

Expressing Negative Affect

Defining the function of negative affect. Negative affect is universal to humans. Its expression differs one person to another and that difference is relevant to both how people meet their needs for safety and comfort and how professionals respond to their negative affect.

The function of negative affect is to alert the person to an imminent threat to the self. Negative affect is felt on a gradient of intensity from desire for comfort (low threat) to anger (greater threat, but not overwhelming), to pain (immediate threat to the survival of the self).

Individual differences in the expression of negative affect. There are learned individual differences in the expression of negative affect. Individuals using a Type B self-protective attachment strategy have learned that direct and accurate expression of negative affect most often meets their needs. Individuals using a Type A self-protective attachment strategy have learned that expression of negative affect does not resolve the threat and often leads to negative consequences; they generally inhibit the expression of negative affect and, sometimes, substitute false positive affect. Individuals using a Type C self-protective attachment strategy have learned that exaggeration of expression of their negative feelings most often yields a better outcome, even if sometimes there are negative consequences.

Responses of others to seeing expressed negative affect. Professionals and foster parents often react negatively to children's and clients' expression of negative affect; they tend to respond more favourably to inhibition of negative affect, thinking it more 'mature', rather than seeing it as strategically different and, often, harder to resolve because of its hidden quality. Thus, professionals and foster parents sometimes increase the likelihood of behavioural problems and depression in children whom they consider good/obedient and parents who are compliant.

Expression of anger, fear, and desire for comfort are often unsettling to both the person who feels these feelings and also to those who observe the expression. Moreover, because they sometimes lead to strong behaviour, e.g., aggression, intense approaches for intimacy, the feelings and behaviour can be considered inappropriate and maladaptive.

In fact, the opposite is true. These sophisticated feelings serve as internal warning mechanisms that something is seriously wrong and action may need to be taken. Being aware of the feelings and using them to guide thoughtful consideration of how best to respond is highly adaptive. That is, anger and fear signal threat whereas desire for comfort signals a desire for assistance and comfort. Further communicating the feelings, through facial expression, voice, tone and body movements, can improve interpersonal harmony.

Unfortunately, when experience has shown that others do not respond or that one's own response easily becomes uncontrolled, expression of feeling may be exaggerated or inhibited and thoughtfulness may be by-passed altogether. Both solutions (i.e., exaggeration and inhibition of negative feelings) are harmful to relationships. They increase the risk of extreme behaviour that could become endangering to children – without the warning signs of negative feeling being interpreted properly and used to elicit protective responses.