

Emotional strength: A response type, response disposition and organizing principle for emotion experience

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents 'Emotional Strength' as a response type, a response disposition and an organizing principle for responding to emotional life. Emotional strength is defined as 'the ability to respond in an open and vulnerable way in the face of intense emotional experience, feeling one's way deeper into the emotion which allows access to implicit functional processes driving action'. We present four hallmarks of emotional strength: (i) openness and vulnerability (ii) emotional responsiveness (iii) self-description using vulnerability-related words (iv) continuing engagement in action. Emotional strength is distinguished from psychological constructs such as mindfulness, emotion regulation, emotion-approach coping, resilience, emotional intelligence, emotion-focused therapy and acceptance and commitment therapy. It is not the point of emotional strength to turn a negative into a positive experience. The skill is to feel deeply into all emotion experience, opening up vulnerability and emotional responsiveness and to change the way emotion is understood in everyday life.

1. Introduction

Of the number of fundamental changes that signalled the beginning of the modern period, it has been argued that central among these were an increased sensitivity to suffering and an affirmation of the importance of 'ordinary' life (Taylor, 1989). These two features of modern life combine to place great impetus on some concept that is contrary to suffering and that can be applied in ordinary life — this place usually being occupied by the notions 'happiness', 'flourishing', or 'well-being'. But unfortunately, there are a series of related asymmetries between the negative and the positive in this context, that render the predicate 'contrary to suffering' highly problematic.

While the concept of suffering seems to have clear and relatively unproblematic content, the positive concepts of happiness or well-being do not. Their content, if they have any at all, is vague, elusive and controversial. In its ordinary usage, happiness tends to play the role of what Jonathan Lear has termed an 'enigmatic signifier', to designate whatever it is that people "don't yet have, what they are longing for, that which they have just lost and would like again" (Lear, 2000, p. 23).¹ The lack of content of these terms also connects with the lack of agreed positive psychological outcomes in psychological research — consider for example the major difficulties presented to the coping field

by the question of how to assess the effectiveness of different coping strategies (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Somerfield & McCrae, 2000; Weber, 1997). Positive evaluative terms such as happiness have a sense of open-endedness that suffering lacks — there is always a possibility that humans can discover something better or more worthwhile for our lives than what we thought was the best available (or for that matter a possibility that what we thought was the best available has hitherto unseen consequences that render it much less good than we had originally thought).

This lack of determinant content in well-being and related concepts makes them unlikely to be very successful as guides to practical conduct (Haybron, 2008). In fact, one-sided focus on pursuing positive states and feelings is likely to be counterproductive by leading to a range of problematic symptoms resulting from denial, avoidance or suppression of unpleasant emotions (a varied literature explores this idea, see for example Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012; Zautra, 2003).

An alternative to seeking a single concept that is contrary to suffering in the guidance of practical conduct is to look for high-level principles that are genuinely action-guiding. Such a principle should reliably produce outcomes that are consistent with the networks of concerns of the agents themselves as well as the network of concerns of their society at large (at least when those social concerns are just; the

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¹ Psychologists have given happiness as 'subjective well-being' a determinate content but most, if not all, acknowledge that the greatest balance of self-reported frequency of positive affect over negative affect plus self-reported satisfaction with life is not all there is to an ideal life (e.g. Diener, Sapyta, & Suh, 1998; Diener & Scollon, 2003; see also discussions in; Haybron, 2008; Sumner, 1996).

Table 1
Factors shaping action.

Action shaping factor	Example
Situational context	A family member comments in front of other family members “you’re so serious now, you used to make us laugh, we want the old you back”
Ability to feel and tolerate feelings and sensations and their associations and meanings	The subject feels humiliated and is not able to feel the humiliation fully, resulting in an action tendency to change that feeling
Present to psychological capacity/coexisting stressors	The subject is reminded of past experiences when she felt humiliated in response to her family’s comments and felt ostracised. She becomes internally critical and hears the words “you will never be free”, “you will never be able to stand up for yourself with your family”
Secondary feelings and attitudes about the primary emotion	The subject doesn’t want to feel the humiliation and feels ashamed of it; she wants the humiliation to go away and this leads to thoughts that she will never be able to achieve her goal - using absolute language digs a deeper hole
Established practical dispositions	The subject is used to adhering to family norms to relieve the tension and ‘lighten up’. The action produces the expected result and positive reinforcement: the family is relieved but the subject feels disappointed internally and didn’t achieve the goal of independence and confidence
Values	A sense of belonging is more important to the subject and adheres to family norms sacrificing a personal goal of independence and developing confidence within the family of origin so she has a voice

same principles should allow unjust and prejudicial concerns within a society to be challenged). In this paper we introduce the notion ‘emotional strength’ as a contribution to research into principles of this kind in the conduct of practical life.²

Emotional strength is a way of responding to emotion experience that differs from other emotion-related terms in the affect literature. Its primary difference is that it refers to feeling one’s way deeper into the emotion during an emotion episode that is imbued with an experience of emotional vulnerability rather than being grounded in attention or cognitions about emotions. Emotional strength can also be used in a dispositional sense, as a stable tendency to this type of response to emotion experience. Finally, as well as naming a type of actual response and response disposition, emotional strength can also assume the role of an organizing principle for practical conduct. This is well illustrated by Schore:

Instead of rationalising the pain or avoiding the risk ... I became aware that I just needed to allow myself to deflate and sink deeper into the momentary defeat. That became helpful to me. In other words, I allowed myself to experience not only the accelerating high arousal play states, but also the decelerating low arousal painful deflations. And I found that implicit processes, other than my conscious mind would operate down there, and when they had run their course I’d come back up and continue forward. These experiences highlighted the fact that the ability to tolerate both positive and negative emotions was a fundamental aspect of emotional growth and development (2014, p.14).

But before we begin our discussion of emotional strength, we briefly signpost a few fixed points in emotion theory that contemporary researchers have found compelling. This we hope will clear the conceptual space for seeing the importance of a research focus on *active response* to emotion experience, and for the discussion of emotional strength that follows.

2. Clearing the conceptual space for emotional strength

In this work we will refer predominantly to emotion episodes, among the numerous other types of affect, for a number of reasons.³ Emotion episodes are, to many, the paradigm cases of emotion experience. Emotion episodes are the most phenomenally salient of

emotion-related phenomena, and thus have the greatest potential for influence on action. Emotion episodes provide a workable unit (however variable and at times difficult to delimit) of emotion experience, which is important for theoretical and empirical research, as well as ordinary understanding of emotions. Furthermore, emotion dispositions are manifest, and thus known, by the actual emotion episodes from which dispositions are inferred.

The term ‘emotion episodes’ can be somewhat misleading because it carries with it suggestion of the classical view of emotion that we are hard-wired to react in certain ways (a defining ‘fingerprint’ of emotion) to specific kinds of situations through particular circuits in the brain that correspond with our everyday emotion words (Feldman Barrett, 2017). There is considerable evidence that emotions are much more complex than this and are made up of a mix of basic feelings or sensations together with cultural and personal meaning patterns in situational context that have been learned since birth and that commonly differ between cultures (Feldman Barrett, 2017). Emotion episodes represent our learned, split-second and usually non-reflexive associations of meaning to complex constellations of feelings with situational context, social patterns and our personal histories. Sometimes we have everyday words for these constellations, sometimes we don’t and in those moments we struggle to put our feelings into words. Accordingly, we apply a model of emotion episodes as dynamic ‘emotion constellations’ that arise in specific interactions of people and situations as they move through their environment. Emotion dispositions are tendencies of a person to enter into a specific constellation in a specific kind of situation.

These factors that make up the constellation in an emotion episode include (a) the social and other features of the situational context (e.g. learnt meaning associations to situation archetypes, affordances for action) in which the emotion arises, (b) the tolerance of the subject of the emotion to feelings and sensations, (c) the presence of other co-existing psychological stressors such as momentary cognitive load, (d) the secondary attitudes and emotions of the subject *about* the primary emotion, (e) the practical dispositions such as learned habitual behaviors, abilities and action patterns, and (f) concerns, commitments, and values of the subject of the emotion (see Table 1; cf. Frijda, 2009, Scherer, 2009). This account of emotion shares many features of the model described by Feldman Barrett (2017), however the practical consequences drawn from it in the concept of emotional strength are quite different.

While this account of emotion differs from the classical view of emotion in its explanation of what emotions are, it nevertheless respects the three key experiential features of emotion episodes that contemporary researchers have found compelling. We will briefly outline (a) their involuntariness in the moment; (b) their intentionality (meaning, ‘object-directedness’) and, related, their functionality; and

² This description of ‘organizing principles’ will sound to some readers like ‘a virtue’ (for a contemporary account, see Peterson & Seligman, 2004). But there are some differences between organizing principles as we used them and virtues, so we will stick with the terms ‘organizing principle’ and ‘organizing heuristic’ here.

³ For a summary of emotion terms, we refer the reader to an appendix to this paper available for download at www.sharonfayefoundation.com.au; see also Hooper and Faye (2009).

(c) their motivational force (or relation to action).

2.1. Involuntariness

The classical view and everyday experience is that we don't choose an emotion episode; it comes upon us. We perceive a situation, have a thought or an imagination and then we find ourselves in the grip of an emotion (Peters, 1961). Our voluntary actions *can* have effects on our emotions: we can deliberately choose to think about a particular image which we predict will trigger a certain emotion, but the link between the image and the emotion is involuntary. We *may* experience a sense of agency with respect to calling up the image, but we don't with respect to the triggering of the emotion.

This common character of affective experience finds expression in the traditional distinction between passion and action; an emotion is something that happens to us, something we have; an action is something we do. Ways of expressing this include, 'emotions are involuntary' and, 'we are passive in the onset of emotion'. It also finds expression in the widespread idea that intense emotion episodes are disruptive to thought and action, as impediments to deliberation and reasoning, and prone to cause destructive actions. Although the classical explanation of what is taking place during this experience is being challenged (Feldman Barrett, 2017), and evidence now supports a more complex explanation in which emotions are heavily shaped by personal and cultural factors, the experience of emotions as involuntary remains valid. This is because in the moment of a person encountering their inner world and external environment, the constellation of factors constituting the emotion is, in practical terms, set and is therefore experienced as involuntary.

