

*The Connection Between Your Child's Emotional Intelligence
and Physical Health – Current and Future – Your Role as
Parent
by Johanna Vanderpol*

How many adults today suffer from terminal or chronic illnesses? How many of those illnesses could have been averted if they had honoured their emotions? And what about the future generations – our children? What can we do to contribute to their health as children so they grow into healthy adults.

What! You say. Emotions don't have anything to do with terminal or chronic illness... or do they?

Breast cancer affects one in eight women. Heart disease is the number one killer of men. These are now common facts. But what is not common knowledge is that women who repress their emotions, especially anger, are at higher risk of getting breast cancer. And, men who are aggressive and hostile, especially when things don't go their way, are at higher risk of heart disease.

Research now confirms what many of us have known intuitively all along – that our emotional coping styles affect our physical health and can contribute to chronic and terminal illness.

North American culture teaches us to inhibit and rationalize away many of our emotions. This is the current mainstream paradigm. Emotions are our built-in guide in what to pursue and what to avoid, what pace to go and where balance is jeopardized. How can we be healthy and happy if we don't listen to our emotions. The good news is that 25 per cent of the population, known as cultural creatives, are looking for and implementing new ways of emotional processing. People who read this magazine are likely cultural creatives. When this many people are implementing new ways of feeling, thinking and behaving, it changes mainstream. We are creating and entering a new paradigm in the way we handle our emotions.

And, we can, as parents and adults who interact with children impact the way they process their emotions. We can help them set up healthy patterns of dealing with their feelings. We can model it for them and teach them. We can contribute to minimizing their future risk of serious illnesses.

In *When the Body Says No* by Dr. Gabor Maté, M.D., looks at patients with terminal illness such as cancer and other illnesses such as ALS, MS and other auto immune disorders. He explains the links between illness and emotions. On Page 127 he talks about the starting point of emotional coping styles as beginning in childhood:

While we cannot say that any personality type causes cancer, certain personality features definitely increase the risk because they are more likely to generate physiological stress. Repression, the inability to say no and a lack of awareness of one's anger make it much more likely that a person will find herself in situations where her emotions are unexpressed, her needs are ignored and her gentleness is exploited. Those situations are stress inducing, whether or not

the person is conscious of being stressed. Repeated and multiplied over the years, they have the potential of harming homeostasis and the immune system. It is stress—not personality per se—that undermines a body's physiological balance and immune defences, predisposing to disease or reducing the resistance to it.

Physiological stress, then, is the link between personality traits and disease. Certain traits—otherwise known as coping styles—magnify the risk for illness by increasing the likelihood of chronic stress. Common to them all is a diminished capacity for emotional communication. Emotional experiences are translated into potentially damaging biological events when human beings are prevented from learning how to express their feelings effectively. That learning occurs—or fails to occur—during childhood.

The way people grow up shapes their relationship with their own bodies and psyches. The emotional contexts of childhood interact with inborn temperament to give rise to personality traits. Much of what we call personality is not a fixed set of traits, only coping mechanisms a person acquired in childhood. There is an important distinction between an inherent characteristic, rooted in an individual with regard to his environment, and a response to the environment, a pattern of behaviours developed to ensure survival.

What we see as indelible traits may be no more than habitual defensive techniques, unconsciously adopted. People often identify with these habituated patterns, believing them to be an indispensable part of the self. They may even harbour self-loathing for certain traits—for example, when a person describes herself as "a control freak." In reality, there is no innate human inclination to be controlling. What there is in a "controlling" personality is deep anxiety. The infant and child who perceives that his needs are unmet may develop an obsessive coping style, anxious about each detail. When such a person fears that he is unable to control events, he experiences great stress. Unconsciously he believes that only by controlling every aspect of his life and environment will he be able to ensure the satisfaction of his needs. As he grows older, others will resent him and he will come to dislike himself for what was originally a desperate response to emotional deprivation. The drive to control is not an innate trait but a coping style.

Emotional repression is also a coping style rather than a personality trait set in stone. Not one of the many adults interviewed for this book could answer in the affirmative when asked the following: When, as a child, you felt sad, upset or angry, was there anyone you could talk to—even when he or she was the one who had triggered your negative emotions? In a quarter century of clinical practice, including a decade of palliative work, I have never heard anyone with cancer or with any chronic illness say yes to that question. Many children are conditioned in this manner not because of any intended harm or abuse, but because the parents themselves are too threatened by the anxiety, anger or sadness they sense in their child—or are simply too busy or too harassed themselves to pay attention. "My mother or father needed me to be happy" is the simple formula that trained many a child—later a stressed and depressed or physically ill adult—into lifelong patterns of repression.

So, what can we do as adults for our children and the other children we interact with in the community that will facilitate their emotional intelligence?

The RHUME™ model

First of all, what we do for them, we must also do for ourselves. In this way, we will recognize what our children are experiencing and then be able to help them navigate the vast emotional terrain.

