



# Healthy Emotional Processing: A Guide for Christians

## Why Is Emotional Processing Important?

As a leader at New Life, you will often need to guide those in your small groups and Bible studies through processing their emotions. To do this, you should understand a healthy and Biblical way to process. Practicing this in your own life will help you to understand it and help others through the same process in the future.

When people experience negative emotions, they don't always know what to do with them. Because of this, they often choose to immerse themselves in their emotions or completely repress them, both of which result in them feeling more anxious, more fearful, angrier, etc. Immersing oneself in emotions leads to an increase in the experience of that negative emotion, and repressed emotions can build up to be suddenly released later in fits of rage or anxiety attacks, and they can ultimately lead to depression.

Ephesians 4:26-27 calls Christians to not sin through their negative emotions, saying "In your anger do not sin': Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." Clearly then, if Christ-followers give free reign to their emotions, it can lead them to sin and can even weaken them to attacks of the enemy. Proverbs 29:11 says, "Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end."

God desires that Christians not be ruled by their emotions. If Christians shouldn't "let the sun go down" while they are angry, then they are expected to be able to process their emotions in a way that does not increase the negative impact in their lives. Psychologically, emotional processing that helps the person step back from their emotions and determine why they are experiencing them can lead to a decrease in that negative emotion. Spiritually, Christians are also called to live by the Spirit and cast their cares on God. Thus, these two together can lead to increased

mental health and more Godly, Spirit-lead behavior.

This article will inform you on both healthy psychological and spiritual emotional processing techniques. It will also give you an understanding of how to use them in your own life, which will aide you in guiding those you lead through the same process.

## What's the Danger of Unhealthy Processing?

People often naturally process their negative emotions in unhealthy ways. This is not only unpleasant because they then experience their emotions even more deeply, but it can also lead to significant mental health issues, like anxiety attacks and depression. This section will discuss two common unhealthy approaches to emotional processing: self-immersed processing and emotional suppression.

People processing emotions with a self-immersed perspective experience past events and the resulting emotions in the first person. This causes them to focus only on the concrete facts of that situation, such as the specific events and emotions experienced. According to a study from Columbia University and the

University of California, all of this focus on concrete issues causes them to painfully relive the experience that caused their negative emotions. This reliving makes them suffer even more from their negative emotions, in turn making it more difficult to analyze those emotions. In the study just discussed, participants were asked to adopt a self-immersed perspective while recalling a past situation that made them feel strong anger and hostility. As the study hypothesized, this perspective led to more anger and overall negative effects than other types of processing, which will be discussed later.<sup>1</sup>

Emotional suppression is another common form of unhealthy processing. Professor of psychology at Madison University, Gregg Henriques, states that this begins with a self-judging of emotions. People who suppress their emotions judge that the emotions they are feeling are bad and should no longer be felt. They then put an increasing amount of mental energy into suppressing their emotions. Their determination to inhibit these feelings then leads to harsh self-talk, which Gregg Henriques says can sound like thoughts

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1 Ethan Kross, Ozlem Ayduk, and Walter Mischel, "When Asking "Why" Does Not Hurt: Distinguishing Rumination from Reflective Processing of Negative Emotions."

such as, “‘Stop feeling this way!’ ‘What is wrong with you!?’ ‘This is pointless, stop being so stupid.’” This is clearly hurtful, and this turning against themselves can spiral into depression. And still their emotions are unprocessed, which means that the build-up of suppressed emotions can be triggered and released in sudden rage, anxiety attacks, depressive crashes, or strong experiences of self-loathing.<sup>2</sup>

1 Corinthians 10:5 says that Christians should “take every thought captive to obey Christ.” So destructive thoughts like the self-critical ones mentioned above should not run free in a Christian’s mind. In fact, this verse makes it sound like not taking thoughts captive is opposed to being obedient to Christ. Because of this, Christians should process their emotions in a way that does not let thoughts contrary to the truth of Christ rule in their minds. Self-immersion and emotional suppression both result in deep negative feelings that can bring up painful thoughts, which should not rule a Christian’s mind.

While these bad approaches to emotional processing can lead to painful experiences

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<sup>2</sup> Gregg Henriques, “Understanding Emotions and How to Process Them.” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/theory-knowledge/201701/understanding-emotions-and-how-process-them>

and mental health issues, having negative emotions doesn’t have to. Other types of emotional processing have been proven to decrease negative emotions and their overall negative effects. The specific approach this article will discuss, called distanced-why processing, helps people address their emotions by looking at the issues behind them instead of just wallowing in a hurtful experience or wanting to ignore it altogether. This approach can bring better closure to emotions, helping people move past difficult experiences. The next section will teach you more about this approach and show you how you might incorporate it in your own life.