Speaking of passivity or involuntariness with emotion does not mean that people cannot actively shape their emotions at all, nor that they have no contribution to their emergence. Emotions are clearly dependent on the mental states and dispositions of persons, mental states and dispositions such as desires, beliefs, hopes (and other emotions), expectations, commitments, values, interpretations, patterns of categorization, associations, memories, and imaginations. All of these influence the appraisal that is prior to and issues in an emotion (Arnold, 1960; Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1966, 1991; Scherer, Schorr & Johnstone, 2001). Perceptions of emotion eliciting events are conditioned by instantaneous and non-reflexive appraisals, which produce the personal meanings that result in interpersonal and intrapersonal diversity in emotions. But in the moment of appraisal and the triggering of emotion, people cannot control their psychological histories; this network of psychological dispositions is set and not open to deliberate control (within the time-frame of the appraisal).

Over longer time periods people may change their commitments, attitudes towards emotions, beliefs and so on, and this may affect their future emotions. But in the moment of the appraisal a person's network of mental states provides the unchosen background to an appraisal, and thus the emotion that arises is unchosen. Out of the interaction between a person's perceptions and the processing of them through his network of psychological dispositions emerges the emotion.

2.2. Intentionality and functionality

There is good reason for the experience of emotions as involuntary. On the one hand emotions are directed towards features of our environments (external or internal); they have objects. This object-directedness is what is meant by the 'intentionality' of emotions (it should not be confused with the other sense of the word 'intentional' meaning deliberate or voluntary). Being afraid is being afraid of something, even if the object of the emotion is not always easy to identify or name.

The intentionality of emotions is closely related to their functionality. Emotions (and other kinds of affective states) imbue experience with important patterns of value, significance, or salience that, although easily overlooked because so pervasive, are essential to our

daily lives. (It is often remarked that without affect our perceptual landscape would be utterly flat and colourless, lacking vital patterns of significance.) Frijda (1986, Ch. 4) described this after Sartre as a mode of appearance of a particular situation, which he then developed into the notion 'situational meaning structure'. R. J. Dolan (2002) writes that emotions "index occurrences of value" (p. 1191). Ronald de Sousa (1987, Ch. 7) writes in a similar vein that emotion "deals with the insufficiencies of reason by controlling salience" (p. 201) and thus sets the agenda for other psychological activities. Many authors who write on emotion comment on the pervasive, subtle role of affect in structuring experience and regulating attention by determining patterns of salience (see also, Damasio, 1994; Lambie & Marcel, 2002; Lazarus, 1991; Nussbaum, 2001; Simon, 1967), in addition to their more noticeable and well-publicized role in disturbing our lives and promoting destructive action. Affective states and dispositions also have fundamental roles in memory, and somewhat under-emphasized roles in learning (Dolan, 2002; LaBar & Cabeza, 2006; McGaugh, 2000). All these functions of affect could not be performed by voluntary or deliberate activity – that would very quickly result in cognitive overload.

The functionality of emotions also extends to those more noticeable and disturbing emotion episodes that are often associated with disruption of functioning. Emotions that are intensely unsettling and unpleasant, or painful, or those that motivate destructive actions that we may wish we did not have to face, retain their own functionality.

A real-life example is of a girl cowering in a corner, wailing as she is beaten by her mother, and begging her mother to stop. The girl is successful, the mother stops the beating on that occasion and the girl escapes with less injury. The emotional reaction was functional. Over time the girl is conditioned to enter a state of high alertness and vigilance, with a release of adrenaline causing the heart to pump at the sound of her mother returning home that, with an understanding of the girl's personal history, we label as fear. The emotion serves to produce an action tendency either to be invisible, to act sweetly or care for her mother or to motivate her to hide her sister to protect her from violence, depending on the other parts of her personal state or surrounding context in any given moment. The girl also develops an association between certain salient elements of this experience, such as a door closing as someone walks in, or the smell of alcohol on another person's breath, or the sound of footsteps outside her room, that lead to her experiencing this familiar emotion (combination of feelings, associations and meaning) in later life, sometimes in situations in which it is not clear to an observer who is not privy to this girl's personal history, how or why the emotion arose. We return to this point later when we come to implicit functional process and meanings in emotional strength.

In this way, emotions depend upon the personal history and therefore the psychology of the person who has them. A single event can elicit a great variety of different emotions between people and great variety over time for a single person. This variability has to do with the person's life history and the network of mental states that have developed out of this history (Feldman Barrett, 2017). A person's network of mental states is complex, which means emotions can also be very complex and highly personal or idiosyncratic. This can be a source of confusion about the functionality of emotions. While the functionality of non-human animal emotions is hardly questioned, the greater complexity of human psychological states, processes, dispositions and abilities (including abstract thought, symbolic cognition, complex associations, sensitivity to norms) means that there is much greater processing (albeit extremely fast and mostly non-reflexive) between perceptions and emotions, in which individual processes intervene.

The significance of this greater processing is that the functionality or personal meaning of human emotions is often difficult to work out and is questioned much more than in the emotions of non-human animals. Nevertheless, we assume that each emotion has an important psychological meaning for its subject, which can be learnt with sufficient knowledge about the subject's personal history and network of

psychological states (e.g. the subject might be accused of over-reacting to a perceived slight until one understands the personal meaning of the reaction, then it is not regarded as an over-reaction).

2.3. Emotion and action

Several influential accounts of emotion have come to define emotion in terms of changes in action readiness or action tendencies (Arnold, 1960; Frijda & Sundararajan, 2007; Frijda, 1986). We believe that the weight of evidence supports the view that action tendencies, the motivational force of emotion, are an important *part* of emotions, but by themselves do not constitute a complete account of emotion. Action readiness refers to “a state of being set to entertain, modify, or abandon a particular relationship to some object of perception or thought, including oneself” (Frijda & Sundararajan, 2007, p. 233). According to Frijda, an action tendency is a specific kind of action readiness state, but its definition appears to have shifted over time with respect to its degree of specificity-generality and whether or not it involves an aim.

In Frijda's earlier work, action tendencies are described as operating at a different psychological level to intentions: “action tendency does not aim at a future state [as intentions do], but achieving change (or at maintaining the status quo) with respect to the actual situation” (Frijda, 1986, pp. 80–81). Frijda writes, “action tendencies have the character of urges or impulses” (1986, p. 78). On this understanding of action tendencies within emotion episodes, action tendencies would be constituted by increases in tension including muscular tension, autonomic arousal, and respiration. These increases in tension would correspond to particular phenomenologies, typically in the unpleasant phenomenologies of negative emotions. In later work, action tendencies are described as “defined in terms of their aims”, with these aims varying on a spectrum of specificity-generality (Frijda & Sundararajan, 2007, p. 233). In this later formulation, undirected states of action readiness are excluded from the category of action tendencies.

The variability in Frijda's definitions of action tendencies belies a key feature of them: they vary along a spectrum of specificity to generality of aims in the actions that they motivate, or as we put it, on a scale of well-defined to indeterminate. We argue that they also vary on a second scale of self-reflexive to non-reflexive in the moment of experiencing the action readiness and a third scale of high energy to low energy (or high arousal to low arousal; cf. Russell's affective circumplex in Russell, 1980; Feldman Barrett & Russell, 1999; Kuppens, Tuerlinckx, Russell, & Barrett, 2013). As we will see later and as is well known in psychology practice, a rich emotional life produces experiences of action readiness that vary across each of these dimensions, which is key to emotion-centred therapies like Emotional Strength Therapy (EST) as well as others like Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). However, understandably there has been significant focus on high-energy low-reflexivity action tendencies at varying levels of definition, that tend to be associated with counter-productive or destructive actions that are sometimes referred to as ‘acting out’.

One possible solution to the dilemma of ‘acting out’ is engaged detachment where one enters into emotional engagement with the event but behaviour is restrained (Frijda & Sundararajan, 2007). Engaged detachment takes the goal of reducing autonomic arousal which enables prolonged and enhanced feelings which provides a delay that prepares for better action. The person may be in a state of action readiness but the action is restrained and therefore not manifest overtly.

Another approach to the dilemma is self-distancing (Ayduk & Kross, 2010; Kross & Ayduk, 2017). This involves distancing oneself from urges or impulses, especially when self-reflection is deemed maladaptive. Psychological distance is thought to reduce a person's negative experience in the here-and-now to provide space to facilitate adaptive self-reflection, therefore avoiding negative actions such as rumination (Ayduk & Kross, 2010).

In section 3 we will see the distinction between these solutions for acting out and the approach in emotional strength. But for now, we should be clear that there is no specific expressive behaviour (including acting out, rumination, or any other so-called emotional behaviour) that is necessary or definitive of any given emotion (Feldman Barrett, 2017). This idea is a consequence of failing to distinguish between emotion and action; the failure to uphold this distinction makes it seem that the only two alternatives in emotional life are either to avoid or suppress emotion or to ‘let it out’. But as we will see there are other options.

The widely-held idea of emotional behaviour can be explained in part by the different degrees of self-reflexivity to non-reflexivity, well-defined to indeterminate character and high-energy to low-energy of action tendencies, in combination with restrictions to cognitive access widely recognized during intense emotions. There are also other reasons why emotions can motivate actions that can be perceived as performed without regard for an individual's broader network of concerns, such as goals and values, and therefore may often be destructive from the individual's own point of view:

1. the emotion episode may arise in a moment where direct action is impossible or inappropriate. For example, the emotion may arise from a thought about the object when the object is itself not there, any action would have to take a surrogate object.
2. the action promoted by the action tendency will be shaped by the individual's set of associations and practical dispositions at the time of the emotion. Most of these action tendencies will have been established early in life, contingent to the prejudices of the early social environment. These may come to be disavowed by a person although they continue to shape her action tendencies, especially under stress.
3. Thoughts, attitudes and feelings *about* feelings can quickly overtake and drown out the initial feeling itself and become the more powerful action motivator in any given moment. From early childhood, we have learned that negative emotions are dangerous or destructive or maladaptive and should be avoided, ignored or hidden away which has resulted in strong learned tendencies to fear, be ashamed of and suppress negative experiences in order to be ‘happy’. This type of conditioning and subsequent instruction has led to an attitude of ‘just move on’ but misses that insight that actions are determined by responses to feelings about feelings. In this case, the resulting action might appear inappropriate in the situation in which it takes place.

