

Discovering the Real Me

Student Textbook #12
Preparing for Life in Society

For teenagers 17 to 18 years of age

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Introduction

The final year of high school marks an important stage in a person's life. For many students it is the final year of a long period of formal schooling going back almost as long as they can remember. It's hard to imagine life without school!



This senior year will bring one phase of your life to a close and lead you into another in which you will be more and more a part of general society. When you finish this academic year, your entire life will stretch before you. The question is: what will you do with it?

Of course, some will extend their schooling by going on to university. Yet this will be different from the schooling they are used to. There is more freedom, more responsibility, and there are more choices. At university, fellow students and teachers will treat you as an adult. You may move out of your parents' home to live with other students, either on or off campus, and assume the responsibilities of living on your own.

The theme of this course, therefore, is Preparing for Life in Society. The past few years have already been marked by a growing independence as you matured and became more responsible. This process will continue even further. As it does, these basic life goals are important: to become a fully mature and responsible individual, to develop loving relationships with others (especially in your family) and to make a positive contribution to your world. These are the goals experts have determined lead to a satisfying and fulfilled life. This book offers some thoughts in each of these three areas.

The first seven chapters focus on issues related to the first life goal. They discuss emotional life—why we feel the things we do and the struggles we all face in trying to understand who we are. We take another look at the “enemy within”—that part of ourselves that seems to be working against our better interests and how to deal with it. We take up the deeper question of finding meaning and purpose in our lives. What makes life worth living, and how do we find the strength to overcome its challenges? We end this section by considering the importance of the choices we make and, through them, the destinies we create for ourselves.

In the next six chapters, we deal with second life goal issues: friendships, love relationships, marriage, and family. We discuss the importance of commitment and loyalty towards our friends, neighbors, and family members. We discuss functioning effectively in a group. How to bring the ideal of altruistic love—living for the sake of others—down to earth and make it work in everyday

life is also covered. We consider the reality of broken families and the reasons for failure. Finally, we look at the individual and family in relation to society, and the importance of loving, stable families.

The final four chapters are devoted to the third life goal—our personal contribution to society. Here we return to the issue of leadership, focusing on some examples of individuals who developed their leadership abilities while facing tremendous opposition. We discuss how one person can make a difference in his or her community, society, and the world by practicing the principle of living for the sake of others. We bring this course to a close by asking the most fundamental question of all: what is a life worth living? Finding the answer to this question is the key to a good and fulfilling life.

We hope that you will find this course valuable for your life as you journey into the world of adulthood and society.

Chapter 1

Our Emotional Life

From the moment we are born we start having emotional experiences. The cry of a newborn baby is an expression of discontent at the sudden change of environment from the coziness of the mother's womb to a relatively cold, outside world. At the same time, it is a proclamation of the existence of a new human being.



At two months, a baby begins to smile, expressing its pleasure at communicating with the parents. As time goes on, individual differences begin to show: some children show strong, even violent, emotions; others are emotionally reserved. A child's nature is both provoked by and provokes reactions in the people around them, which further influence the child. A child with an emotionally difficult background is usually less able to study, for instance, than a child who has had positive emotional experiences. Hence, our overall character and even our intellect is influenced by our emotional experiences in childhood. The better our emotional experiences, the more positively our personality can develop.

BASIC HUMAN EMOTIONS

Most scientists distinguish three basic human emotions: pleasure, fear, and anger. The rich variety of human emotion is all based upon these three.

Although the entire human brain is involved in emotional states, some leading centers of emotion have been discovered. The most important of these brain structures is the *hypothalamus*, which is involved in regulating the body's *metabolism*. Experiments have shown that stimulating the hypothalamus in a laboratory can produce pleasure, fear, and anger. The hypothalamus is closely connected to the *pituitary gland*, which influences our growth, metabolism, and maturation. It is also connected to other parts of the brain that are involved with *hormone secretion*. Thus, stimulating these key centers affects the whole person, emotionally and physiologically. It affects

the heartbeat, breathing, and causes us to sweat. The face may grow flushed or pale. The entire body may “jump for joy” or “shake with fear.”