## What’s the Healthy Way to Process?

If suppressing emotions or being immersed in them increases their negative impact, then clearly addressing and stepping back from emotions must help people work through them for a positive impact. Those conducting the before mentioned study hypothesized this, guessing that people who mentally removed themselves from their painful experience would feel less of a negative impact. They also theorized that people would process more successfully

while asking why they were experiencing an emotion instead of focusing on what emotion they were feeling. These two ideas combined make up distanced-why processing.

After having one hundred and fifty-five individuals reflect on a painful experience, they had them rate the emotions they felt during processing compared to those they felt during the actual incident. Those who adopted distanced-why processing reported significantly less anger and overall negative effects.

Focusing on what is felt leads people to think of just the concrete facts of the situation, “I felt abandoned. I felt like I wasn’t cared for. I felt used.” However, focusing on why allows people to think more abstractly, letting them understand their emotions without having to painfully feel them all over again. This can also help them see why exactly they feel angry, sad, or afraid, which can reveal if they need to resolve conflict with someone. Matthew 18:15 calls Christians to go to those who have sinned against them and discuss the issue with them. Christians may realize conflict during emotional processing: “I think I feel abandoned because \_\_\_\_ did \_\_\_\_.” They should then go and try to

resolve that conflict Biblically.

Because of this potential to realize conflict and to process without significant pain, distanced-why processing can lead to a happier and healthier mind, while also helping people build healthy relationships with those they love. Some research also indicates that this kind of abstract processing is associated with long-term physical health benefits.

## What Are the Steps to Healthy Processing?

Having a specific method that helps people distanced-why process can be beneficial for getting them from “I feel hurt,” to “I understand why, and I know what I should do.” It helps people pause and process without getting distracted. Will Meek, Director of Counseling and Psychological services at Brown University, suggests from his work that those processing negative emotions should go through several specific stages, which will be discussed below.

### I. Sensing

People experiencing negative emotions should sense that something is wrong. Instead of attributing what is happening

in their body to being tired, they need to understand that they are experiencing difficult emotions that need to be addressed.

## II. Naming

They should name their emotion. They should identify exactly what they feel. While this may seem easy, when in the grips of strong emotions, people can have a lot of trouble determining exactly what they feel. So they should take time to really understand what they are experiencing and name the emotion.

## III. Attributing

They should attribute their emotion to the right cause. Sometimes this is easy, but sometimes an emotion seems to come out of nowhere. Whatever the case, people experiencing negative emotions should try to understand what made them feel this way. This prevents them from falsely attributing the feeling to one event: "I'm angry because I had a bad day at work," when in reality the bad day at work built on the anger they were already experiencing. They need to understand all of the causes.

## IV. Evaluating

They should evaluate how they feel about what they are feeling. This may sound unnecessarily complicated, but it helps people withhold judgment against their own emotions. As discussed earlier, judging emotions can lead to suppression. This step helps people accept their emotions. For example, if people feel angry that they are sad, this step can help them accept and validate their sadness, keeping them from suppressing it.

## V. Acting

They should determine what they need to do about their emotions. They may need to resolve conflict or take time to express their emotions. Thinking ahead about what they're going to do can help people avoid letting their emotions dictate their actions. This way, they can determine what is truly the best action and not just act out of what they feel.<sup>3</sup>

Having a healthy system like this helps people work through their emotions while avoiding common pitfalls like ignoring or suppressing their emotions or acting without thinking. This makes emotional processing, while not easy, simple. It can

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3 Will Meek, "Processing Emotions." <http://www.willmeekphd.com/processing-emotions/>

still be emotionally difficult, but having steps helps people focus, address their emotions, and determine their actions. It makes it simple for them to practice distanced-why processing and thus work through their emotions for a healthier mind. It also gives them better self-control because they stop to consider their actions instead of simply acting out of their feelings. This could mean fewer fights with those they love or fewer issues with coworkers.

