

Emotional Medicine

Jacqueline Lapa Sussman, MS, LPC

For this month, I am excited to share an interview I conducted with a dear and longtime friend, Penelope Young Andrade. Penelope is a masterful and gifted psychotherapist, whose fantastic book, “Emotional Medicine Rx,” details the importance of restoring the ability to experience all of one’s emotions for complete health in both body and mind. She describes how symptoms such as depression and anxiety, as well as psychosomatic illnesses, are rooted in unfelt emotions that have been suppressed from past traumas. She also illustrates how problematic physical, mental and emotional symptoms can be overcome in practical steps that not only eliminate symptoms, but facilitate peace, equanimity and wellbeing.

Jackie: Penelope, in your book, “Emotional Medicine” you say that emotions themselves are medicine and that the ability to feel one’s emotions is crucial to mental and physical health. How did you come upon this knowledge?

Penelope: I am happy to say it was a gift I received in a moment of deep despair, when my husband ended our 15 year marriage. I had a 3 year old, a dream house, and it all fell to pieces at my feet. I was destroyed. One day, I was crying intermittently on a massage table as a body worker was working on me. At one point, she told me she thought I was done crying. I looked inside my experience and saw that was true. At that very moment, my body was done crying. I got so excited. I knew I had been given a gift that would change my life forever.

Jackie: What excited you about that?

Penelope: Well, my life was still in pieces at my feet. But, at that moment, my body was at peace. That meant that if I used my awareness and chose to let my body lead, I could find peace amidst this or any other shattering experiences. This is why awareness and will are such important aspects of Emotional Medicine. We need to be aware of what we’re experiencing at all levels of being not just focused on the stories in our heads. From that moment of insight, through the rest of all of my life’s upsets, I have used this attention to my body’s experience to see what I need in the present moment. Do I need to cry now? Is my body done? Do I need to use my will to stop focusing on the story in my head and choose to feel the subtle beginning of relief? Am I willing to focus now on that relief? Our bodies will always tell us the truth about what we’re experiencing. Furthermore, they’re not neurotic. Unlike our complicated minds, our bodies move

through emotion and trauma quickly and provide all kinds of feel good biochemistry when they’re done. I tell people, set the timer! If you’re still crying after three minutes, you’re probably up in your head. Anger, sadness, or fear typically last no more than three minutes. After these three minutes, positive sensations and feelings of well being naturally emerge as your biochemistry changes. If you then focus on these good feelings for another three minutes, your thoughts change too. You begin to think happy, confident thoughts.

Jackie: What happens if people are numb and can’t feel their bodies or emotions?

Penelope: This is an important question. I had just such an experience. Emotional Medicine worked for me for many years, until a bad drug reaction during menopause precipitated a panic disorder, and I was left numb. I couldn’t feel my body or my emotions. That is when I learned about post-traumatic stress disorder and how such numbness indicates the involvement of trauma. The good news is that numbness, like all sensations and emotions, is temporary. When you stop recycling fearful stories and drop your awareness into the numbness in the present moment, it typically goes away quickly. Interestingly, numbness is a gift from nature so we don’t have to feel pain when we’re being hurt or traumatized. It also gives us the ability to stay still and frozen to fool a predator into thinking we’re dead. Numbness is designed to dissipate rapidly once the danger is passed so you can briefly feel the sad, mad, scared emotions that accompanied the danger and be restored to well being. But as humans, with highly developed cerebral cortexes it’s easy to get lost in our heads replaying that trauma over and over. When we’re stuck in our heads, we are unable to cooperate with our bodies’ simple plans to help us unwind our nervous systems after traumatic experience. However, it’s important to realize if people are used to feeling numb and have found a certain safety in feeling numb, the thawing out process needs to be gentle and titrated so the ensuing emotional aliveness is not overwhelming.

Jackie: Can using emotions as medicine eradicate the need for medications in the treatment of depression or anxiety and other mental illness conditions?

Penelope: Interestingly, recent research indicates that depression is due to chronic low-grade immobilization, or frozen, numb energy as a result of post traumatic stress. And we know what’s underneath that numbness – unexperienced emotions.

Anxiety, and depression are not emotions — they are states of mind resting on top of frozen sad, mad, or scared emotion. As I mentioned, the good news is that your body already knows how to do the thawing. It is instinctual and pre-programmed. When we feel safe enough to let our bodies lead us through this natural, neurobiological process of unwinding, feeling our emotions, stopping when our bodies are done and focusing on the resulting good feelings, medication can be avoided. However, some people may need empathic professional help and temporary medication while unwinding trauma and becoming safe enough to feel emotion again.

Jackie: A lot of people have been made wrong about their true feelings while young; as a result, they fear experiencing their emotions. How do you deal with this?

Penelope: Fear of emotions is a huge issue in our society. That's why it's important to be gentle and compassionate with ourselves about learned patterns and fears of emotion. I encourage people to start their emotional medicine journey by first finding and acknowledging the resources and strengths they already have within themselves at any level. Following this, it can really help get educated about the true value of emotional experience.

Jackie: So how have you found that feeling emotions helps one overcome physical and mental health symptoms?

Penelope: Emotions are an essential part of our human tool kit for creating the life we deserve. They are part of our ability to respond to events in our lives, whether good or bad or ugly. They give us the energy and motivation to take actions that support us. When you're sad and grieving, you need to reach out for connection. When mad, you need to set boundaries or take a stand for yourself. When scared, you need to find safety and connection. If you're not experiencing and responsibly acting on the information your emotions provide, their energy will be bound up in your body. This typically creates physical and mental distress. Experiencing some emotional release in a safe and private place can restore a feeling of confidence and clarity. It also saves your gut from digestive difficulties or distress created by "holding it in."

Jackie: It sounds like Emotional Medicine

has similarities to other meditative practices. Is that true?

Penelope: Absolutely. This process is about consciousness, love and will. It takes full awareness to pay attention to what is happening in your body and get out of your narrative—your ongoing internal stories—to enter your experience in the present moment. It also takes will to stop when your body is done —just like it takes will to keep your awareness focused on your breath, mantra or experience. Finally, it takes awareness and will to focus on the good feelings within you rather than dash off to your next task. One of my clients, Rosa, told me that for years, she'd been attending workshops and hearing about the importance of self-love, but she never knew what that meant. After experiencing Emotional Medicine she said I now know what it feels like to truly love myself.

Jackie: So, you've written this book for the general audience and health care practitioners to learn to navigate the world of emotions for full radiant health?

Penelope: I know I can't be a therapist for everybody. But I wanted to offer my heart, my hand, my knowledge and experience to help everyone discover that emotions are their friends and that it's possible to feel happy, confident and peaceful — fast!

Jackie: Thank you so much Penelope. Your book sounds like a wonderful self-help tool that allows anyone to learn to free themselves from internal stress and to fully feel all their emotions without shame or suppression. ■

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