Scientists know a lot about human emotions. But scientists only study the physiological effects of a person’s environment on the emotional state. We know, however, that human emotion is not only physiological but is psychological and spiritual as well. This is why our emotions play such an important role in the development of our inner life and character.

THE POSITIVE IS MORE POWERFUL THAN THE NEGATIVE

Of the three basic emotions, there is considerable evidence that pleasure is much stronger than fear, anger, and other related emotions such as hatred, resentment, aggressiveness, shame, guilt, and grief. It is the power of love which gives rise to feelings of joy and pleasure. So the old saying that love is the greatest power in the universe is scientifically true!

Yet much of what we read, hear, and see about human emotions focuses on the negative. Numerous TV shows are about solving murder mysteries. Many books, plays, and movies deal with despair, adultery, tragedy, and death. Newspapers are full of accounts of war, death, and horror. History also seems to be a record of people’s negative behavior instead of a record of the positive aspects of human emotional life.

In everyday life, we also seem to pay more attention to negative emotions than positive ones. We remember vividly the time our teacher exploded at us in anger; we forget or ignore the hundreds of other days he treated us with kindness and respect. Thus, we may get the impression that negative emotions are more powerful in human life than positive emotions. However, this is not true.

Anger, fear, aggression, hatred, and grief may make for great drama, but they are not the dominant forces in human life. They are interesting in stories and news accounts *because* they are unusual. The norm is human cooperation, friendliness, helpfulness, peacefulness, and respect for the rule of law. Human progress has been powered by the positive emotions of life, the root of which is love. Love and the joy and pleasure that flow from it are much more powerful than the negative emotions.

The problem has been finding people who believe this and practice love in the face of all the emphasis on negative emotions. History shows that when people have done so, they have unleashed monumental changes for good in the process.

POSITIVE FEELINGS

Emotional experiences shape who we are and give rise to the feelings we have as we face everyday life. Positive emotional experiences will bring out many kinds of positive feelings, which will impact our personal relationships, our lives, and our interactions in society in general. The following is an incomplete list of positive feelings:

1. Religious feelings: the joy of coming closer to God.
2. Altruistic feelings: the result (or cause) of helping others.

3. Feelings of companionship: an emotional attitude toward those we feel close to and comfortable with.
4. Feelings of satisfaction: the result of successfully completing a task.
5. Feelings of exhilaration: the result of successfully overcoming barriers, dangers, or difficulties.
6. Romantic feelings: an attraction for someone of the opposite sex, involving tenderness.
7. Feelings of intellectual excitement: the stimulation of learning something new, discovering a new theory, inventing a new machine, or solving a complicated intellectual puzzle.
8. Aesthetic feelings: appreciating the beauty of nature or art.
9. Sexual feelings: when in an intimate physical relationship.

When we experience one of these positive feelings, it produces an overall feeling of happiness, sometimes flooding our whole being in joy. We have an inborn desire to be happy—indeed to be intoxicated with joy—and we are forever pursuing the positive feelings which are the basis of that happiness.



Personal relationships are happy only when they are permeated with positive emotional experiences. This is why expressions of anger or fear are destructive to family life. Marriages are strongest when both husband and wife experience positive emotions in their relationship. This is one reason that marital therapists urge long-time married couples to start “dating” each other again—making time for pleasant, fun times together so that they associate one another with pleasure. The same is true for relationships between parents and children. Positive experiences—it can be as simple as making a cake together in the kitchen or going to a special event together—lead to close bonds and mutual happiness.

CAN WE CONTROL OUR EMOTIONS?

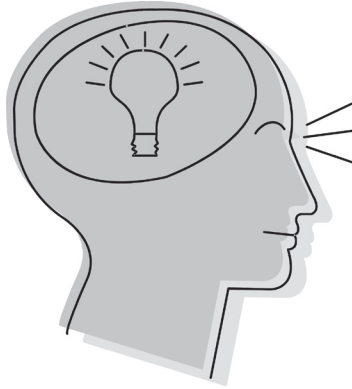
If positive emotions are stronger than negative ones and more desirable, the question comes up: Can we control our emotions?

