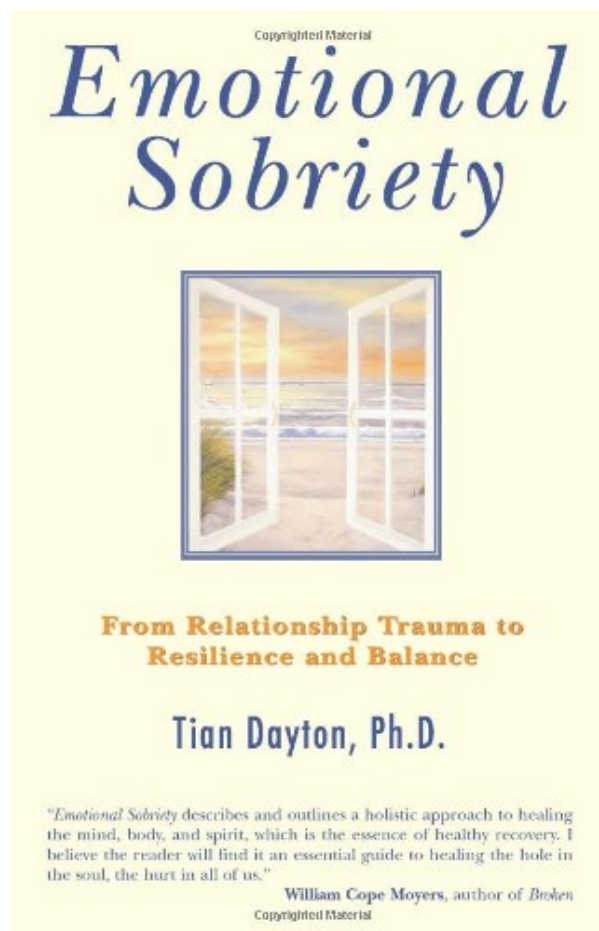


# EMOTIONAL SOBRIETY: FROM RELATIONSHIP TRAUMA TO RESILIENCE AND BALANCE BY TIAN DAYTON



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# *Emotional Sobriety*



**From Relationship Trauma to  
Resilience and Balance**

**Tian Dayton, Ph.D.**

*"Emotional Sobriety describes and outlines a holistic approach to healing the mind, body, and spirit, which is the essence of healthy recovery. I believe the reader will find it an essential guide to healing the hole in the soul, the hurt in all of us."*

**William Cope Moyers, author of *Broken***

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## Review

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But recent research in neuroscience suggests just the opposite. Emotions, it turns out, impact our thinking more than our thinking impacts our emotions. The emotional part of our brain actually sends more inputs to the thinking part of our brain than the opposite (Damasio 1999). In other words, when our emotions are out

of control, so is our thinking, and when we can't bring our feeling and thinking into some sort of balance, our life and our relationships feel out of balance too.

Emotional sobriety encompasses our ability to live with balance and maturity. It means that we have learned how to keep our emotions, thoughts, and actions within a balanced range. Our thinking, feeling, and behavior are reasonably congruent, and we're not ruled or held captive by any one part of us. We don't live in our heads, our emotions don't run us, and we aren't overly driven by unconscious or compulsive behaviors. We operate from a reasonably integrated flow and enjoy a life experience that is more or less balanced and present-oriented. We're not 'off the wall,' and at those moments when we do fly off the wall, as all of us do and probably need to now and then, we can find our way back again.

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### Finding Our Feeling Rheostat

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But how do we achieve this living in balance? Is it something we can train ourselves to do? If we didn't learn adequate skills of self-regulation in childhood, can we learn them in adulthood? And how do we fall in and out of balance?

Science now can describe in comprehensive detail just what goes on in the body when we experience emotions, or to take it one step further, how our body works with our mind to experience, process, and create our emotional world. Science can also describe in some detail what happens to us, physically and emotionally, when we fall out of balance.