These features of action tendencies cause further confusion about the functionality of human emotions. How can emotions be functional when the actions they motivate so often seem to be confusing or defective? But it is perfectly compatible with recognizing the functionality of emotions to recognize that the actions motivated by them may contradict a person's own commitments or be in other ways destructive. It needs to be recognized that although emotions motivate actions, this motivational force of the emotion itself is often very indeterminate (Frijda, 1986). The concrete actions in which the indeterminate motivational force of emotion is ultimately manifest are made determinate by factors outside the emotion itself (Feldman Barrett, 2017). These are the same factors that make up the constellation in an emotion episode described in section 2.

Consider these elements in the example of a subject who is attempting to respond differently to a family situation by stepping outside of expected family norms (see Table 1). The example illustrates the subject taking familiar action, which provides temporary relief. The person finds it difficult to feel the intense emotion by sinking deeper into humiliation to access the implicit processes which could lead to the subject feeling independent and a strong sense of belonging with her family of origin. This is not a dichotomous either/or scenario, it is feeling of independence while building a stronger sense of belonging.

Table 2
Forms of emotional strength.

Emotional strength form	Description
Response type	An open and vulnerable response to an intense emotion episode, feeling one's way deeper into the emotion which allows access to implicit functional processes driving action
Response disposition	A recurring ability to respond in an open and vulnerable way to a variety of intense emotion episodes, feeling one's way deeper into the emotion which allows access to implicit functional processes driving action
Organizing principle	Adoption of emotional strength responding as the fundamental principle in a person's approach to emotional life and accordingly investing substantial time and effort in building emotional strength

The importance of this distinction for action tendencies is that although they are statistically associated with actions, they are logically independent of them.⁴ Action tendencies promote but cannot fully determine action. As Gross puts it: “emotions do not force us to respond in certain ways, they only make it more likely that we will do so” (Gross, 2002, p. 281).

3. Emotional strength

Having sketched the conceptual space that we take to be a compelling framework for person-level emotion research, we turn now to the main task of the paper, to present ‘emotional strength’.

The term emotional strength (ES) refers primarily to a way of responding to occurrent emotion. Emotional strength is the ability to respond in an open and vulnerable way in the face of intense emotional experience, feeling one's way deeper into the emotion which allows access to implicit functional processes driving action. In Table 2, we outline the three forms of emotional strength: as a response type to occurrent emotion, as a response disposition, and as a guiding principle for emotional life. Emotional strength as a response disposition is simply the recurring tendency to demonstrate emotional strength responses to a variety of occurrent emotions over time in safe as well as triggering situations, so can be understood by the detailed treatment of emotional strength responses that follows. Emotional strength as a guiding principle for emotional life is, we hypothesise, a key factor in developing dispositional emotional strength. It is defined as the adoption of emotional strength responding as the fundamental principle in a person's approach to everyday emotional life and accordingly investing substantial time and effort in building emotional strength. We return to this form of emotional strength in the conclusion of the paper.

Fig. 1 is a schematic representation of the process of building emotional strength. The outer layer illustrates the process of people gaining an understanding and developing a degree of psychological mindedness about human feeling, information processing and behaviour. This education process is like many other types of therapy, except that the content is specifically a simplified version of the principles outlined in section 2, which are vital to establishing action tendencies to feel one's way deeper into emotions as we will see later. The inner layer is building a capacity to feel as clients typically come into therapy in various degrees of dissociation. As we move from left to right around the inner layer, clients learn how to be open and vulnerable first in safe spaces and then in ‘unsafe’ spaces and experience the depth of difficult feelings, learning to go deeper into emotions while continuing to attend to work and other commitments in life.

Fig. 1 also represents the process undertaken with clients during a therapeutic approach based on building emotional strength, that we call EST. While it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss types of

⁴ Although note that the logical relationship between emotional action and emotion itself is complex (see, Bennett & Hacker, 2003). We discuss this issue more fully in Hooper and Faye (2009). Here it is enough to emphasize that *involuntary* behavioural manifestations of emotions are best thought of as belonging to the emotion proper and can play the logical role emphasized by Bennett and Hacker, while voluntary actions in response to the emotion proper, are under most circumstances best distinguished from the emotion proper, having only a statistical relation to it.

therapy, EST is mentioned here because of the need to explain the similarities and differences between emotional strength and the goals of other emotion-centred therapeutic approaches such as EFT and ACT (see section 4.5 in this paper).

3.1. Open and vulnerable

‘Open’ refers to the conjunction of (a) allowing one's spontaneous emotion episodes to unfold, with (b) fully feeling and experiencing those emotion episodes, and (c) a continued moving toward and engagement with one's internal and external environments.

‘Vulnerable’ refers to the *capacity to experience hurt*, as distinct from the state of actually being harmed (McCoy, 2013). Since vulnerability is the capacity to experience hurt (in the future), full appreciation of the experience of vulnerability requires broadening of feeling beyond awareness of present moment experience and engaging with the past and future, and how the past and the future collide in the present. While all raw feelings in the present moment can heighten a person's sense of vulnerability, in emotional strength, the components of experiencing vulnerability and feeling oneself deeper into the emotion (see 3.2) mutually reinforce one another and yield a powerful experience of personal vulnerability, which is fundamental to it. The outcome of these mutually reinforcing components of emotional strength is emotional responsiveness, a key hallmark discussed in section 3.4.

Living a vulnerable life involves taking a risk in each moment. Expressing one's hurt to a loved one involves speaking up about uncomfortable things. Speaking up in the moment is risky business. The risk is that one may experience ‘push back’ including being dismissed, laughed at, criticised or otherwise invalidated, encounter a lack of sensitivity or emotional responsiveness or even retaliation when one's loved one expresses anger or some other negative emotion. Choosing to develop the capacity to experience and share the vulnerability is challenging.

As discussed by McCoy (2013), we take vulnerability to be central to human experience. Consistent with the central place of the experience of vulnerability in emotional strength, McCoy argues convincingly that:

Not only individuals, but also political communities, must come to terms with and respond appropriately to the vulnerability that exists within. Indeed, vulnerability strengthens interpersonal bonds within a community, and is closely intertwined with a number of different facets of ethical life. I thus suggest that rather than treating vulnerability as something to be avoided, vulnerability is a necessary component of living a rich and authentic human life in community (p. ix).

This account of vulnerability shared by McCoy (2013) and our paper differs starkly from conceptualizations of emotional vulnerability in the psychological literature, in which it is defined as ‘intense, easily triggered affective reactions’ (Limberg, Barnow, Freyberger, & Hamma, 2011), anxiety sensitivity or trait negative affectivity (McKee, Zvolensky, Solomon, Bernstein, & Leen-Feldner, 2007) or emotional over-reactivity and an inability to regulate emotional responses (Linehan, 1987) and is considered a core behavioural symptom of borderline personality disorder (Linehan, 1987). We think emotional vulnerability is an unfortunate and misleading label for the constructs

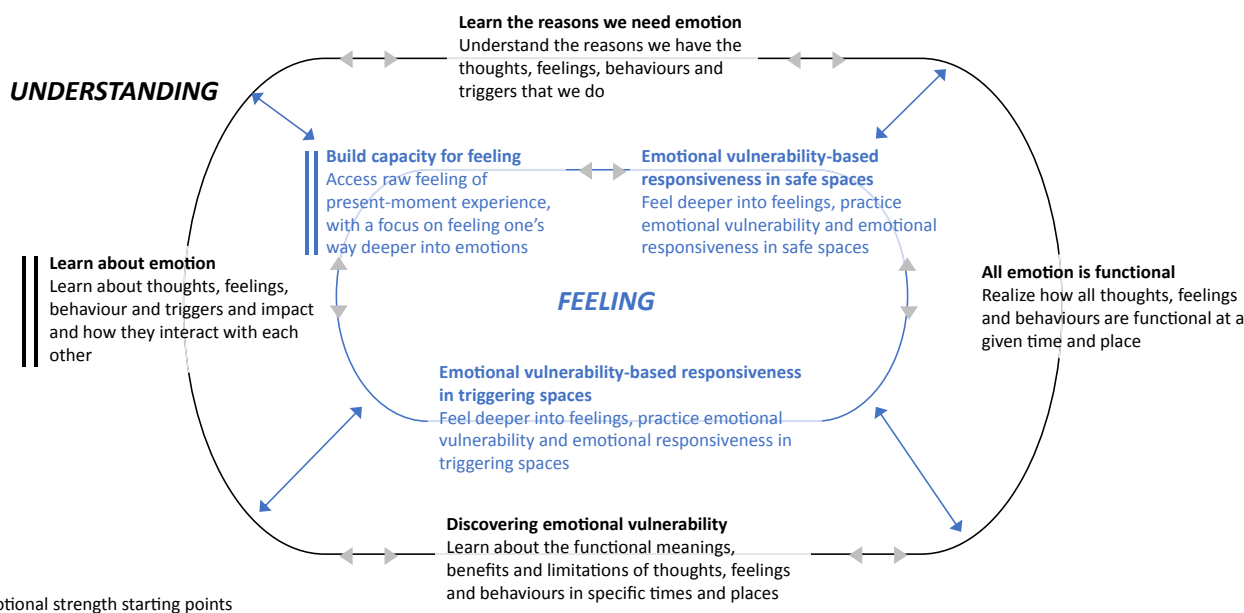


Fig. 1. A schema of emotional strength.

being described in these studies, but for the purposes of this article, it is sufficient to acknowledge this fundamental difference in uses of the term vulnerability.

