and performing that action can activate the same parts of the brain in monkeys--down to a single neuron--then it makes sense that watching an action and performing an action could also elicit the same feelings in people" (Winerman, 2005).

We are hard wired to read each other's emotions and reactions. We've all had the experience of feeling uplifted when a person near us is exuding joy and happiness – and the feeling of fear or anxiety because another person demonstrated anger. When you are the mediator, your internal regulation will impact the internal regulation of participants. Fear, anxiety and defensiveness are catching!

Self-compassion is a skillful way to work with the threat defense response. A self-compassionate response to difficulties activates the left temporal pole and insula activation – areas of the brain associated with positive emotions and compassion. When we practice self-compassion, very different hormones are released, the most important being oxytocin, which is associated with feeling safe, relaxed and calm. When we are safe and contented, our sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems are in balance (Neff, 2011). If you can evoke this response in yourself, the participants in mediation will co-regulate with you and also calm down.

<u>Evoking the soothing/affiliation system through practicing self-compassion</u>

- Warmth, gentle touch and gentle vocalizations are the primary means of evoking your soothing/affiliation system. Practice putting your hand on your heart or some other part of your body that feels soothing, and notice whether you feel a bit calmer. Speaking to yourself with a kind and gentle voice (rather than the harsh attacking voice of the inner critic) is another practice which can help to mediate your fight or flight response.
- Try taking a slow, relaxed, mindful breath. If you feel anxious, triggered or panicky, try taking one long slow breath, making the exhale longer than the inhale. Think about how practical this is: it is a direct message to your nervous system that you are not being chased by a lion. You cannot take a long, slow, relaxed mindful breath while running as fast as you can. You are sending a direct message that bypasses thought to your nervous system.
- Practicing mindfulness and compassion will build your capacity to access the soothing/affiliation system when you need it.

Some other things to know:

- "Name it and Tame it." Naming the distressing emotion has the effect of slowing and even stopping the amygdala hijack (Torre, 2018). This is called "affect labeling" and it produces an immediate decrease in amygdala activity (which stimulates the fight or flight response). For example, saying "this is anger" or "I feel anger" can cause an immediate decrease in your autonomic responses. It also makes a difference if you say this to yourself in a warm and understanding voice (evoking the soothing/affiliation system). Of course, you have to be self-aware enough to know what you are feeling, which is where a regular mindfulness practice can come in.

- "Feel it and Heal it." Body awareness of the physical manifestations of disturbing emotions is another important factor in emotion regulation. Research suggests that emotions are associated with distinct parts of the body (Nummenmaa, 2014). Remember that gentle touch evokes the soothing/affiliation system: putting a gentle hand on the part of your body which is experiencing the distressing emotion can help slow down or stop the reaction.

We all have nervous system reactions. Allow yourself to be human and recognize the reaction is a psychologically healthy way to handle the emotions. Trying to stuff emotions or control them just creates a stronger fight or flight reaction. The goal of all of these practices is to help you self-regulate when you notice you are having a reaction by developing skills to relate to your emotions in a supportive way.

Resources

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