



Chapter 12: HOW THE STRUGGLE SWITCH DEVELOPED

As you read through the emotions listed below just notice, without thinking too hard about it, which ones you automatically judge as ‘good’ or ‘positive’, and which you automatically judge as ‘bad’ or ‘negative’:

- fear
- anger
- shock
- disgust
- sadness
- guilt
- love
- joy
- curiosity.

You have just read a list of the nine basic human emotions, from which all others are derived by combination. (At least, this is what many scientists believe — it’s still the subject of considerable debate.) Most people tend to automatically judge the first six emotions as ‘bad’ or ‘negative’ and the last three as ‘good’ or ‘positive’. Why is this so? It’s largely because of the stories we believe about emotions.

Our thinking self loves to tell us stories, and we know how they affect us when we fuse with them. Here are some of the many unhelpful stories that our thinking self may tell us about emotions:

- Anger, guilt, shame, fear, sadness, embarrassment and anxiety are ‘negative’ emotions.





- Negative emotions are bad, dangerous, irrational and a sign of weakness.
- Negative emotions mean I am psychologically defective.
- Negative emotions will damage my health.
- People should hide their feelings.
- Expressing feelings is a sign of weakness.
- Strong emotions mean I'm out of control.
- Women shouldn't feel angry.
- Men shouldn't feel afraid.
- I must keep my emotions under tight control.
- If I don't control my emotions, something bad will happen.
- Negative emotions mean there's something wrong with my life.

You may agree with some or all of the above, or you may have beliefs that are quite different; it depends largely on your upbringing. If you grew up in a family where 'positive' emotions were freely expressed but 'negative' emotions were frowned upon, then you quickly learned that the 'negative' ones were to be avoided. If your family tended to suppress or hide their feelings, then you learned to keep your feelings bottled up. If your parents believed in 'getting anger off your chest', you may have learned that it's good to express anger. But if you were frightened by a parent's display of anger, you may have decided that anger is 'bad' and should therefore be suppressed or avoided.

What Was Your Childhood Programming?

It's a useful exercise to spend some time thinking about your childhood programming regarding emotions. This can often give you an insight into how and why you struggle with certain feelings. Please take some time to write some answers (or at least think about them) to the following questions:

- As you were growing up, what messages were you given about emotions?
- Which emotions were you told were desirable or undesirable?
- What were you told about the best way to handle your emotions?





- What emotions did your family freely express?
- What emotions did your family suppress or frown on?
- With what emotions was your family comfortable?
- With what emotions was your family uncomfortable?
- How did the adults in your family handle their own 'negative' emotions?
- What emotional control strategies did they use?
- How did the adults in your family react to your 'negative' emotions?
- What did you learn from observing all this as you grew up?
- As a result of all this programming, what ideas are you still carrying around today about your emotions and how to handle them?