Emotions occur in the body as well as in the mind. When we're scared, for example, we tense up. Who can't relate to this? Maybe we're in fourth grade and the teacher puts us on the spot: we don't know the answer, and we feel a moment of panic. Our palms sweat, our hearts beat fast, we tense up and sit overly alert in our chair. The blood leaves our head and goes straight to our muscles. Our mind seems to turn off, and we can't think of the answer we're sure we know. Our cortex, which is our thinking brain, can freeze up when we get scared. But our emotional or limbic brain keeps operating. If the stressor is momentary, being thrown into this mind/body conundrum is no big deal. We'll take some deep breaths, relax, and come back to normal.

But if the stress is chronic, it can impact our internal regulators. We can get stuck in our prepare-for-stress

mode. Our nervous system becomes keyed for overreaction, or under-reaction. We move from one to ten and ten to one. We live on the extremes rather than in four, five, or six. Emotional sobriety is about learning to live on middle ground.

### It Takes Two to Become One

We learn the skills of self or what we call 'limbic regulation' from those who surround us when we are young. As children, if we get frightened or hurt, for example, we look to our mothers, fathers, and caregivers to help us to feel better, to sooth us and woo us back into balance.

Children are dependent on their parents for nothing less than their survival. Because of this, what goes on in those primary relationships affects us on a deep level, at that survival level. Who am I in relationship to you? Do I please you? Am I safe in your arms? Do I have a place in the world? Will I be fed, understood, and cared for? These kinds of fundamental issues are part of early life.

Here's an example. We're on the spot again, but this time we're little, we're being blamed for something, and we can't figure out what we did wrong. We did the same thing yesterday, and no one got mad. Our parent is yelling at us. They look out of control, with arms flying around and eyes filled with fury. It's as if another person has taken over their body and that other person is scary. We are two feet tall. They are huge. We are barely able to tie our shoes or open the refrigerator. They can drive a car and buy groceries. We can't run because they would catch us. We can't fight; they'd win. So we freeze, and all sorts of what we call survival responses swing into action. Our bodies start pumping out adrenaline, for example, in case we need to flee for safety or stand and fight. But we can't do either. We're stuck.

What happens when home is scary, when the family we are growing up in becomes a source of ongoing stress? What about when our fight/flight apparatus gets mobilized not because we're staring into the spear of an adversary or a bear is lumbering toward us, but because our mother is depressed and lost in a world where we can't connect with her or our father is on a drinking binge and hurling abuse of all kinds that reverberates around the house and throws everyone's emotional state out of whack? What if our parents are getting divorced and our lives are being turned upside down? How is our development affected, in other words, when the very place that represents home and hearth feels threatening?

The child looks to the parent to learn whether or not he should be scared and how scared he may need to be. Even a barking dog, fireworks, or a thunderstorm can frighten a child out of his wits. The child is completely dependent on his or her parent to act as an external regulator because his or her own internal regulators won't be fully developed until around age twelve or so. This is why the small child is so vulnerable to emotional and psychological damage when the home is chaotic. Not only is what's going on frightening him and throwing him out of balance, but if the parent is the one who is scaring him, the child loses access to his path back to regulation. He's scared, and no one is telling him it's okay, cuddling and reassuring that life will soon return to normal or that he will not, in any case, be abandoned to manage all by himself.

It's time for a caveat, though. I don't want anyone to get the wrong idea. Life can be difficult. It's designed to be challenging. All homes fly out of balance some of the time. All parents lose it occasionally; then they repair the damage and everyone's fine, even better sometimes, having come through a problem and learned a little something or having felt misunderstood and disconnected and found their way back into a comfortable space. Ideally families tolerate moments of imbalance and find their way back to balance.

Evolution favors adaptability and flexibility because life is constantly changing. We're not meant to live by some rigid ideal of perfection. It's not natural. What we want to develop is flexibility, adaptability, and

resilience. We want to sink and then swim again, to lose our balance and have some sense of how to get it back, which actually develops a broader and more complex range of skills and abilities in us than trying to live a phony or contrived sort of balance. It even creates new learning and hence new neural wiring.

As I write this it makes me think of how my cat somehow knows that I want to corral her so I can take her into the city with me. Every week, when Monday morning comes, she can just somehow hear me think. She can hear my husband think, too. We are thinking, 'catch the cat.' And she immediately slinks away, under the bed, into a closet, somewhere hidden, somewhere she feels is safe. If we have been stupid enough to leave the door open, she shoots outside. Then we're really in for a hair-pulling, nerve-bending couple of hours.