## How Should Christians Process?

Christians should not just seek to do the right thing with their emotions but should seek to live in the power of the Spirit. Joyce Meyer, a practical Bible teacher, explains self-control, saying, "Self-control is a freedom, not a bondage. You're free to use wisdom, free to obey God, and free to follow the leading of the Spirit. You're free not to be pushed around by your feelings. You don't have to do what you feel like doing."<sup>4</sup> Self-control does not limit Christians, but gives them the power to live

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<sup>4</sup> Joyce Meyer, "Toxic Emotions: How to Get Rid of Them." [http://www.joycemeyer.org/articles/ea.aspx?article=toxic\\_emotions\\_how\\_to\\_get\\_rid\\_of\\_them](http://www.joycemeyer.org/articles/ea.aspx?article=toxic_emotions_how_to_get_rid_of_them)

in the goodness that Christ offers. In John 15:5, Jesus says, "Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." This emphasizes Christians' reliance on the Lord for all strength and ability to act well.

Galatians 5:16 calls Christians to walk by the Spirit and lists the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The fruits of the Spirit are how Christians should be living. Of course, this doesn't mean they are the only things that Christians should feel, but they are what Christians should operate out of.

So if Christians are being unkind or impatient, it's probably a signal that they are not living and walking by the Spirit. Founder of Charis Bible College, Andrew Wommack, explains it this way: "How can you tell if your thoughts and emotions are coming from the new, born-again self or the old carnal self? God's Word is the key... Any thought or emotion that agrees with what God's Word says about you is from your new man. Any thought or emotion that violates God's Word is from your old man or the devil. If you are angry at someone, you're in the flesh (old man). Just repent and get back in the spirit (new

man) where you have love, joy, and peace (Gal. 5:22)."<sup>5</sup>

For the Christian, noticing that they're not walking according to the Spirit can help them sense that they are having an emotional issue. Then they have to identify what they are feeling and why. If they are feeling negative emotions because of some thought that is clearly contrary to Scripture, then they have to acknowledge that lie, repent of thinking and believing it, and turn back to Christ.

Addressing false, un-Biblical thoughts can help Christians discover the deepest root of their negative emotions and help them correct that issue through re-orienting their mind to the truth. This brings them peace and joy (and the other fruits of the Spirit), and it can also improve their relationship with Christ. Removing false beliefs removes a sinful barrier in their faith.

Dealing with negative emotions is a difficult and sometimes painful process. This pain can be amplified when people choose to immerse themselves in their

emotions, focusing simply on what they are feeling. Others who try to suppress their emotions only cause pent-up emotion to burst out later at unexpected times. However, those who step back from their negative emotions, investigate why they are feeling this way, and seek to re-orient their minds to the truth of Christ enjoy better mental health, personal relationships, and a better relationship with Christ. Even through the experience of negative emotions, Christians have the hope of healing and joy through healthy, Biblical processing. As a leader at New Life, we pray that you process your emotions in a way that brings you closer to Christ and to those in the Church, and that you learn to lead others in healthy emotional processing.

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5 Andrew Wommack, "Harnessing Your Emotions." [http://www.awmi.net/reading/teaching-articles/harnessing\\_emotions/](http://www.awmi.net/reading/teaching-articles/harnessing_emotions/)

New Life Church is passionate about helping our members grow in their relationship with Christ. To help members grow in their emotional lives, we have created the Refocus Tool, which aids in spiritually and psychologically processing emotions. The tool is shown below with instructions for each step.

# The Refocus Tool

*Begin by identifying a situation where the fruit of the Spirit was not present in you*

## Facts

What happened? What did I do in response?

## Feelings

What did I feel? (Circle your strongest feeling)

## Fueling Beliefs

I felt [strongest feeling] because... (include thoughts, judgments, perceptions, self-talk, desires, etc.)

### Going Deeper:

- Why does that matter? (refer to the second half of the sentence after the "because")
- What does that mean? (about me, God, and /or others)

## Faulty Agreements

What do my beliefs tell me about agreements I've made with Satan or the World?

Do I see an idol or vow emerging from my beliefs?

## Reflect

- 1) What have my faulty agreements cost me?
- 2) Is there anything within me that holds me back from turning to God and his truth?

- If I'm ready to turn, here is my prayer of repentance...
- If I'm not ready to turn, pray and confess unwillingness to repent to God and ask for his help.

## Renew Mind

What truth can I claim to address the lies in my fueling beliefs?

## Reorient Worship

What is an action I can take to reorient my worship towards God?

As I take this step, what do I want to ask God and others for?