Emotions sometimes seem overwhelming and out of control. A person with a bad temper sometimes feels that he or she will never learn not to shout, not to abuse others, not to experience the rush of anger that keeps coming back as memories of the triggering incident return. A fearful

person may feel he or she will never be able to compete, never venture into new things. Some people are so fearful, they never leave their houses!

Sexual attractions and romantic feelings may also seem out of control. In fact, many popular songs compare falling in love to “being crazy about you” or “losing my mind over you” or say, “I’m about to lose control.” Sexual desire can seem almost overwhelming at times.

Fortunately, we have a powerful weapon on our side when our emotions threaten to take over our lives. We are rational, thinking beings. We can think our way out of some emotional storms.



For instance, angry people might find themselves feeding their anger with their own thoughts, even as they blame another person for making them angry. They might not have seen or talked to the other person for days, even years (the person who made them mad may even be dead!), yet they are still seething in anger due to the way they are thinking about the other person. Often emotions like compassion, forgiveness, and love can blot anger out, so the key is to use our rationality to cultivate these good emotions.

Some psychologists have developed a training program to associate the negative emotion of anger with the positive emotion of compassion. One program does this by linking anger and compassion deep in the person’s mind and heart through repetition and training. Another program helps New York City bus drivers be less angry with their customers by changing their thinking about the customers. A film showed the drivers that their customers’ most annoying behavior might be related to causes that could evoke compassion rather than anger. For instance, a seemingly drunk and dizzy customer was shown to have taken some medicine for a heart condition that was affecting him. His stumbling on the bus and slurred speech were due to medication rather than alcohol. The bus drivers then felt sorry for the customer instead of angry and impatient with him. Changing their thinking helped the drivers feel more positively toward their customers.

A fearful person can fight fear with positive affirmations: “I can do this. I am a good and worthy person. I’ve done this before and done well at it. There’s no reason to fear this. I can choose not to feel fear in this situation.” There are also psychological techniques, called de-sensitization techniques, where a fearful person imagines things that frighten him or her in a therapeutic, relaxed setting. Doing a series of muscle tightening and relaxing exercises, the fearful person learns to identify relaxation and associate it with a fear—say, a fear of public speaking. Soon, the thought of public speaking becomes associated with a wonderful feeling of relaxation, and the fear goes away.

Sexual attractions and romantic feelings can also be controlled by our rationality. We’ll examine this in a section by itself.

LOVE AND SEXUAL ATTRACTION

In our teenage years, most of us have experienced the joy of falling in love with someone of the opposite sex. Often, this may occur with someone who is totally wrong for us: a teacher, an older teenager, someone who doesn't share our values at all. We may fall in love with someone we can't even meet—a movie star or model or singer. We may fall in love with a pretty or handsome face and take a long time to “wake up” to the person's true personality. Some high school students experience many boyfriends and girlfriends by the time they graduate. Once they find out what the other person is really like, they break up and go on to the next.

Imagine if in all these relationships of “love,” they had acted on their emotions by engaging in numerous sexual experiences. No wonder sexual diseases are epidemic in some countries! No wonder there are so many unwanted pregnancies. No wonder depression and psychological problems are so common among teenagers. Better to control our emotions with our rationality so that we don't get hurt—physically, mentally, or emotionally—when it comes to relating to the opposite sex.

Sometimes an older person's rationality can guide us when our emotions are going out of control. The story of Lucy demonstrates how this happened for her.

Lucy Learns a Lesson

Lucy was absolutely crazy about Anton. He was so cute! And funny and nice. The wonderful thing was, Anton seemed to feel the same way about her. She was on “cloud nine.” The couple met constantly throughout the school day and said they were boyfriend and girlfriend.

But something puzzled Lucy. Anton could never see her on weekends. Anton told her he was busy with his family on weekends.

Soon, though, friends started mentioning that they had seen Anton on the weekend with a blonde girl named Marietta from another school. They saw him in the park with her, at the movies, and window shopping downtown together. They couldn't be sure, but they thought the couple had been holding hands.

Anton got mad when Lucy brought it up. He said that Marietta was a friend of one of his cousins. “You're just jealous!” he accused her.

Upset, Lucy turned to her aunt for advice. She really wanted to believe Anton. Maybe he and Marietta weren't holding hands. Maybe they were just in a group of cousins together. Was she just being jealous, like Anton said?