Vulnerability involves creating a space of ‘dynamic uncertainty’ (Chinnery, 2013, p. 63), which sets the scene for the risk-taking behaviour that is necessary to allow oneself to be vulnerable with other people. A space of learning from each other where someone is willing to tell ‘the truth’ and to risk self. This stance requires humility and a sense of exposure (Chinnery, 2013). Consider a client’s description of the experience of vulnerability, which powerfully expresses the key elements of the experience:

This is how vulnerability feels for me.

It feels like I have been cracked open and the most private, hidden parts of me are on show for all the world to see. Not only the bits I want to hide and feel ashamed about, but the most treasured bits too – the bits I don’t want to offer the world for fear they will be spoiled in the rush and tug of everyday life.

For me, the key sense of vulnerability is one of exposure. I can’t pretend to be something stronger, better or different. There is a sense of raw realness. Usually this feels too much – too raw, too real – and it can be terrifying. When vulnerable I feel more at risk of injury, and as if that injury would hurt more than it does when my protective cloak is on. When vulnerable, I often have the feeling of being young and green, like I don’t know what I’m doing. It’s hard to separate the feeling of vulnerability from the crowd of emotions which accompany it, especially fear (of being rejected or ridiculed) and anxiety. Physically, there is usually a wrenching feeling in my chest, my heart pounds, I feel hot, and I often feel on the verge of tears. At the same time, my head is going crazy issuing instructions to do things differently and telling me how wrong I am. When my persecutor is not hammering so much, it can feel like a quiet warmth in my chest, like hot lemon-honey.

Learning how to experience unmediated vulnerability in this way is absolutely essential to emotional strength and is fundamental to human experience, behaviour and, as McCoy argues, the ethics of how we live together in communities. It is also unique to emotional strength compared to other ways of responding to emotion. As we see in the next section, vulnerability is also essential to the next component of emotional strength, feeling one’s way deeper into emotions.

3.2. Feeling oneself deeper into the emotion

A subject practicing emotional strength feels further and deeper into the emotion. At the time, the experience at depth can look like the person is struggling with the intensity. As the subject struggles at depth, allowing the emotion to run its course, the subject may shift attention from the internal experience to the experience of the outer world in a rhythm that gains momentum. Also along the way, physical and psychological tension may build until it reaches its peak and then dissipates. There is no goal along the way to achieve anything or get anywhere.

Feeling oneself deeper into the emotion of sadness is a paradoxical experience when one compares it to childhood rhetoric like: “don’t come out of your room until you’re happy”, “it can’t be that bad, smile”. When one gives self-permission to deeply engage in the human experience, it is a raw feeling, it is a raw mix of doubt, vulnerability and unmediated freedom to be able to deal with any life experience. One’s momentary resolve is staying alive to the feeling and feeling one’s way deeper into it. Thoughts and feelings come and go and as one drops deeper into the experience, one arrives (by accident) at a feeling that is uncontaminated by memories of the past or anticipation of the future.

The capacity to feel oneself deeper into the emotion does not require a quiet space, being alone or ceasing action. Once committed, building emotional strength becomes a dispositional posture and one appreciates the ability to build emotional tension (including unexpected triggered experiences) and the subsequent physical sensations that follow.

An example of the loss of a loved one is a young woman grieving the tragic loss of her younger sister. Shortly after her sister died, her friend said, “I wish I could take your pain away” to which the young woman replied – “you leave my pain alone, that is all I have left of my sister”.

There are many ways the young woman could respond to this tragic event in her life. First, if this young woman became self-immersed (Ayduk & Kross, 2010; Kross & Ayduk, 2017) or ‘stuck’ in her grief indefinitely, she might avoid the painful feelings of loss by getting busy and preserve her sister’s bedroom the way it was when her sister was alive as a shrine in her memory. She might create a special garden in the backyard in memory of her sister. She might get busy and help others grieving the loss of loved ones. All this activity and busyness is not engaging in the pain of the loss. Another avoidance strategy is for the young woman to react in a fight or flight automation and leave her country of origin and become estranged from her biological family and

‘start again’ elsewhere in the world. Or she might become depressed and stuck in ruminating on all the things that she should have said or done so her younger sister would have known that her elder sister loved her before she died.

Second, if the young woman responded to the death of her sister by self-distancing and attaining some psychological space from herself (Ayduk & Kross, 2010), she may reflect upon her relationship with her sister to make sense of her untimely death. With her analytical mindset, her experience of the grief in the here-and-now decreases so she can contemplate her sister's death and move on. She might see the big picture of her sister's life and what a wonderful person her sister was, instead of the pain of losing her sister in a tragic car accident. Using this strategy, the young woman would avoid reliving her experience of the phone call she received shortly after the accident. Rather, she is more likely to take a ‘fly on the wall’ perspective that promotes insight and closure.

Third, if the young woman responded with engaged detachment (Frijda & Sundararajan, 2007), she might experience a strong sense of loss and grief and wonder about the meaning of her life since her sister's passing. She may experience second-order awareness and become aware of the experience of her grieving. The young woman can talk about her experiences with a friend. She may become self-reflexive and tell herself “I feel empty”. If she is savoring her grief, she may prolong and enhance her feeling of emptiness. At this point, she is not taking action and her autonomic arousal has decreased. From this low energy point, she may engage in the memory of her sister, experience the pleasurable imagery of how her sister loved birthday's and hear her sister's laughter and excitement on her birthday. If she is in a state of action readiness, she may want to join the rest of her family to share her memories of her sister or stay alone and remember in her own mind. The young woman may feel excited that she was able to face her grief and move through it in a competent way.

Fourth, if the young woman responded with emotional strength, she might experience a strong sense of loss and grief and experience the impulse to run away. By engaging fully with her impulse to run away in the moment, she may realise that it is part of the grieving process. She may experience the emptiness of the loss of her only sister, and in the next moment experience regret in her sister dying with things left unsaid between them. By going further and deeper into the sense of loss, she may feel a sense of nausea, gripping tension in her stomach, tightness in her jaw and tension in her cranial system which gives access to unconscious implicit processes that guide her to take the next action. The young woman may not know what the next action will be, but finds herself connecting to a deep vulnerability in her that feels raw and fragile (refer to vulnerable example on p.19). At this point she may judge her experience to be ‘messy’ while at the same time receiving feedback to the contrary (that she looks great considering what she has experienced). The feedback is surprising to her as it does not match her internal experience (See Table 3 for the contrast between emotion refinement and emotional strength).

From an emotional strength perspective, the young woman is taking action, the action of effortfully feeling her way deeper into the emotion, so it differs from emotional refinement and she is not watching herself in her experience from a distance. Neither is she building awareness of this present moment experience non-judgementally and letting it pass, so it differs fundamentally from mindfulness (see section 4.1). She is starting with a raw feeling and an action impulse, and, having previously adopted the implicit attitude of assuming the functional importance of the emotion, acts to feel her way deeper into the experience. After going deeper and deeper into the experience, feeling many variations and levels of emotion and action tendencies and continuing to choose the next action of going still deeper into the feeling, at some point she will take a different action and the new action will produce the next emotion constellation to which she then responds and the process starts again.

Building emotional strength involves experiencing the whole

spectrum of action tendencies along the dimensions of self-reflexive to non-reflexive, well-defined to indeterminate and high energy to low energy. We agree that felt action readiness reflects neural readiness (Frijda & Sundararajan, 2007; Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2008), and similar to emotion refinement, “... transcend the dichotomy of positive and negative emotions” (p. 236). However, emotional strength involves feeling one's way deeper into the experience of all these forms of action tendencies, which requires continuing action and feeling rather than distancing. The key to this is the work in safe spaces on adopting the assumption that all emotion is functional which lead to simultaneous action tendencies to feel one's way into the emotion, and the work in safe spaces to practice feeling vulnerable and discovering emotional responsiveness.

Feeling one's way deeper into intense emotion builds confidence without being conscious of the process of confidence building. One may be aware of an internal struggle or of being on an emotional roller coaster. When a person connects to this internal ‘mess’, other people may comment on how well that person looks, say that the person has a glow or ask if the person has a new love. Typically, people are asked “what have you done? You look so well.” The person experiencing the internal mess is always surprised that they get feedback opposite to how they feel. They experience confusion and then they connect to that and so the process continues.

3.3. Access to implicit functional processes driving action

As we discussed in section 2.3, emotions and actions are logically distinct. In emotional strength, the person often does not remember or know what to do in the moment of ‘mess’ so instinctively drops deeper into the feelings which gives access to implicit resources that are always functional in the current space that drive the next action. This action may not be judged as ‘good’ or the ‘best possible action’, but it will always be functional. With any given action, the person might judge it as having made a mistake or fallen back into old patterns or messed up and move into a cognitive process of rationalising, judging, criticising, distracting, self-reflection or attempting to understand what happened. The person building emotional strength will become aware of being cognitive, drop down into the feelings and allow going deeper into the emotions while continuing to take the next action.

In the real-life example of the young woman grieving the tragic loss of her younger sister, we saw that she felt at least two distinct action tendencies: one to run away and go somewhere else and the other to feel her way deeper into the emotion. She acted on the second action tendency and in doing so discovered new layers of feeling. She discovered and felt grief, emptiness, bitterness and continued to act to go deeper into the emotion. At the end she discovered and felt her own raw vulnerability her capacity to be hurt, her fear of being hurt and her fear of loss and losing again in the future. Here she gets to implicit functional processes that she never would have reached had she not acted to go deeper into the feeling: a fundamental need to protect herself from being hurt, to protect herself from further loss. Moving away would give her control and would weaken the other relationships she has in that place without completely losing them, thereby protecting her from the painful severing of sudden loss. The initial emotion and action tendency were functional, but on this occasion by moving away to reduce the discomfort and restlessness, she would have missed the access to her vulnerability and the cycle might end up repeating itself.