Our sweet little kitty's instinct to escape is inborn. She has a brain the size of a couple of walnuts, but still she has all the survival instincts strewn throughout her brain and body that we will read about in this book. Her scanning instinct is so honed that she can truly read our minds. All we have to do is think about catching her and she does one of three things. She puts her back up and hisses, flees the room as fast as her little legs will carry her, or freezes dead in her tracks, like some exotic forest animal that somehow got transported from the branch of a ginkgo tree to our wall-to-wall carpet. These fight/flight/freeze responses are all part of her animal brain/body system, her limbic system.

But what she doesn't have that we humans have is a well-developed prefrontal cortex, a place where she does math or crossword puzzles or plans a vacation to Europe. That's why we can outsmart her, learn all her favorite hiding places, when not to let her have the run of the house. And because she is not complicating her survival responses with a lot of thinking, when she wants to flee, she just flees if at all possible, or tries to fight, or stays absolutely still. She doesn't seem to worry much about consequences, such as 'If I leave, will my sister get my room? Can Lilly still come over if I'm in trouble? Or will my parents dock my allowance?' But children do think all these things because their brains are more evolved. They are much bigger than walnuts. They worry and try to come up with solutions to stay out of trouble, even if their solutions are driven by the best thinking of a five-year-old who is scared, immature, and needy. Children who want to preserve their connection with their parents above all else will likely come up with whatever strategy they need to insure that bond. These child solutions can stay with us throughout life if they are never reexamined, especially if they get frozen into place by fear.

Children who repeatedly find themselves in these situations learn some bad lessons, and they miss learning some of the good ones. The bad lessons they learn are that adults can be very frightening and unreliable. The children then learn to hide what they are really feeling. The good things they don't learn are what positive steps they can take to rectify a situation. They don't learn the skills of repair and negotiation: 'This is your part, this is mine, this is what you need to do differently, this is what I will do.' They feel forced to take all the blame or they want to kick, scream, and throw it all off. So it is not only what the child does learn that creates problems later in life, but also what the child doesn't learn: the skills of self-regulation and relational regulation.

### The Development of a Sense of Self

The self is not developed once and for all, as you might construct a statue or a building, but in the ever-shifting sands of the world in which we live. It is a constantly evolving container that's developed in relationship to others (Moreno 1946).

Drawn from the cloth of our parents' personalities and the fabric of our early experiences, the self is a

tapestry into which we have daily woven all of our varied perceptions and experiences. It holds, in its evanescent grip, our thoughts, concerns, dreams, fears, and aspirations. The self and the mind are fluid, adaptable systems. They are penetrable and porous, always interacting with the environment. They are never quite complete.

Trauma can have the effect of shutting down the cortex (van der Kolk 1994). Our thinking mind shuts down when our limbic/feeling mind becomes overwhelmed with fear. Relationship trauma can interfere with our ability to build and consolidate a sense of self.

Stress during childhood, when we have not yet developed to maturity, has a stronger effect than at other times in life. We simply lack the developmental equipment to process stress. We don't have the maturity to understand what's going on around us because the cortex, that part of us that thinks and reasons, is not fully on board until around age twelve. For years when we're young, we have to depend on others to borrow, in a sense, their selves and wear them as our own. We also borrow their emotional regulation and internalize it into our own self system. Who we are surrounded by as children and how we are seen and treated by those people remains with us as a template through which we see ourselves. It becomes who we are.

### Bringing Our Thinking and Feeling Minds into Balance

At the core of emotional sobriety is the ability to bring our emotions into balance so what we're feeling is within a manageable range. When our emotions are within a balanced range, a few things happen to bring that balance into our lives:

- Our balanced emotions spawn balanced feelings, and thoughts.
- Our balanced emotions, thoughts, and feelings spawn balanced behavior.
- Our relationship conflicts stay within a reasonable, manageable range.
- We're better able to tolerate the intensity of our emotions so we can use our thinking minds to decode our feelings.

When we operate within a manageable emotional and psychological midrange, we cope better with life's inevitable stresses and overloads.

