



Healthy, *Truth-based* Emotions and Associations

(©Copyright 2002 K.D. Lehman MD & C.E.T. Lehman MDiv, New 8/16/2002)

We agree with Dr. Smith that most intense emotional reactions in the present get much of their energy from triggered emotions and lie-based associations. We also agree with Dr. Smith that people tend to need a lot of help to be able to see and acknowledge their triggered emotions and lie-based associations. However, we also perceive that some people need help in understanding that not all emotions are triggered and not all associations are lie-based triggers. In our understanding, triggering requires that there is a lie imbedded in the memory of a previous experience. Triggering accesses the lie, and the exaggerated intensity of the triggered response comes from the energy and emotions associated with the lie. By definition, no lie is being triggered when a person experiences healthy, *truth-based* emotions, and no lie is connected with healthy, *truth-based* associations.

Healthy, truth-based emotions vs lie-based emotions: Emotions are an important part of our subjective experience and serve many important functions, one of which is to provide subjective, experiential, visceral, intuitive guidance and motivation. Truth-based emotions provide important guidance and motivation *towards* things that are good, nurturing, and restorative and *away* from things that are destructive. Truth-based emotions are also an important source of guidance regarding *balance* and/or *completion* – “this is not enough,” “this is just right,” and “this is too much.”¹ Lie-based emotions provide powerful *misguidance*, *towards* things that are destructive and *away* from things that are good, nurturing, and restorative. Lie-based emotions also provide powerful *misguidance* regarding balance and/or completion.

For example, truth-based loneliness is a negative/unpleasant emotion the Lord has given us to guide and motivate us towards relationship and connection, and it will also provide guidance regarding balance: “I’m still lonely – I think I need to spend more time with my friends.” Truth-based guilt is an unpleasant emotion the Lord has given us to guide and motivate us away from sin and towards repentance, and it will also provide guidance regarding completion – we know when we have “gotten the job done” because truth-based guilt will go away as soon as we have completed confession and repentance. Truth-based fear is an unpleasant emotion the Lord has given us to guide and motivate us away from danger. Peace and joy are positive/pleasant emotions the Lord has given us to guide and motivate us towards good, nurturing, and restorative things. Pleasant and unpleasant physical sensations provide a good analogy to the way in which God designed positive and negative emotions to provide guidance. For example, hunger is a physical sensation the Lord has given us to guide and motivate us towards food, and if the system is healthy our hunger will go away when we have eaten just the right amount. Thirst is a physical sensation the Lord has given us to guide and motivate us towards drink, and again, if the system is healthy it will tell us when we have had enough. Pain is a physical sensation the Lord has given us to guide and motivate us away from things that are harmful to our bodies and to guide

¹ Our perception is that these observations and comments apply to believers, but we are less clear regarding the reliability of emotions (even truth-based) in non-Christians where the sin nature is still in place.

and motivate us to protect body parts that are already injured. Physical pleasure is a physical sensation the Lord has given us that draws us towards things that are nurturing to the body (much distortion has come with sin and brokenness, but physical pleasure is a positive motivation towards appropriate sleep, adequate food and drink, ideal body temperature, etc). Again, if the system is healthy, we will *feel satisfied* when we have had enough.

On the other hand, if a person was neglected as a child he may have lies such as “I am all alone,” or “Nobody will ever stay with me.” This person will have lie-based loneliness that will not be relieved by appropriate friendships, and that will drive him to pursue relationships in a way that is unbalanced and unhealthy. Or a person who was sexually abused may have lies such as “It was my fault because I didn’t say ‘no’,” and “I am dirty because it felt good.” This person will have lie-based guilt and shame that will not resolve with confession and repentance (of sins thought to be causing the feelings). This lie-based guilt and shame will guide and motivate him or her *away* from appropriate sexual intimacy with a spouse and will drive him or her *towards* unbalanced, compulsive confession and repentance.