We have this clarity now, a long time after the event, but in the moment she didn't have this clarity, she just assumed the functionality of her emotion and kept on feeling her way further into it. She felt her way into her vulnerability and this led to the next action which was her sitting there and sobbing her tears of loss, which then became a feeling of love for her sister and a feeling of love for herself. In this case she decided to stay put and reach out to a close friend for support.

Here she is not waiting for an emotion to pass and then acting on her values so it differs from the process in ACT. Also she is not feeling her

Table 3
Comparison of emotional strength with emotional refinement and engaged detachment.

In emotion refinement a person,	In emotional strength a person,	Similarity
Harmony Experiences paradoxical combinations of disquiets and balance, including contradiction and its resolution Engenders a peaceful mind and behavioural relaxation	Feels his way deeper into the emotion experiencing intensity that is beyond what he knows is possible. Feels the internal 'mess' while receiving external feedback to the contrary.	Low
Savoring Holds an attitude of searching for harmony with prolonged attention-absorbing in order to produce insights about life. Mental distance-second-order awareness	Has a fundamental belief that all emotions are functional despite the judgement of the content of life. Has awareness of a momentary attachment to: 'insights', 'in order to', aims, or achieving goals.	Low
Self-Reflexivity Self-directed attention; experience and experience of the experience	Engages with awareness across the full spectrum of self-reflexive and non-reflexive action tendencies that is both well-defined and indeterminate	Low
Engaged Detachment Experiences emotional but not behavioural engagement, decreased autonomic arousal, not defensive, prolonging and enhancing feelings	Enters into emotional and behavioural engagement with the event; has no specific goal to decrease or increase autonomic arousal or reduce emotional tension; is likely to demonstrate moments of defensiveness; has no aim to prolong or enhance feelings	Low
Restraint Restrain action which allows sensations, feelings, desires; allows one to become aware of one's pleasure; delay prepares for better action; deepens rather than blunts emotional feeling	Feels his way deeper into the emotion (sensations, feelings, desires) while responding covertly or overtly. Experiences both positive and negative emotion and does not intentionally delay action or deepen emotional feelings	Medium

way through the initial emotion of restlessness and discomfort in order to get to the other side to achieve lasting change, so it differs from EFT, even if ACT and EFT both start from emotion as emotional strength does (see section 4.6).

Let's also return to our earlier example of the girl who was repeatedly beaten by her mother, which led to her experiencing emotions in later life that stemmed from those situations, like when a door closes as someone walks in, or the smell of alcohol on another person's breath, or with the sound of footsteps outside her room. As an adult, she might be mocked or misunderstood or judged by people who do not understand her personal history. How does she respond to the feelings of hurt, confusion and shame that arise in these moments? She has even forgotten where these feelings come from, through her trauma response when she was still a child. So her experience is of having feelings she can control or explain and that others whom she cares about do not judge or mock.

In the example, the girl is forever monitoring and scanning her environment for an explanation for her experience. Stumbling onto emotional strength, she learns that even though no one including herself understands them or thinks they have any use, they are functional. Gradually, she learns to feel her way deeper into the hurt and shame, and she feels fear, she feels that her fear is actually of fear itself and of the fear hurting her, and this takes her to her experience of vulnerability, which is like being a child, and she feels what it felt like to be a vulnerable child who could be hurt and she discovers that she had good reason to feel afraid. Despite the many other feelings of embarrassment, repeated fear and the action tendencies that come with them, she learns to keep choosing the action to feel deeper into her feeling and discovers the implicit functional processes that are keeping her safe although she feels unsafe. She feels her way into the unsafety and feels what it felt like the last time she felt safe and thereby accesses the implicit functional processes underneath her initial feelings of shame, confusion and hurt. At some point having accessed these implicit processes, the woman takes another action and this action has a new constellation of factors as its basis including the fundamental experience of vulnerability and the meaning of safety and unsafety for her.

On the way to becoming proficient in emotional strength, the person learns that all feelings are functional and no single feeling forces or fully determines action, nor do they define who one is or who one has become. The person knows that feeling deeper into the emotions will enable access to as-yet undiscovered internal resources. The challenge is that to access unconscious internal resources the person is going to have to go through challenging times by facing uncomfortable experiences that the person has learnt to be afraid of or associate with the sense or judgement that something is wrong. This is why in building

emotional strength, considerable work needs to be done to adopt the implicit assumption that all emotion is functional. This creates the new opportunity to feel one's way deeper into the emotion to experience the implicit functional processes that ultimately generate new action tendencies that can be chosen at whatever moment the person chooses them.

3.4. Observable hallmarks of emotion strength

In addition to the key features of the definition just presented, there are corresponding observable hallmarks of emotional strength. These hallmarks are key for recognizing emotional strength responses. The hallmarks of emotional strength include (i) raw experiences of openness and vulnerability, (ii) emotional responsiveness, (iii) self-description as 'a mess', 'confused', 'struggling' and 'grateful and privileged to be able to be real', (iv) continuing engagement in action. Apart from (iii), these hallmarks are often not self-avowed or self-recognized and, as per the earlier example, feedback from others often comes as a surprise to the subject in the emotional strength response.

The internal experience of feeling open and vulnerable can be described as raw or fragile. When one connects to that fragile experience and moves deeper into the emotion, one might feel moved, a feeling of welling up with tears and privilege to be able to feel so directly. In the debriefing of such an experience, the person reports feeling a sense of relief to be able to stay connected with the depth of one's experience. The person no longer feels the need to 'run away' (avoid, distract, numb, deny) from such intense emotion.

In another moment, the person may judge a similar feeling as being a 'mess' or 'struggling' and avoid feeling all together. The observer may see someone who is quiet, suppressed, broody and withdrawn who avoids eye contact and does not have much to say. In another moment, the person may still feel 'a mess' and 'struggling' with life, but connect to the struggle and appear calm, peaceful and 'together'. When given feedback on how they appear that is contrary to how the person feels, the person is often surprised and perplexed by this phenomenon.

The second hallmark, emotional responsiveness, is defined as being visibly engaged, activated or moved by one's experience. This can include expression of care, concern, undistracted attentive looking, gestural and microbehavioural expressions of engagement, welling up or tearful eyes, smiling, laughter and many others. This can include empathy responses in some cases, but is broader than empathy and includes response to one's own internal experiences and external events, as well as responses to other people.

The literature on emotional responsiveness stems mainly from the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and person-centred therapy (Rogers,

1951) fields. Emotional responsiveness has most often been operationalized as follows:

- ‘emotional responsiveness’ as continuous emotion rating combined with facial muscle and skin conductance measurement in response to affective stimuli (Waugh, Thompson, & Gotlib, 2011)
- ‘empathic concern’ in studies of children and juvenile emotion-related behaviour (Goodvin, Carlo, & Torquati, 2006)
- ‘perceived partner responsiveness’ or ‘perceived emotional responsiveness’ as measured by partner disclosures of emotion in studies of partner behaviour and support in intimate relationships (Fekete, Parris Stephens, Mickelson & Druley, 2007; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004; Laurenceau, Feldman Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998)
- ‘emotional availability’ in studies of parent-child relationships, as an extension to early attachment theory research (Biringen & Easterbrooks, 2012; Saunders, Kraus, Barone, & Biringen, 2015)

The study by Waugh et al. (2011) operationalizes emotional responsiveness in a way that comes closest to our definition. However, people have become masterful at masking and pretending everything is OK when it is not. Some people know they are masking, some don't, but nevertheless it is in their best interest to ‘not be seen’ so they can survive. However, perceptive people can see the contradictions and the incongruences between the words people use and their actions, slight variations in skin colour, changes in facial expressions, the loss of control of saliva in the person's mouth, a slight shift in eye contact or changes in their breathing.

People who are emotionally responsive will look alert or ‘switched on’. Their posture is erect and muscle tone responds to the breath. They can demonstrate flexibility of response and are willing to feel the strong intense feelings even though they are uncertain about what is likely to happen from moment to moment. They tend to be curious and inquisitive about how the world works and are willing to be challenged and change their point of view if required. They become aware of their defensiveness and inability to listen and then they are present again.

The third hallmark of emotional strength is use of vulnerability-related terms such as ‘confused’, ‘struggling’ or ‘a mess’ in self-description or avowal of experience. This is often combined with avowal of an experience of ‘gratitude’ or ‘privilege to be able to be real’. This self-description corresponds to the person's experience of being alive to feelings of vulnerability. Yet, an additional aspect of this hallmark is that external observers tend to describe the person as looking more alive, sharper, more active.

The fourth major hallmark of emotional strength is continuing action. While exhibiting vulnerability and emotional responsiveness, the person living a life with emotional strength continues to engage with internal and external worlds while taking the next action. There is no meditation or rehabilitation required or taking the person out of his environment to focus on feeling. Often the very action is feeling one's way deeper into the emotion as in the examples described above, but at some point (often very quickly) this leads to a next action which is something else, motivated by unknown or unexpected action tendencies that are often non-reflexive and that vary on the scales of well-defined to indeterminate and high-energy to low-energy.

4. Distinguishing emotional strength from other responses to emotion

Having defined emotional strength, we will now outline some key differences between emotional strength and some relevant, existing concepts in the psychological literature. While not intending to be exhaustive, the selection of concepts outlines key similarities and differences between emotional strength and the following relevant concepts: mindfulness, emotion regulation, emotion-approach coping, resilience, emotional intelligence, EFT and ACT.

4.1. Emotional strength and mindfulness

Since a key aspect of emotional strength is the deliberate and attentive feeling of emotions through their episodic course, this naturally brings up the question of the similarities and differences between emotional strength and mindfulness. Since Kabat-Zinn's work in introducing secular mindfulness into pain management practices and mindfulness-based stress reduction, an impressive body of literature has emerged on mindfulness as a way of responding to emotion and the evidence for its health benefits (see Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2003; Creswell, 2017; Karremans & Papias, 2017; Brown, Creswell & Ryan, 2015; and references therein). Therefore, a discussion to compare and contrast emotional strength and mindfulness is warranted here.