After studying the Emotional Intelligence literature for many years, I was able to synthesize the research into a practical application. Most of the EI knowledge is taught in a cognitive style, but the model I have developed is taught in an experiential style which is where true learning takes place and lasts.

The RHUME™ model teaches us how to honour our emotions in ways that minimize physical illness and increases happiness and positive emotions. Some studies suggest this has more impact on our health than genetics or biological predisposition.

The Five Steps of the RHUME™ Model

We will be able to teach our children how to Recognize, Honour, Understand, Manage and Express their emotions in ways that are respectful of self and others. This is the RHUME™ model of emotional intelligence, a process and experiential model, the first of its kind. As we put this knowledge to use, we, as adults, will benefit from our own increased physical and emotional health. We will create life-long healthy emotional coping styles in our children that will insure their increased physical and emotional health as adults.

The RHUME™ model is a five-step model of how to process our emotions to completion so the do not trigger hormonal and chemical cascades that damage the body and lead to illness. What we are creating in the RHUME™ process is a pattern of emotional coping that optimizes physical and emotional health.

This works for older children as well as toddlers who have little verbal skills. When my son was one or two years old, I would mirror for him in words what he was feeling. He very quickly had an internal sense of his emotional world (within months) and very early on was able to report to me how he was feeling about any given situation.

Recognizing their emotions

The first step that we can teach our children is for them to recognize their emotions. This is done as life happens, in teachable moments. This is where we stop long enough to truly hear what they are saying with their body language and words and feed it back to them. For example, 6 year old Tommy comes home and says that some kids were mean to him on the playground. You ask for more details on the circumstances so you can get the whole picture. And, then listen in between the lines though his body language, tone of voice, posture and choice of words to see how he might be feeling. When you think you might know how he is feeling you can mirror it back to him by saying something like, "Oh, that must have hurt your feelings." He will probably respond with something like, "Yeah. It did." Or, "No. I felt sad." Then you would ask him, "How did that

feel in your body?" He would respond with information such as, "My chest felt like it hurt."

Don't worry if you can't stop and listen all the time. The demands of life sometimes places too many responsibilities on us and we move faster to complete those demands. We can't always stop and listen. On the other hand, if you can hardly ever stop and listen, really listen to your children, then you might want to implement some lifestyle changes.

One day my son told me he was looking forward to an event. I said, "Are you excited?" He said, "Yes." I said, "How does that feel in your body?" He said he felt like he had "too much energy in his arms and legs." He was nine at the time.

If you use this as a normal part of your dialogue with your children from time to time, they will very quickly tune into their bodies and be able to identify their feeling. They will also feel visible and heard by you. This is Recognizing your emotions, fairly simple.

Honouring their emotions

The second step is to honour their feelings. This is where we, as parents, have a hard time not jumping in to fix or change or judge things. This is more of a "not doing" than a doing. It creates space for the child to experience his or her feelings without doing anything about it. The only doing that might happen here is for you to create an emotionally safe space for your child to have permission to have his feelings. This is as simple as saying, "Yes, I can understand how you could feel that way." Or, especially with younger children whose verbal skills have not developed much yet, a hug or a compassionate sound like "Ohhh!" Suspending good or bad judgment is critical at this point. This is not always easy to do as parents, especially when we want our kids to turn out a certain way or we do not want to see them suffer. This is OUR anxiety, not theirs. Own it in that moment, become aware of it so you can suspend it. If you are unsuccessful at this point of honouring their emotions, it is because you need to honour your own emotions. You can honour yours and theirs simultaneously. It is a matter of awareness and acceptance.

Understanding their emotions

The third step is to understand your children's emotions. Here, the task is to identify the underlying belief systems that are at work, any unmet needs and the message of the emotion. Beliefs drive emotions. If we feel we are an unlovable person, and someone is unfriendly toward us, we may interpret that as they don't like us when in reality it may be that they are in a hurry or just tired. Our interpretation will make us feel sad or anxious. We start forming our beliefs about ourselves and the world at a young age.

Emotions are our built-in divine guidance system. They are part of our intuition. They are messengers of information. Even science is now calling the chemical cascades in our bodies linked to emotion, "chemical messengers of emotion." So the question to ask is "What is the message?"

In general terms, anger signifies a boundary violation or an injustice occurring. The action

required is to right this wrong in some way. Sadness signifies a loss of sorts. The action required is to be still and quiet to allow ourselves to come to terms with the sense of loss. Hurt signifies emotional pain inflicted upon us and is closely connected to anger in terms of a violation. Here we take action by informing someone that they cannot treat us this way and/or to remove ourselves from the situation if at all possible. This act of self-protection is a form of healthy self-love. Joy signifies we are on the right path and involved in something that has importance and meaning to us. The motivation from joy is the message to continue on this path.

