

Men's Emotions and the Old Rule Book



Very early on men learn not to express the strong basic emotions of fear, sadness, or shame, because of many experiences of being ridiculed if they did. How many times have you been told 'Don't be a girl' or something similar if you acted in a 'non-male' way or showed any of your gentler emotions? How many times did you hear 'Big boys don't cry,' robbing you of your ability to fully grieve over the sad times in life — the death of close friends or family, relationship break-ups, the loss of a job, and so on?

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The old rule book way to deal with these powerful feelings is to switch into power-taking behaviour rather than risk fronting up to

feelings of vulnerability. The rule that says 'men don't have emotions,' combined with the strong urge to feel okay, invites men to move into the mode of self-righteous anger (which is not one of the basic emotions but a secondary emotion—see the diagram below). This might make you feel good in the short term but will have a disastrous impact on those around you. While self-righteous anger may feel good in the short term, very soon you are back with your old feelings and the pattern starts again.

So how do you change this pattern, given that it is so much a part of who you are? The answer is both simple and hard. Simple because it requires that you become bilingual in your expression. Becoming bilingual means reclaiming the language of emotional expression in addition to the language you now speak. I believe nearly all men know the language of emotional expression and are aware of most emotions, but being taught powerful messages about not expressing these, means we need practice.

Jack (38) told me in a session that:

'Whenever I began to get down or miserable I knew that if I got angry I would feel better. What I did was to pick a fight with someone to get that feeling of adrenalin pumping. I felt great for a while. The feeling never lasted long and I'd end up feeling down again. People began to keep away from me; they said I was unpleasant to be around. I got angry at that as well.'

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Jack went on to realise that he had every reason to feel depressed. He was faced with the issue of coming to terms with the effects of a long-term illness that would eventually mean the loss of his mobility. By avoiding facing his fears Jack was not able to grieve for his loss of enjoyment of life. Jack played a very familiar script for men by trying to avoid facing his depression directly and developing a healthy response to his situation.

He also cut himself off from the many friends and loved ones who were prepared to support him, which would have meant he didn't have to face his illness alone. Others only saw the unpleasant side of Jack, not the man who was deeply worried about how his illness would affect him and his family. Jack was restrained by his pride in coping by himself, his fears about admitting the reality of his condition, and his belief that to give in to feelings of depression was unmanly.

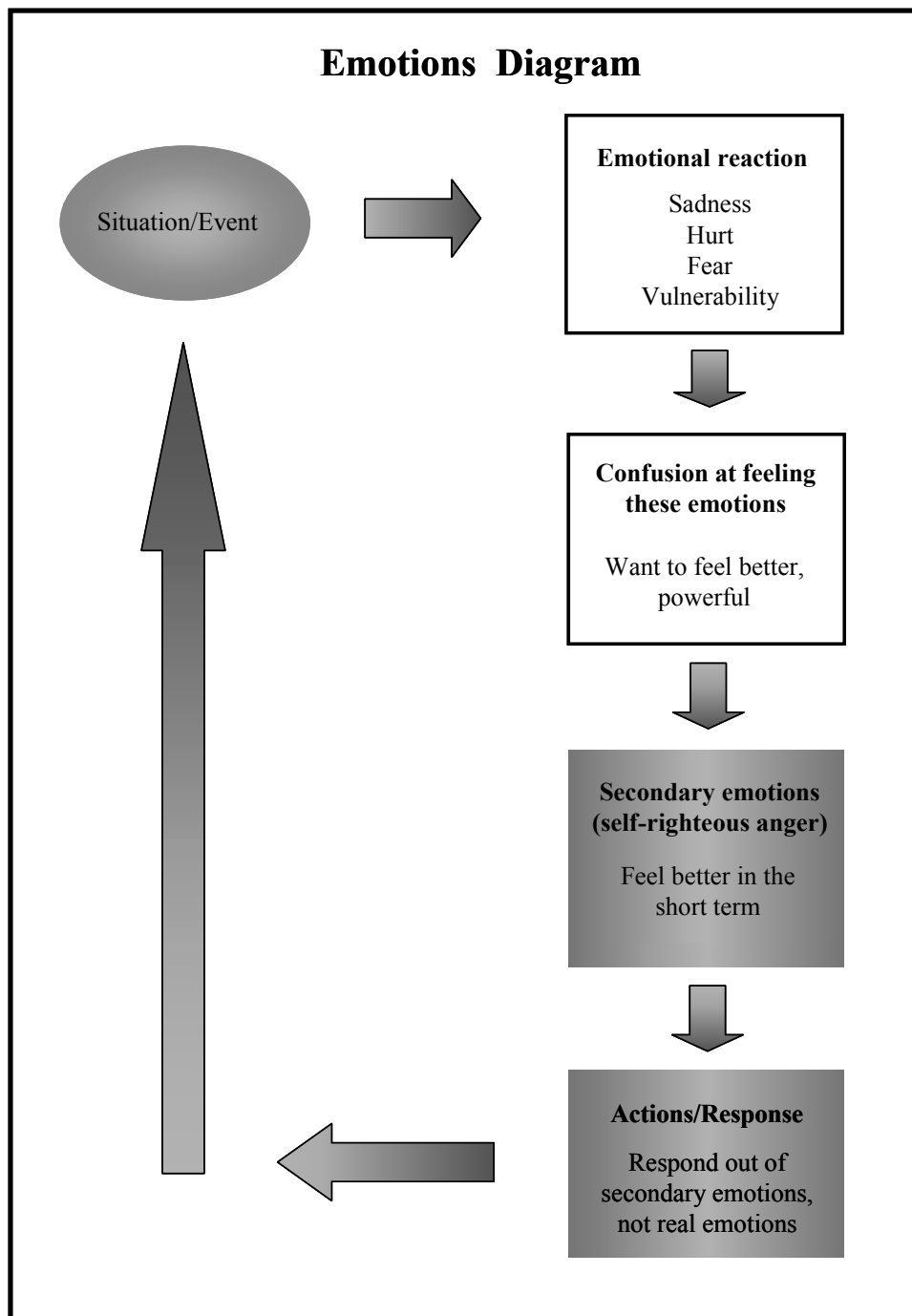


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