Mindfulness is defined as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). Recent reviews have tended to focus on two key features of mindfulness: (1) awareness: attention in and awareness in one's present moment experience in all its forms (bodily sensations, emotional reactions, mental images, mental talk, and perceptual experiences), and (2) acceptance: an open and accepting attitude consisting of attending to experience with a curious, detached, and non-reactive orientation (Creswell, 2017; Kang, Gruber, & Gray, 2013; Teper, Segal, & Inzlicht, 2013). Kabat-Zinn (2003, p. 145) also emphasizes “an affectionate, compassionate quality within the attending, a sense of openhearted, friendly presence and interest”, which is often omitted from definitions in the literature but which is important to understanding mindfulness practice.

Fig. 2 shows that there is one point of partial overlap between mindfulness or mindful acceptance and emotional strength, which is in the use of attention techniques to access and build capacity for feeling emotions. And indeed, mindfulness techniques such as focusing on the breath or visceral sensations are sometimes used to help clients in EST to access and build capacity for feeling (although full mindfulness meditation practises are not typically used in emotional strength training). However, the goals of mindfulness are fundamentally linked to emotional or mental state regulation through attention to and acceptance of emotion (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), which differs from emotional strength, which is feeling oneself deeper into the emotion in an experience imbued with vulnerability, for its own sake, stemming from the fundamental belief that these emotions are functionally important.

A further set of distinctions between emotional strength and mindfulness flow from this difference. In Table 4 we outline the important features of mindfulness and alongside them, the similarities and differences between mindfulness and emotional strength. The distinctions can be analyzed into four groups: (i) the model of emotion assumed in each and the goals which stem from this model, (ii) the core experiences of detached groundedness, calming and clarity of mind in mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) compared to the experience of intense feeling and vulnerability in emotional strength, (iii) the emphasis in mindfulness on nonreactive experience compared to the emphasis in emotional strength on emotional responsiveness and (iv) the importance in emotional strength of continuing action through new forms of access to the functional meaning of emotions and how these play out into action tendencies, which contrasts with the non-responsive forms of attention in mindfulness.

The model of emotion in mindfulness is somewhat difficult to pin down, because it is multifaceted and seems to have several strands of psychological thought influencing it. In Kabat-Zinn's (1990, 2003) influential text *Full Catastrophe Living*, we see passages indicating that emotional patterns can be toxic and cause pain to oneself and others, indications of a view that negative emotional patterns can be rigid and maladaptive, we see emotions as episodes, we see the relational view of stress influenced by Lazarus and Folkman, we see reference to appraisal, and we see the metaphor of emotions as messengers carrying information to be encountered and felt in their full force and we see the

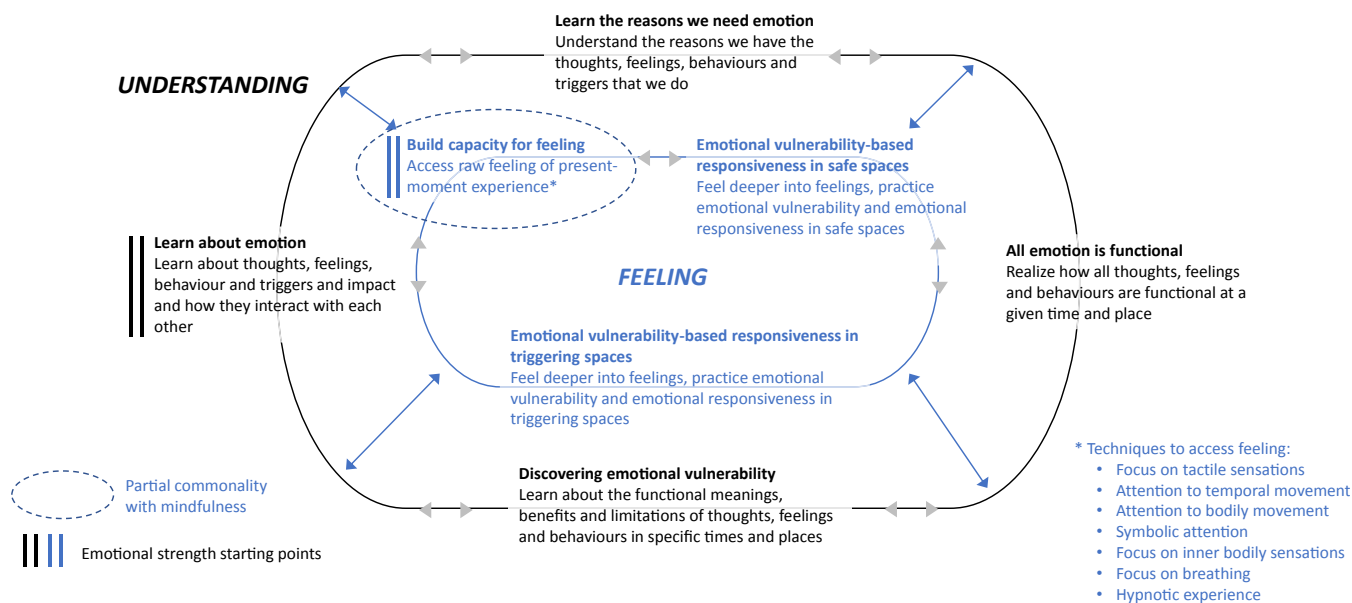


Fig. 2. A schema of emotional strength: Relation to mindfulness.

metaphor of emotional pain as a heavy burden. Below are two contrasting passages to illustrate these facets:

If, on the other hand, our reactions to things are usually clouded by fear, hopelessness, or anger, by underlying greed or distrust, by fear of loss or betrayal—ways of seeing the world and emotional patterns of reactivity that we develop early in life and then all too often carry with us relatively unexamined as fixed schemas, which rule our lives when they are triggered—then our actions will more than likely create additional problems and dig us deeper into a hole, to the point where it may be hard for us to see our way out of what seems more and more overwhelming. We bog down and get stuck. This can lead to feelings of vulnerability, being overwhelmed, and helplessness. (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 295, p. 295)

As with physical pain, emotional pain is also trying to tell us something. It too is a messenger. Feelings have to be acknowledged, at least to ourselves. They have to be encountered and felt in all their force. There is no other way through to the other side of them. If we ignore them, repress them, suppress them, or sublimate them, they fester and yield no resolution, no peace (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 412, p.

412).

Both passages are fairly representative of the descriptions of emotion in accounts of mindfulness and afford insight into the model of emotion. The model seems to be a mix of a pattern or schema brought from the past that produces appraisal-based episodic emotional experience in the present, which holds similarities to the model we endorse. However, there are a few important differences. One aspect of this model that differs from emotional strength, is that the motivation to feel (negative) emotion appears to be in order to prevent the negative impact to the subject of suppression and experiential avoidance, as well as in order to make it through to the other side of the emotion. The key principle in mindfulness is to let go of the underlying negative emotional patterns through observing, accepting and letting go of each emotion episode. Other features of emotion in mindfulness that differ from emotional strength include the underappreciation of the important functional meanings of emotions, and the ways in which the components of these functional meanings are connected to same components in action.

These differences drive key distinctions in the core experience in mindfulness versus emotional strength. In mindfulness, the core

Table 4
Comparison of emotional strength with mindfulness.

In mindfulness a person,	In emotional strength a person,	Similarity
Adopts a mental model of emotion as events that should be attended to or observed with curiosity and left to pass on (Kabat-Zinn, 1990)	Adopts a mental model of emotions as relations between the systems of a whole person, their history and present environment that are functionally essential for surviving and thriving	Low
Assumes that there are adaptive and maladaptive emotions (Kabat-Zinn, 1990)	Assumes all emotions are functionally important	Low
Emphasizes attention to the present moment (Brown, , Creswell, , & Ryan, 2015; Creswell, 2017; Kabat-Zinn, 1990)	Uses attention to the present moment to engage with how present experience is shaped by the past and future	Medium
Accesses awareness of present-moment experience through attention to breathing (Creswell, 2017; Kabat-Zinn, 1990)	Accesses awareness of present-moment experience through a range of attention tools, including focus on tactile sensations, attention to passing time and rhythms, attention to movement, symbolic attention and focus on inner bodily sensations	Medium
Practices exercise of open and accepting forms of attention, consisting of a curious, detached, nonjudgmental and nonreactive orientation (Creswell, 2017; Kabat-Zinn, 2003)	Practices exercise of judgmental and non-judgmental forms attention, assuming all are functional	Low
Assumes chronic stress and distress-related emotions are maladaptive (Kabat-Zinn, 1990)	Assumes chronic stress and distress-related emotions are functional in specific times and places, bringing both benefits and limitations	Low
Adopts the goal of increasing conscious awareness to experience in the present moment and de-automatization of behaviour (Kang et al., 2013)	Learns how all modes of experience function and affect one another and discovering the functionality of all modes of experience and behaviour	Low
Reduces stress and achieves a calmer level of experience (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Williams, 2010)	Develops experience of emotional vulnerability during intense emotional experience	Low

experience is of non-judgemental awareness followed by acceptance and letting go, whereas in emotional strength the subject feels his way deeper into the emotion, because it is assumed to be functionally important for action. This emotional strength experience consists in raw feeling, entering layer upon layer upon layer of feeling, requiring an unmediated non-self-conscious experience of vulnerability. There is no letting go, and neither is there a holding on or clinging on. The holding on versus letting go dichotomy in the mindfulness literature is to us something of a false dichotomy, because there are other options for responding to emotion such as feeling oneself into the emotion, feeling through the emotion and many variations on these experiences. The other distinction in experience is that mindfulness theory holds that the full force of an emotion can be felt while retaining a calm within the storm, a relatively reflective looking at the emotion while the subject is feeling it with some degree of self-distancing and associated with a degree of emotional clarity (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). In our view, retaining this distance, calm and reflection reduces the felt force of the emotion and inhibits access to its full experience.