Our cortex helps us to order our emotional and sense impressions and to make meaning out of them. The cortex loves facts. It lives to nail things down—to order, name, codify, and quantify. The limbic brain, on the other hand, feels and senses its way through life. It collects sensory impressions and emotional data that it feeds in great quantities to our thinking brain, to sort through and make sense of. The limbic brain processes our emotions. The cortex draws meaning from them.

#### Emotions Aren't Necessarily the Same as Feelings

Though we use the terms interchangeably, Antonio Damasio, author of *The Feeling of What Happens*, suggests that emotions and feelings are actually different, that basic emotions such as fear, grief, desire, rage, and love are hardwired into our bodies and happen 'atomically' while our feelings are processed by the thinking part of our brain (Damasio 1999). Our thinking, in other words, elevates our more primitive emotions to a conscious level where we can actually experience them. When we can decode and understand the emotions, we can incorporate them into our ever-expanding and evolving sense of self. Once we make our emotions conscious through thinking about them, we can begin to understand our feelings about them.

We're meant to experience our basic emotions in a split second, before we have time to feel our feelings

surrounding them. That crucial one-tenth of a second may mean the difference between health or injury. So nature put first things first, safety above understanding. When we're terrified, the thinking part of us temporarily shuts down for some very sound reasons. We aren't supposed to be distracted by random thoughts when danger threatens. We're meant to be flooded with the adrenaline we need to fight or flee, or to freeze, to be absolutely still and remain unnoticed, to become 'invisible.' This ancient fear response happens before any conscious thought enters our process. It's part of what is referred to as the 'automatic response system.' Our emotion gets us to fight, flee, or freeze. How we feel and think about being almost hit by that car goes on hold while we do what we need to do to survive. Later, when we can afford the time, we may realize what a close call we had and experience all of the surrounding feelings that went on hold while our survival response took over.

On the other hand, when it comes to the more pleasant drives and emotions, we're meant to make love rather than think about love, which would do nothing to further our species.

### The Relationship between Emotion and Action

We cannot simply lie back and feel our emotions . . . the motor aspect of emotion involves both inwardly and outwardly directed discharge processes. Inwardly, the experience of emotions is accompanied by the release of hormones, changes in breathing and heart rate . . . changes in regional blood supply, and so forth. Outwardly, emotion manifests itself in various ways: through changes in facial expression, baring of teeth, crying, blushing, and the like, but also in complex behaviors like shouting, running away and lashing out (Solmes and Turnbull 2002).

This body involvement, this urge to act, is the key to understanding why we act out our emotions when we can't tolerate feeling them. Learning to tolerate experiencing our strong emotions and use our thinking minds to elevate them to a conscious level where we can actually feel the feelings and think the thoughts surrounding them is key to developing emotional sobriety.

### Unfelt Childhood Emotion

Sometimes emotions from childhood can live within us in a frozen state if they were never elevated to a conscious level. A child who has been raged at over and over again, for example, may simply freeze, though he will not know why he is numbing himself. He may not be able to tell you how he feels. When, as an adult, he is around anger, he may freeze all over again and still not know why.

Therapy, recovery, and support groups are designed to help with this situation. As the frozenness of that inner child, for example, wears off in the safety of a therapeutic environment, he can now process the feelings that never really were processed to begin with, within the safety and support of a healing environment. This process allows him to self-reflect, to witness this situation from the past through his adult eyes of today. In this way he can process the feelings that went on hold, make sense of them through more mature eyes, and bring them into perspective and balance.

Homes that aren't calm?that are in what we might call chronic chaos?undermine our body's ability to maintain a regulated state. When we're scared too much of the time, our limbic system gets stuck at one or



the other end of the emotional spectrum; we either feel too much or too little. We lose our ability to fine-tune, to self-regulate, to live comfortably in our own skin. We don't think through what we're feeling and bring it into a state of equilibrium, because we're either running from our emotions, or they are running ahead of us. At the most extreme level, thought and emotion become disengaged. We lose touch with ourselves.

This subject of finding emotional balance has riveted me much of my professional life, both because of my own background and because I have come to understand that curing people is not what therapy is about. Therapy is about helping people to restore the ability to regulate their emotional responses to life.

I came from a happy, successful family that encountered more pain than it could handle. My stable family became unstable, and my husband came from the same setup. On the surface it was alcoholism, but the alcoholism grew out of a family ecosystem that was perpetuating painful emotional experiences by not working problems through toward understanding and resolution. We went through our pain behind closed doors, and eventually those doors became hidden even from ourselves.