These are the basic messages in emotions. When any of these emotions seem out of proportion or inappropriate to an event, it means something else is going on. Cumulative negative experiences will cause us to overreact if we have not resolved them. Misinterpretations will also determine how we respond to an event. Cumulative experiences, inaccurate beliefs about oneself or the world or unmet emotional needs over time are three of the culprits. But the emotions can also point us in the direction of uncovering messages to these prior beliefs or needs.

What we can do for our children here is to ask them what they think the message is in the emotion. They have a greater sense of body intelligence and emotional intelligence than we do. You can help them if they are stuck by repeatedly asking them what their body and emotions are trying to tell them. It will help them become self-sufficient in determining the message and acting appropriately from a very young age. They will then carry this on into adulthood.

Managing their emotions

The fourth step is to help your children manage their emotions. This is where they learn the skill of impulse control. This skill alone could make all the difference in reducing or eliminating violence in our schools. However, impulse control is NOT to be confused with denial or suppressing emotions. Previous generations were taught to suppress, repress and deny their emotions through family, culture and religion. The more healthy action would be to control emotions in a way that does not cause undue harm. This is a very important distinction that carries with it a fine line in thinking and doing. If we control our emotions, we can still have them and still express them. Except we would do it in a way that is respectful of self and others. Impulse control is easier when we allow ourselves to have our emotions in the first place. Then, when we need to practice impulse control, it is easier. We can help our children by training them when young to wait for something, one minute, then two minutes, etc. As they get older they will be able to learn to work for something and wait a week for the reward. Each time they will be able to put effort into something for a longer period of time before reaping the rewards. Impulse control is a predictor of life success in adulthood, so, even though these things may sound simple, they are significant.

A lot of basic things help in the process of managing emotions. They are sleep, nutrition, exercise and a balanced pace between a variety of activities. Most of our difficulties in managing our emotions happen because we are tired, burned out, inactive or lacking in some vital nutrients. If we change our life to strengthen a basic healthy lifestyle, we can go a long way in avoiding undue emotional difficulties. And, when we do arrive upon emotional difficulties, we will have more resilience in dealing with them. When we model this lifestyle for our children, they will pick it

up by osmosis. We can teach them healthy basic lifestyle practices.

Poor management of anger has been implicated in the etiology of heart disease (Fredrickson, Maynard, et al, 1999). Therefore, it is important as parents that we teach our children basic sound management techniques.

Expressing their emotions

The fifth step in processing emotions is expressing their emotions. This does not have to be done in temper tantrums and heated arguments. This can be done with calm verbal language and through the arts.

Again, feeling emotionally safe to express feelings is key. Studies by James Pennebaker, a researcher on expressing of emotions notes "...translating our thoughts into language [through talking or writing] is psychologically and physically beneficial. When people write about major upheavals, they begin to organize and understand them. ...they can begin to move beyond the trauma."

And again from James Pennebaker's book *Opening Up*: People who wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings surrounding traumatic experiences evidence heightened immune function compared with those who wrote about superficial topics. Although this effect was most pronounced after the last day of writing, it tended to persist six weeks after the study. In addition, health-center visit for illness dropped for the people who wrote about traumas compared to those who wrote on the trivial topics.

So, what can we do for our children? We can encourage them to express themselves using language as part of a pattern in their lives. Children who are inclined to write as they get older can be encouraged to have a journal or a diary. And children who are more inclined to the arts such as music, dance and mixed media can be encourage to express themselves with those mediums.

It's like a water hose. If we turn on the water (our emotions) and plug the hose at the end it should come out, then we have pressure which eventually leads to a broken hose or a huge gush of water creating more problems. Best to express ourselves.

Summary

This is a very short description of the process that happens in a matter of seconds. There are many details that need to be addressed but are left out in a document of this size. For a more detailed account of this process complete with exercises and further resources the book *Honouring Your Emotions: Why it Matters* will give you more information to delve deeper into this process. This e-book can be found at www.johannavanderpol.com.

It is my hope that I have informed you of the true value and power that emotions have in our lives and a few ways to apply this new knowledge in your life so that you can further contribute

to the emotional and physical health of yourself, your children and other children in your life.

Biography

Johanna Vanderpol is an emotional intelligence consultant who is currently developing resource materials such as books, tapes, courses and workshops for people who want to decrease their emotional suffering and increase their emotional intelligence. She is the creator of the RHUME™ model of processing emotions and has been actively engaged in courses and conferences in the world of emotional intelligence since 1998. Johanna lives in British Columbia, Canada with her son, Naseem.

For more information and to order the book *Honouring Your Emotions: Why it Matters* contact Johanna at 250-483-1877 or at info@johannavanderpol.com. Be sure to visit her website at www.johannavanderpol.com.

Johanna Vanderpol
Emotional Intelligence Retreats and Coaching
Honour Your Emotions, Live the Life you Yearn For
www.johannavanderpol.com