The final two distinctions relate to externally-oriented behaviour. Emotional strength compels spontaneous emotional vulnerability-based responsiveness whereas mindfulness emphasizes nonreactive awareness (Creswell, 2017). Furthermore, emotional strength requires continuing action and engagement with the external situation whereas mindfulness as a form of meditation emphasizes nonaction. In Kabat-Zinn's words, "we just watch—resting in awareness itself" (2003, p. 30). Practising this form of attention can increase the toolset available to a subject in advance of intense emotional experience and can thereby indirectly support the subject's ability to act in intense emotional experience or under stress, these features are fundamentally different to emotional strength. In emotional strength, raw feeling and unmediated experience of emotional vulnerability produce unique configurations of the constituents of emotion and action systems, directly supporting emotional responsiveness and action in intense emotional experience.

4.2. Emotional strength and emotion regulation

Emotional strength may also seem to share important features with emotion regulation (Gross, 1998b, 2002). Emotional strength certainly involves regulatory processes, although not those commonly studied in emotion regulation research. Emotional strength involves regulatory capacities in the sense that the individual actively attends to and experiences the emotion episode through its course; a person regulates oneself to allow the emotion to unfold. This entails regulating not emotion but action. This is a key point. The distinction between emotion and action is overlooked in most studies of emotion regulatory processes. In particular the distinction between involuntary behavioural expressions of emotion (which are genuinely part of emotion episodes) and voluntary actions in response to emotions (which are not strictly part of emotions) are not distinguished in these studies (see for example, Gross, 1998a, p. 224). This is evident in the construct 'expressive suppression', which "involves reducing emotion-expressive behaviour once the individual is already in an emotional state" (John & Gross, 2004, p. 1302, see also references therein). Expressive suppression then, includes regulation of both kinds of emotional behaviour: voluntary *and* involuntary. It is important for emotional strength to recognize that the notion does *not* involve regulation of the involuntary behavioural manifestations of emotion, but rather involves only the regulation of action motivated by emotion. The regulation of action in emotional strength is in *no way* performed for the purpose of 'concealing feelings' and so should not be associated with research on the cognitive costs of expressive suppression (Richards & Gross, 2006; Richards, 2004).

This failure to distinguish between these in emotion regulation research leads to statements such as, "Sometimes emotions are destructive, and sometimes they are helpful" (John & Gross, 2004, p. 1302). The two alternative pictures of emotional life are commonly presented

in practical thought about emotional life. One is the most commonly held view that negative emotions are a danger to ourselves and society and must be controlled and hidden. The second is the polar-opposite view that it is unhealthy to keep negative emotions inside that they should be 'let out'. This dichotomy depends on a number of assumptions and our considerations point the way to a reframing of what we can now see to be a false dichotomy. Negative emotions are functional and so it will be self-defeating to develop patterns of behaviour based on their blanket avoidance and inhibition. It seems implausible that emotions can suddenly lose and then regain their functionality, although this functionality can be more or less complex, and thus more or less difficult to apprehend. Rather more plausible is that the actions motivated by emotions (but which depend on much more than just the emotions) can be productive or destructive (Hooper & Faye, 2009). Action then, is what needs to be regulated, and this is what we have described for emotional strength.

4.3. Emotional strength and emotional-approach coping

Psychological research on a person's active, voluntary response to emotion experience has been in the last half-century the purview of the coping research paradigm (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1966; Snyder, 1999; Zeidner & Endler, 1996). Following the influential distinction by Folkman and Lazarus (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, emotion-focused coping has been interpreted in the coping literature almost exclusively as coping by actively reducing and inhibiting negative emotions. This form of coping is clearly inconsistent with emotional strength. Moreover, considerable evidence has accrued in support of links between this style of coping and various undesirable outcomes (see articles in Zeidner & Endler, 1996). Since 1994, Stanton and colleagues (Austenfeld & Stanton, 2004; Stanton, Danoff-Burg, Cameron, & Ellis, 1994; Stanton, Kirk, Cameron, & Danoff-Burg, 2000) have been exploring an alternative interpretation of emotion-focused coping, 'coping through emotional approach'. Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) have identified this work as a promising new development in coping research. As a further clarification of the notion of emotional strength, it will be useful to compare it to the notion of emotional-approach coping.

Emotional-approach coping is described by Austenfeld and Stanton (2004) as "coping through acknowledging, understanding, and expressing emotion" (p. 1335). Acknowledging and understanding emotion are reflective cognitive abilities more similar to the concept of emotional intelligence (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008) than emotional strength. Reflective and reportable recognition of the functionality of emotions may be an instrumentally important precursor to the development of emotional strength. Such acknowledgment and understanding will likely facilitate the adoption of attention to one's emotional life as a goal or aim, which may support the development of emotion strength. But emotional strength is not constituted by acknowledgment or understanding of emotion. To bring this into focus, consider that a person may acknowledge and understand emotion without that understanding having any particular effect on actions towards his emotion. Unless the actions that we have described above are present, there is no evidence for emotional strength. Also, it cannot be ruled out that a person may display emotional strength without explicitly acknowledging emotions or having any great reflective understanding of them.

Neither does emotional strength refer to, nor necessarily involve, emotional expressiveness. As we emphasized above, attentively feeling emotion in the sense required for emotional strength does not entail 'being emotional' in the traditional sense that so often worries business owners and managers when emotion is mentioned in the context of the workplace. Naturally, when feeling an intense emotion episode the person will tend to display the *involuntary* expressions associated with that emotion. But when the primary emotion episode lasts usually less

than a minute or two, so does the involuntary display. The difficulty with the construct of emotional expressiveness is, as we have discussed, that action typically taken to be expressive of emotion is often used to prevent or terminate an emotion episode rather than be the result of feeling it.⁵ Therefore, an individual whose behaviour invites the description 'emotional' due to its expressiveness, may have a particularly low capacity to feel the tension of an emotion through its episodic course.⁶ Thus responses that display emotional strength probably tend to involve systematically different patterns of emotional expressiveness than responses that don't, but these changes will not be captured by a global 'emotional expressiveness' construct. Emotional strength, although it is based on greater experiencing of emotion, shares nothing with notions of emotional expressiveness that involve 'letting emotion out'. This latter idea is a consequence of failing to distinguish between emotion and action; the failure to uphold this distinction makes it seem that the only two alternatives in emotional life are either to avoid or suppress emotion or to 'let it out' (Hooper & Faye, 2009).

The types of expressive actions that an individual displaying emotional strength will take are not stipulated in the notion of emotional strength. The only generalization we can make about the types of concrete actions stemming from emotional strength responses is that they are unlikely to resemble either of the two stereotypical kinds of emotion-related actions: neither an inability to respond to emotion expressively, nor what is typically thought of as emotional expression. We conclude that the relation between emotional-approach coping and emotional strength are limited to (i) the cognitive aspects of emotional-approach coping may support the development of emotional strength, and (ii) they share the broad character of involving greater approach of negative emotions.

There is an important distinction to be made between the general approach to emotional life based on emotional strength, and the approach to emotional life based on coping. The notion of coping refers explicitly to an individual's response to situations in which psychological resources are taxed or exceeded (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). An individual in this situation must mount a kind of emergency response (wherein intense negative emotion is generally conceived as a further barrier to an adaptive response). While the types of situations relevant to emotional strength overlap (those that elicit intense emotions), the approach implied by emotional strength is different. Through considerable effort and deliberate attention an individual has increased the capacity to feel under high emotional intensity, high tension, and high anxiety without having to act (the tension) out. Thus the individual benefits from the functionality of an emotion while continuing to engage with the environment in order to come up with the most open and productive response available (see Hooper & Faye, 2009). Thus coping responses result when an individual is in a situation appraised as exceeding the psychological resources, while emotional strength responses result from prior effort to increase

those resources.

4.4. Emotional strength and resilience

Resilience is a feature of individuals who have experienced substantial adversity, which is ordinarily associated with chronic and intense negative affect, but who achieve positive developmental or adaptational outcomes despite that adversity (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Luthar, 2003; Masten, 2001). Thus it might be thought that emotional strength is a kind of resilience. Indeed emotional strength might contribute to resilience under some definitions of the term. Much clearly depends on the way in which the notion 'positive developmental or adaptational outcomes' is conceived. Positive outcomes may involve say 'causing no trouble to authority' or 'fitting well into his social environment' (which may be an environment where having negative emotions is discouraged), where these outcomes are achieved by shutting down difficult, complex and inconvenient emotional processes. A clear difference is that resilience research begins with a certain starting condition and certain desired outcomes and then studies the processes that tend to promote these outcomes; whereas emotional strength research studies a particular process and leaves the outcomes of that process entirely open.

4.5. Emotional strength and emotional intelligence

Since the heart of emotional strength is feeling or experiencing emotion more fully while maintaining a distinction between emotion and action, the notion is clearly different from emotion-related cognitive constructs like emotional intelligence (Mayer et al., 2008; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). While certain cognitive states are involved in and support the development of emotional strength as we sketched above, as well as being useful in inferring emotional strength from actual responses, emotional strength is a type of response not a set of cognitive states or a type of knowledge or intelligence.

4.6. Emotional strength, emotion-focused therapy and acceptance and commitment therapy

While the purpose of this article is not to explore EST in detail, EST like EFT (Greenberg, 2011) and ACT (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999; 2012) is a form of emotion-centred therapy, so a brief comparison to EFT and ACT can help to further clarify the meaning of emotional strength.

EST shares with other forms of emotion-centred therapy the belief that emotion is fundamental to human living, and that our approach to living must give emotion a central place. In addition, the account of emotion underlying these approaches to therapy has more similarities than differences. However, there are a number of major differences that are key to understanding emotional strength (see Table 5).