It has taken a good part of our adult lives to fully wrap our minds around what went wrong and how to fix it. That's the bad news. The good news is that we figured it out, or let's say we figured enough of it out so we could get out of our own way and lead happy, constructive lives.

### What Are the Signs of Emotional Sobriety?

Well-developed skills of self-regulation

Ability to regulate strong emotions

Ability to regulate mood, appetite

Ability to maintain a perspective on life circumstances

Ability to regulate potentially harmful substances or self-medicating behaviors

Ability to live in the present

Ability to regulate activity levels

Ability to live with both social and intimate connection

Resilience, the ability to roll with the punches

Ability to regulate personal behavior

Ability to own and process unwanted or painful emotions rather than disown them, split them off, or project them outside the self

### What Are Symptoms of a Lack of Emotional Sobriety?

Underdeveloped skills of self-regulation

Inability to regulate strong feelings such as anger, rage, anxiety, sadness

Lack of ability to regulate mood, appetite

Lack of ability to regulate behavior

Not being able to put strong emotions into perspective

Lack of ability to regulate substances or self-medicating behaviors

Inability to live in the present

Lack of ability to regulate activity level (chronically over- or underactive)

Inability to live comfortably in intimate relationships

Lack of resilience or the ability to roll with the punches

Tendency to try to get rid of painful emotions through defensive strategies such as transference (transferring painful feelings from a relationship from the past onto a relationship in the present), projection (projecting unwanted feelings outside the self onto another person or situation, disowning them), and splitting (throwing unwanted feelings out of consciousness)

### What Are the Solutions for Coming into Balance?

Learn the skills of mind, body, and emotional self-regulation

Resolve childhood wounds so they don't undermine self-regulation

Learn effective and healthy ways of self-soothing and incorporate them into daily life

Learn effective ways to manage stress

Maintain a healthy body; get daily exercise, rest, and proper nutrition

Process emotional ups and downs as they happen and learn to consciously shift feeling and thinking states

Learn to use the thinking mind to regulate the feeling, limbic mind

Develop inner resources: quiet, meditation, spiritual pursuits

F -Develop outer resources: work, hobbies, social life, community

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Do you use substances or engage in compulsive activities to regulate your mood? Do you reach for something sweet, a couple of drinks, or a pack of cigarettes after a difficult day because you can't unwind without them? Do you race to the stores to spend away the day's frustrations or run around in circles taking more time to get less done? If these self-defeating habits sound familiar, Emotional Sobriety will shed light on why and how these coping mechanisms threaten your health and impact resilience.

When we manage the stresses of the day by turning to outside 'mood managers' such as food, sex, work, shopping, gambling, drugs, and alcohol rather than healthier forms of 'self-soothing,' it is because we lack emotional sobriety--the state of processing our thoughts efficiently to bring our emotions into balance, says bestselling author and renowned addictions psychologist Tian Dayton, Ph.D. In her latest book, Emotional Sobriety, Dr. Dayton shares compelling, honest tales of her life experiences and case studies of those she has counseled.

Illustrating that emotional sobriety is a mind/body phenomenon, Dr. Dayton includes ideas on how to attain emotional literacy--the skill of translating feelings into words so that we can use our thought processes to understand and bring our emotions into balance--and how to calm the limbic system so that we can actually experience what we're feeling. The limbic system processes our emotions and governs our mood, appetite, and sleep cycles. Repeated painful experiences, in childhood or adulthood, over which we have no ability or sense of control or escape can oversensitize us to stress and deregulate our limbic system. Dr. Dayton shows you through concrete examples how to bring your emotions and thoughts into balance and learn healthy ways of 'self-soothing' to relieve symptoms of depression, anxiety, rage, and the desire to self-medicate.

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But if the stress is chronic, it can impact our internal regulators. We can get stuck in our prepare-for-stress mode. Our nervous system becomes keyed for overreaction, or under-reaction. We move from one to ten and ten to one. We live on the extremes rather than in four, five, or six. Emotional sobriety is about learning to live on middle ground.