When Lucy's aunt heard that several of Lucy's classmates had seen Anton with Marietta on several different occasions, she said it didn't sound to her like Anton was being completely truthful. Why did he never ask Lucy along on these group outings with his

cousins if it was okay for Marietta, who was also no relation, to be there? Lucy's aunt advised Lucy to cool off her relationship with Anton a bit and take a good hard look at the situation.

It was painful, but Lucy explained to Anton that she needed some time and distance from their relationship. She did not accuse him but said she needed to work some things out on her own. If she was too jealous like he said, she needed some time to work through that.

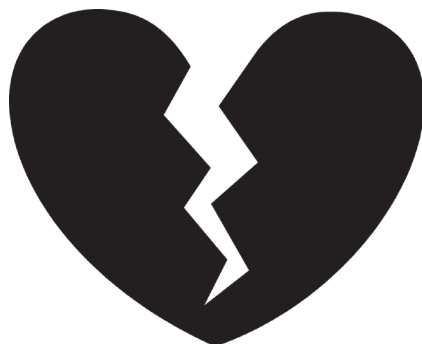
Lucy went through several lonely and painful months, but when things got too bad, she went to talk to her aunt. Her aunt strengthened her by saying things like, "You need to protect your heart," and "Don't let him play you along."

It turned out Anton had been secretly going steady with Marietta for a long time, all during the time he was "boyfriend and girlfriend" with Lucy. The only reason he hung around with Lucy at school was because Marietta went to a different school.

Lucy was glad she had listened to her aunt. The voice of reason had won over her emotions. It was painful to "lose" Anton, but Lucy had the pride of knowing that she had ended a situation that was unfair to her with dignity.

If Lucy and Anton in the above story had entered into a sexual relationship, it would have been much harder for Lucy. Sexual relationships involve explosive emotions. They are not just physical experiences. Sex bonds people deeply together. When a couple breaks up after having had sex, they are much more torn than if they did not have sex. Especially for girls, a sexual relationship implies along with it a high degree of commitment—a commitment that may not be there.

Sex can lead to the emotions of joy and pleasure that imitate feelings of true love. But this is short-lived. Sex between people who are not committed to one another in marriage can lead to fear, guilt, shame, disillusionment, anger, and other negative feelings. Eventually, someone feels hurt and betrayed—and broken-hearted. A bad experience with sex at an early age can do great damage to a person and negatively color any future romantic relations. It can even damage that person's attitudes towards love in general. When pain invades such an intimate relationship, the heart is deeply wounded and may never totally heal.



The wonderful thing is, we don't have to wait until we fall in love with someone of the opposite sex to experience the joys and wonders of love. The joy generated by true love—love for the sake of others—is the greatest gift possessed by human beings. It helps our personalities grow and enriches our lives. Love is joyful whether we experience it by taking care of a young child, helping an elderly person, being kind to our friends and family, working to help animals, or helping with a community clean-up. Our hearts well up with the positive emotion of love when we behave lovingly toward others. Then we become so filled with love that we are more ready than ever to love that special someone with whom we will fall in love and marry.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What are the three basic human emotions?

2. What are some of the positive feelings we may experience in life?

3. How are negative emotions expressed in family life?

4. What feelings provide for family happiness?

5. Can our minds control our feelings? Give an example.

6. How can sexual relations lead to negative emotions?

7. What is the best way to practice for true love in marriage?

EXERCISES: “IDENTIFYING HUMAN EMOTION”

1. Look at a picture that expresses a strong emotional experience and try to describe the emotions felt by those in the picture.

2. Think of the most positive emotional experience of your childhood. What was its cause? How do you feel today when you think about it?

3. Observe the people around you and try to identify the kinds of feelings they are experiencing—positive or negative. Which ones do you see more often?

REFLECTIVE EXERCISE: “CHECKING OUR EMOTIONS”

During the week, record all the situations in which you experienced strong emotions. Find the words that most accurately characterize those feelings. At the end of the week, look through your notes and identify those that were most dominant. Are you satisfied with the result, or would you like to change something in yourself?