Healthy, truth-based associations vs dysfunctional, lie-based associations: The mind is designed to make associations (both negative and positive), and this process is the basis of all *experiential* learning. Healthy, *truth-based* associations are the basis for all appropriate experiential learning, whereas *lie-based* associations are the basis for all (learned) dysfunctional, triggered reactions.

For example, on the healthy, truth-based side, we make associations between staying out in the sun too long and painful sunburn, and thereby appropriately learn to wear sunscreen. We make associations between staying out too late and missing dessert, and thereby appropriately learn to get home in time for dinner. We make associations between completing our chores and getting an allowance, and thereby appropriately learn to delay gratification in order to accomplish important but unpleasant tasks. We make associations between friends and relief from painful loneliness, and thereby appropriately learn to take the risks and invest the energy necessary to build friendships.

On the dysfunctional, lie-based side, a girl who is molested by her father and uncle may make associations between men and sexual abuse, “learning” that men are dangerous and will violate her boundaries. This lie-based learned association will cause her to fear and avoid being close to all men. Or a boy who is verbally abused by his parents, his first grade teacher, and his baseball coach may make associations between authority figures and verbal abuse, “learning” that authority figures are dangerous and will attack him if he doesn’t do things perfectly. This lie-based learned association will cause him to be intimidated by all authority figures. A girl in an abusive situation where she experienced tenderness and affection only when she was being molested may make positive associations between affection and sex, “learning” that she will only receive affection when she is being sexual. This lie-based learned association will cause her to feel “cared for” when she is being sexual, and these triggered positive emotions will impair her judgment with respect to sexual relationships. Or a child who only receives affirmation when he performs may make positive associations between the affirmation and achievement, “learning” that he is only “good enough” to be affirmed when he is performing well. This lie-based learned association will cause him to feel “good enough” when he is performing well, and these triggered positive emotions will drive him to a workaholic life style.

In summary, it is important to distinguish between *triggered, lie-based*, positive associations and emotions and *healthy, truth-based* positive associations and emotions. As described above, triggered, lie-based positive associations and emotions will impair our discernment and drive

inappropriate behavior², but the Lord has designed legitimate positive associations and emotions to guide and motivate us towards fun and restorative activities. We want to resolve the lie roots of triggered positive associations and emotions, but embrace healthy positive associations and emotions as the blessings that they are. We want to accept as healthy the desire to engage in activities that elicit positive emotions and that are associated with positive emotions. For example, it is appropriate and healthy to want to continue certain Christmas traditions that are associated with positive childhood memories of happy times together as a family. It is appropriate and healthy for a couple to want to play a certain song that reminds them of special occasions together – a song that is associated with memories of happy romantic times together as a couple and that evokes positive emotions.

In the same way, it is important to distinguish between *triggered, lie-based* negative associations and emotions and *healthy, truth-based* negative associations and emotions. Whereas lie-based negative associations and emotions will cause many different problems³, the Lord has designed legitimate, healthy negative associations and emotions to guide and motivate us away from painful and destructive activities. We want to embrace legitimate, healthy negative associations and emotions as the blessings that they are, and accept as healthy the desire to avoid activities that are associated with truth-based negative emotions and that elicit truth-based negative emotions. For example, even after all lies have been removed from earlier abandonment, neglect, and rejection memories, it is still appropriate to want to have friends in order to avoid truth-based loneliness. Even after all lies have been removed from earlier similar memories, you will still want to avoid getting a speeding ticket because of the appropriate negative emotions associated with paying \$50 to the state of Illinois instead of using that money to take your family out for dinner.

² See “Triggered ‘Positive’ Associations and Emotions” on the Articles and FAQs page of our web site for additional examples and discussion of how triggered pleasant associations and emotions can impair discernment.

³ See Smith, Ed. *Beyond Tolerable Recovery* (Alathia Publishing: Campbellsville, KY. 2000) for extensive discussion and many examples of the problems caused by triggered, lie-based negative emotions.