

# Emotions as resources

## A CONVERSATION WITH JAN GLASENAPP\*

### *What are emotions, what are feelings?*

**Glasenapp:** The German word “Gefühl” [“feeling”] is very general. It describes what people feel, and these feelings can be very diverse. They include physical sensation, for example. Some people say “I feel listless,” “I feel tired,” “It feels cold.” An emotion, on the other hand, is a more concrete description of an emotional need that pushes us in a particular direction, which is not automatically the case for physical sensations. Emotions, as the word “emotion” suggests, give us the strength to move in a particular direction, to do things or not do things. They help us to register important events in our lives, to evaluate them, and to gain the strength to move. In the scholarly discourse there is a distinction between the word “emotion,” which describes the whole process of experiencing a situation, i.e. perception, evaluation, and the motivation of an impulse to act, and the word “feeling,” which describes what a scientist cannot measure, that is: how the emotion feels subjectively.

### *“Emotions as resources” – what does that mean?*

**Glasenapp:** I firmly believe that every emotion has a meaning, and that for every emotion there is a particular situation where it can make sense to feel and experience it. In order to be capable of action, it is important to understand emotions as resources. They give us important information and have important functions for the way we deal with the world we live in. I personally get annoyed – to name an emotion – that even in academic contexts, the division into positive and negative emotions is still used. As a result, we divide our experiences into 2 categories, positive and negative, and

try to avoid the less pleasant ones. I can certainly understand that people experience and evaluate emotions differently. And in a world where we learn, even as children, that evaluation is very important, it is quite understandable that we also evaluate our emotions. For a fulfilled, healthy life, though, we need to understand emotions as resources, and to encourage people to take their emotional experiences seriously. That also means respecting emotions that we don’t find so pleasant, and finding a way to appreciate the emotions that are supposedly painful or are felt to be unpleasant and to use them as a valuable resource (see blue box). Leslie Greenberg, the founder of emotion-focused therapy, talks about “emotional productivity:” this is when people are able to use the information contained in their fundamental emotions (emotion utilisation) and regulate their experience in an adaptive way.

### *What part does culture and the people around me, who influence me etc. play?*

**Glasenapp:** Researchers give different answers to this question. There is one branch of emotion researchers who strongly emphasise the universal aspect of emotions. The main representative of this branch, Paul Ekman, has produced fascinating studies proving that the way certain basic emotions are expressed is independent of cultural influences, religion or origin. Other studies have shown that cultures can also have very specific emotions and concepts, which they express in very specific ways. For example, the Japanese have the concept of “amae,” translated as “freedom in security,” an emotion expressing the simultaneous need for security and dependency. So there

## EMOTIONS AS RESOURCES

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### **Happiness:**

Happiness signals to us that we are receiving something that is viewed as positive. It helps to resolve the issues of assimilation linked with the expansion of our boundaries, and motivates us to get more of this.

### **Grief:**

Grief signals the need to process loss by stabilising our breached boundaries. It triggers a psychological process that enables us to separate from what has been lost and to accept the loss.

### **Fear:**

Fear signals the need for protection from a possible threat. It activates physical functions which protect our needs: we flee or retreat.

### **Anger:**

Anger signals a need to actively and physically protect ourselves from a threat to our identity boundaries. This activation, however, is expressed not just by flight (as with fear), but also by distancing ourselves from the threat.

### **Disgust:**

Disgust signals to us that something that has come too close to us is endangering us. It mobilises energy to get rid of it again and to secure our boundaries.

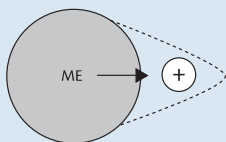
### **Surprise:**

Surprise signals to us that anything is possible. It activates our body, even if it is not clear in which direction.

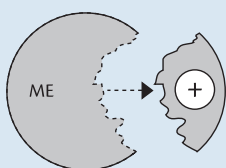
(Source: Glasenapp, Jan (2013). *Emotionen als Ressourcen. Manual für Psychotherapie, Coaching und Beratung*. With online materials. Weinheim: Beltz.)

**KEY SCENARIOS OF EMOTIONS**

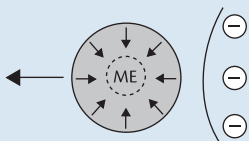
**Happiness:** We are expanding our boundaries and move towards something positive.



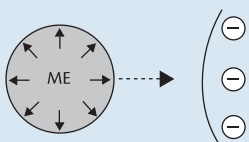
**Grief:** Our boundaries are getting hurt by loss, we are trying to stick to the lost person/item.



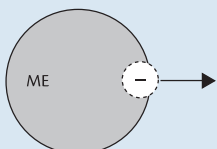
**Fear:** We are protecting our boundaries by backing away from the threat.



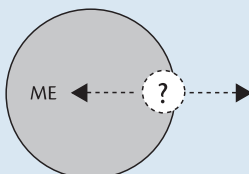
**Anger:** We are protecting our boundaries by grappling and clashing with the threat.



**Disgust:** We are trying to get rid of something dangerous that has trespassed our boundaries.



**Surprise:** Something has suddenly trespassed our boundaries, we are still uncertain how to evaluate it.



seem to be culturally specific emotions as well as basic universal emotions.

Ekman himself talks in this context about “display rules.” What this means is that the basic emotions are universal, but people learn to display these basic emotions in different ways, e.g. with differing degrees of intensity, depending on their cultural influences. And here the cultural factor does seem to play a very significant role. Reddy, a cultural anthropologist, even talks about “emotional regimes” in this context. This means that the social environment has a very profound effect on the way I express emotions and perhaps even on the way I experience them. All this is transmitted through our upbringing.

**What does “emotional intelligence” and “emotional competence” mean?**

**Glasenapp:** For a long time, intelligence was seen as the key factor for e.g. achievement at school and in the workplace. It was an important step to realise that purely cognitive intelligence cannot be the only factor for a successful and perhaps satisfying life. This is thanks to the concept of “emotional intelligence,” which defines intelligence more broadly, moving away from purely cognitive concepts. Unfortunately, this concept has not become widely accepted among researchers because of problems of definition. It is therefore probably simpler, in our so-called “knowledge society,” to talk about “emotional competence,” i.e. skills that are not just inherited but can also be trained. The common feature of all these approaches is that they are concerned with recognising emotions in oneself and in other people, and finding a way to deal with these emotions in different ways. This means reflecting on and changing our own way of dealing with emotions, but also thinking about how we can influence the way other people experience emotions.

**What is a person’s “emotional style?”**

**Glasenapp:** People experience and express emotions in very different ways.

Some, for example, both experience and express them more intensely than others. But there are differences not just in the quantity of emotions, but also in their qualities. That is, people have varying abilities to perceive and differentiate between particular emotions. The idea of an “emotional style” covers this. For example, some people get angry and distance themselves when they feel threatened. Others, on the other hand, retreat in fear. “Emotional style” describes people’s habitual emotional reactions in similar situations. The interesting thing here is that every person has emotions he or she can show easily, while other emotions are not used in this way. The regrettable thing here – if every emotion is a resource, and a helpful means of dealing with a particular situation in life – is that people who avoid or do not use certain emotional qualities also, unfortunately, do not make use of these aids. It is therefore worth thinking about a person’s “emotional style,” and also asking ourselves: what emotions am I comfortable with? What emotional qualities do I find hard to show to other people?

**What should we teach our children?**

**Glasenapp:** We should encourage children to express their feelings. We should value our children’s feelings, and give them the feeling that they, and their emotions, are noticed. At the same time we should show them helpful ways to deal with their feelings. ■

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