

What About Our “Emotional Immunity?”

Catherine Nelson, Ph.D.

Here we are in the middle of winter. It’s a gray-sky day and there’s snow and ice on the ground. We are all hoping for a decline in the prevalence of the Covid virus. Some of us have been vaccinated and some have not.

“Immunity” is a frequent word in our conversations, as we talk about the health of our physical bodies. We all have antibodies that contribute to our immune system and protect our good health. Some antibodies occur naturally; some come from fighting off a specific infection or disease; and some antibodies can come from vaccinations.

One way we develop antibodies to various organisms begins with a gradual exposure in our environment from infancy through childhood into adult life. Most of us played outside as children. We played in the dirt; we had domestic animals around us; we were in constant contact to germs and bacteria of all kinds. We ate the cookie that fell on the ground. We wiped our nose on a muddy sleeve. All of those different kinds of germs and microorganisms helped to strengthen and expand the capacity of our immune systems to develop a larger repertoire for fighting new environmental agents.

Our “emotional” immunity works in a parallel way. Those of us who’ve had a wide variety of different life experiences have a greater capacity to respond to unexpected and uncomfortable “unknowns.” Here are a few examples to illustrate this point.

One summer, two grandchildren came to visit their grandparents for the first time. The grandparents decided

to take the children on a three-day camping trip, and given their many years of camping, they planned well. On the first day, they went hiking and fishing. However, that night an unexpected rainstorm came in and continued all through the second day. Everyone had to stay inside the tent. Fortunately, the grandparents brought along a bag of games and a harmonica. The children laughed and sang all through that soggy day.

On the third day, the sun shone again, and they all enjoyed more hiking and fishing before heading home. It was a memorable trip.

In this instance, the rain was the unwelcome and unexpected event. The grandparents still created a fun day for everyone. The children learned from their grandparents how to accept what is, adapt to a change in plans, and create a positive outcome.



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Another example is about Luke and Sara, two graduate students who have just completed their doctorates and are planning to marry next year. They are eager to find good jobs in engineering and economics but currently, they are living in a small town. Sara grew up traveling with her military parents to many different locations, including several foreign countries. Sara is confident and enthusiastic about them moving to a big city and finding jobs. Luke grew up on a farm and worked much of his

childhood helping his parents. He too wants to get his career going, but he has no experience finding another place to live or finding a new job. He is facing lots of “unknowns” and is anxious and uneasy about all the upcoming changes. Luke also knows from living on a farm that unexpected challenges can easily occur and cause problems in one’s life and work. Luke trusts Sara, and he feels she will teach him a lot about living in a bigger world.

In sum, our emotional immunity is about increasing our exposure to unplanned, unexpected, and unwanted situations so we can build more psychological skills to live more fully in life. Some of the desired qualities in establishing strong emotional immunity are: the ability to accept an unexpected and undesired situation; the ability to adapt to changing circumstances; the emotional flexibility to “bend” without breaking; and the desire to create possible solutions that are either temporary or permanent.

With conscious awareness, we can all work on improving our emotional immunity regardless of our backgrounds. If you are a parent, keep giving your children opportunities to grow and learn these qualities. Encourage your children to solve problems and find creative solutions in a variety of situations. Their success or lack of success are “gold mines” for discussion.

The ability to accept unexpected and undesired change also presumes that family members are able to talk about their feelings with each other. We all need positive emotional support when these events come along in our lives.

The one constant in life is “change.” Some change is expected, and we can prepare for it. It is the unexpected and unwanted changes that will require us to be more resilient and proactive. Remember, it’s not the event itself that matters; it’s our relationship to it and how we react that makes all the difference! ■

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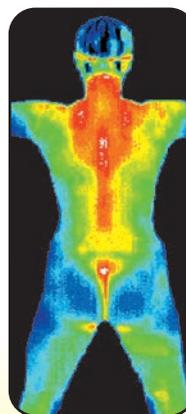
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