Comparing EST and EFT, while the underlying account of emotion shares many similarities, there are a couple of key differences. In EST it is assumed that all emotion is functional whereas in EFT, while emotion is fundamentally considered adaptive and important in conveying information, some emotions are considered maladaptive (Greenberg, 2010; 2011). In understanding the benefit of engaging with emotion, in EFT: (i) the information conveyed by emotion and (ii) emotion as the basis for lasting change are emphasized as the reason to engage (Greenberg & Pascual-Leone, 2006; Greenberg, 2010, 2011, 2012). In EFT, there is an emphasis on "the transformation of *emotion by emotion*" (Greenberg, 2011, p. 36). This differs in EST, in which feeling oneself deeper into the emotion is done for its own sake, on an assumption that all emotion is functional, as has been extensively described in this paper. The other key difference is in the focus in EFT on change as the goal of therapy (Greenberg & Pascual-Leone, 2006; Greenberg, 2010, 2011, 2012). In EST, there is no aim to change any emotion, since all emotions are assumed to be functional, the feeling of emotion and

⁵ Lear writes in his discussion of Freud's Rat Man case:

Normally we are inclined to think that the expressions of emotional life are themselves part of a developmental process in which the emotions themselves gain in complexity and structure. But in this case we have an affective display which, while on the surface it looks like an expression of fear, is in fact deployed in the service of disrupting and thus inhibiting the development of the capacity to experience fear in an important sense, he has not yet allowed himself to have an emotional life. For when a powerful emotion starts to develop, the Rat Man develops so much anxiety that he disrupts the whole process with a break.

(Lear, 2002, pp. 589–592)

⁶ Note that emotional expressiveness as it is conceived in a series of studies in the disclosure paradigm (Pennebaker, 1993) has more to do with emotional processing or cognitive engagement with emotion than expressive action as ordinarily understood (see also discussion in Larsen, Hemenover, Norris, & Cacioppo, 2003).

Table 5
Comparison between emotion-focused therapy and emotional strength.

In EFT,	In emotional strength,	Similarity
Emotion is viewed as an innate adaptive system that has evolved to help people survive and thrive; they are signals of events that affect our deepest concerns and our most important relationships (Greenberg, 2011)	All emotion is viewed as functional and was evolved and learnt to help people survive and thrive; they are signals of events and states of affairs that affect our deepest concerns and our most important relationships	High
Emotions are associated with a multimodal network of information (thoughts, feelings, beliefs, desires, bodily experience), and accessing emotion accesses this network of information (Paivio, 2013)	Emotions are made up of a constellation of factors across feelings, situational meanings and personal history; feeling deeper into an emotion accesses the underlying functional processes	Medium
Emotion is accessed through visceral feeling (Greenberg, 2011)	Initial emotion is accessed through a range of techniques including visceral feeling, depending on the specific experience	Medium
People learn to discern when they need to use adaptive emotions as a guide and be changed by its urgings, when they need to change maladaptive emotions, and when they need to regulate emotions that overwhelm them (Greenberg, 2011)	People learn that all emotions are functionally important and that no emotion needs to be changed	Low
Clients are helped to better identify, experience, accept, explore, make sense of, transform and flexibly manage their emotions (Greenberg, 2011)	Clients are encouraged to feel whatever they are feeling and experience whatever they are experiencing and rediscover emotional responsiveness through their experience and expression of emotional vulnerability	Low
Expression of underlying vulnerable emotions between people in a relationship is seen as central in changing interaction and re-establishing the emotional bond (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988)	Expression of underlying vulnerable emotions between people in a relationship is seen as central to cultivating emotional responsiveness	Medium
Emotions are crucial in motivating behaviour, therefore to achieve behavioural change, people need to change the emotions motivating their behaviour (Greenberg, 2011)	Emotions are crucial to action tendencies, these tendencies filtered through multiple psychosocial and behavioural patterns to result in behaviour. Feeling emotion and experiencing emotional vulnerability results in behaviour change without change being the goal	Low
Changing emotions is seen as central to the origins and treatment of human problems (Greenberg, 2011)	Feeling whatever is occurring and experiencing vulnerability are central to being human	Low

discovery of vulnerability is done for its own sake resulting in access to their functionality.

Although ACT and EST share some methodologies and tools, there are clear differences between them. ACT is based on the evidence that avoiding negative feelings leads to undesirable outcomes, therefore ACT encourages people to openly feel emotions so not to suffer undesirable outcomes from experiential avoidance and suppression of emotion (Hayes, Villatte, Levin, & Hildebrandt, 2011; Hayes et al., 1999, 2012; Hofman & Asmundson, 2007). Once the emotion has passed then the subject should act on consciously held values and commitments. In emotional strength responses, the functionality is key to opening up new possibilities of action, but as described above the action tendencies that result are not known in advance and even in the moment are often non-reflexive, unclear and brings their own feelings of doubt. This is manifest in the third hallmark of emotional strength: common avowal of experience feeling like a ‘mess’, confusion and doubt about what the next action should be.

5. Conclusion

We introduced the concept of emotional strength as a response type, response disposition and organizing principle for emotion experience in everyday life. It is not the point of emotional strength to turn a negative into a positive experience. The skill is to build capacity for all emotion experience and respond in an open and vulnerable way when faced with everyday experiences including perceived threats or intense trauma, which results in greater emotional responsiveness and access to implicit functional processes. Although there is no conscious goal or attachment to influencing the resulting experience, people who have developed emotional strength commonly report that it is an empowering context to live life.

There are six main reasons why emotional strength is an important contribution to emotion theory which also informs practical life.

1. Emotional strength introduces a new way of responding to emotional life. The idea is to feel one's way deeper into all emotions, positive and negative, with all the rawness, confusion, feelings about the feelings, judgements, urges, thoughts and the overwhelming experience of not knowing what to do, which provides access to the fundamental experience of vulnerability and implicit functional processes and meanings of emotion. This is clearly distinct from avoiding, suppressing, distancing from or observing feelings, attending to them

non-judgementally and letting them go, changing them, or feeling through them to the other side. Establishing experience of vulnerability and the functionality of emotion as essential to human experience is key – and, we believe, holds tremendous potential to spawn new ways of living together in communities.

2. It challenges emotion regulation research which purports that ‘sometimes emotions are destructive, and sometimes they are helpful’. The concept of emotional strength proposes that it seems implausible that emotions can suddenly lose and regain their functionality. Rather it is more plausible that the actions motivated by emotions can be destructive or helpful. Therefore, it is the action that needs to be regulated. Under this premise, there is a requirement to separate emotion from action. Often it is assumed that the emotion causes the action therefore the experience of anger (emotion) is treated the same as violence (action). However, anger is a valid emotion that can be used to set boundaries and that is often judged to be the same as violence. Life becomes a lot easier when we separate the emotion from the action.

3. It challenges the dichotomous view that negative emotions are either a danger to ourselves and society and must be controlled or hidden or that it is unhealthy to keep negative emotions inside so they should be let out. This is a false dichotomy. Emotions that are intensely unsettling and unpleasant, or painful, or those that motivate actions that we may wish we did not have to face, retain their own functionality.

4. It introduces new insights to understand the relationship between emotion and action, emphasizing the logical distinction between emotion and action but showing how the underlying parts of emotion and action are common; it also highlights the observation that feelings and judgements about emotions commonly drown out the initial emotions themselves, which has major implications about what we teach and role-model children about emotion.

5. Emphasis on the experience of vulnerability resulting in heightened emotional responsiveness brings emotional responsiveness right into the heart of emotional life, whereas it has often been on the sidelines even as we are in the midst of a revolution in our understanding of emotion, the mind, and the brain. Emotional responsiveness, we believe, will increasingly become a central topic both in research and in everyday life.

6. Emotional strength as an organizing principle that respects the functionality of emotion, and organizing activity around benefiting fully from that functionality, offers an alternative to positive outcome-

or satisfaction-based ideas of well-being or happiness, which either have no determinate meaning, acting as enigmatic signifiers, or do not account for the often confusing variability and yet essential functionality of emotional life, or which even worse, lead people away from feeling emotion by loading real, raw emotions with negative meaning. The examples given in the paper show how emotional strength as a guiding principle for emotional life can be genuinely action guiding, and lead to a next action that can be taken from access to implicit functional processes in emotion, even if a person does not know in advance what that action will be.

In the clinical area, emotional strength has been applied in family systems and has improved the learning capacity of individual children diagnosed with autism, selective mutism and ADHD. In order to statistically test hypotheses generated by clinical work, the Sharon Faye Foundation, an independent charity and research institute on emotion, has been founded with the purpose of advancing global research on human emotion. The goal of the foundation is to conduct practical research on emotion in collaboration with local universities and international collaborators across five pillars: health, education, business, law and politics. The first approved applied research project scheduled to begin in 2018 is in education. The hypothesis of the study is that building emotional strength in teachers will impact classroom climate, teacher-student engagement and teacher burnout.

Future research opportunities stemming from this account of emotional strength include testing the hypothesis based on therapeutic observations that emotional strength produces more productive or impactful action, extending the current research project education, but also broadening this program out to the other four pillars described above. In addition, we predict a rich vein of further research to the explore further the relationships between the components of emotional strength, the experience of vulnerability, feeling one's way deeper into an emotion, and access to implicit functional processes as well as the observable hallmarks of emotional strength, including emotional responsiveness. Aspects of this future research include more controlled characterization of the components and hallmarks of emotional strength responses between individuals and cultural backgrounds, the relations and interdependencies between them, their neurological underpinnings, and their impact on subsequent emotion experience.

Feldman Barrett (2017, p. xv) writes, "We are, I believe, in the midst of a revolution in our understanding of emotion, the mind, and the brain – a revolution that may compel us to radically rethink such central tenets of our society as our treatments for mental and physical illness, our understanding of personal relationships, our approaches to raising children, and ultimately our view of ourselves." We offer emotional strength as a contribution to this change in the way emotion is understood in everyday life.

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