### It Takes Two to Become One

We learn the skills of self or what we call 'limbic regulation' from those who surround us when we are young. As children, if we get frightened or hurt, for example, we look to our mothers, fathers, and caregivers to help us to feel better, to sooth us and woo us back into balance.

Children are dependent on their parents for nothing less than their survival. Because of this, what goes on in those primary relationships affects us on a deep level, at that survival level. Who am I in relationship to you? Do I please you? Am I safe in your arms? Do I have a place in the world? Will I be fed, understood, and cared for? These kinds of fundamental issues are part of early life.

Here's an example. We're on the spot again, but this time we're little, we're being blamed for something, and we can't figure out what we did wrong. We did the same thing yesterday, and no one got mad. Our parent is yelling at us. They look out of control, with arms flying around and eyes filled with fury. It's as if another person has taken over their body and that other person is scary. We are two feet tall. They are huge. We are barely able to tie our shoes or open the refrigerator. They can drive a car and buy groceries. We can't run because they would catch us. We can't fight; they'd win. So we freeze, and all sorts of what we call survival responses swing into action. Our bodies start pumping out adrenaline, for example, in case we need to flee for safety or stand and fight. But we can't do either. We're stuck.

What happens when home is scary, when the family we are growing up in becomes a source of ongoing stress? What about when our fight/flight apparatus gets mobilized not because we're staring into the spear of an adversary or a bear is lumbering toward us, but because our mother is depressed and lost in a world where we can't connect with her or our father is on a drinking binge and hurling abuse of all kinds that reverberates

around the house and throws everyone's emotional state out of whack? What if our parents are getting divorced and our lives are being turned upside down? How is our development affected, in other words, when the very place that represents home and hearth feels threatening?

The child looks to the parent to learn whether or not he should be scared and how scared he may need to be. Even a barking dog, fireworks, or a thunderstorm can frighten a child out of his wits. The child is completely dependent on his or her parent to act as an external regulator because his or her own internal regulators won't be fully developed until around age twelve or so. This is why the small child is so vulnerable to emotional and psychological damage when the home is chaotic. Not only is what's going on frightening him and throwing him out of balance, but if the parent is the one who is scaring him, the child loses access to his path back to regulation. He's scared, and no one is telling him it's okay, cuddling and reassuring that life will soon return to normal or that he will not, in any case, be abandoned to manage all by himself.

It's time for a caveat, though. I don't want anyone to get the wrong idea. Life can be difficult. It's designed to be challenging. All homes fly out of balance some of the time. All parents lose it occasionally; then they repair the damage and everyone's fine, even better sometimes, having come through a problem and learned a little something or having felt misunderstood and disconnected and found their way back into a comfortable space. Ideally families tolerate moments of imbalance and find their way back to balance.

Evolution favors adaptability and flexibility because life is constantly changing. We're not meant to live by some rigid ideal of perfection. It's not natural. What we want to develop is flexibility, adaptability, and resilience. We want to sink and then swim again, to lose our balance and have some sense of how to get it back, which actually develops a broader and more complex range of skills and abilities in us than trying to live a phony or contrived sort of balance. It even creates new learning and hence new neural wiring.

As I write this it makes me think of how my cat somehow knows that I want to corral her so I can take her into the city with me. Every week, when Monday morning comes, she can just somehow hear me think. She can hear my husband think, too. We are thinking, 'catch the cat.' And she immediately slinks away, under the bed, into a closet, somewhere hidden, somewhere she feels is safe. If we have been stupid enough to leave the door open, she shoots outside. Then we're really in for a hair-pulling, nerve-bending couple of hours.

Our sweet little kitty's instinct to escape is inborn. She has a brain the size of a couple of walnuts, but still she has all the survival instincts strewn throughout her brain and body that we will read about in this book. Her scanning instinct is so honed that she can truly read our minds. All we have to do is think about catching her and she does one of three things. She puts her back up and hisses, flees the room as fast as her little legs will carry her, or freezes dead in her tracks, like some exotic forest animal that somehow got transported from the branch of a ginkgo tree to our wall-to-wall carpet. These fight/flight/freeze responses are all part of her animal brain/body system, her limbic system.

But what she doesn't have that we humans have is a well-developed prefrontal cortex, a place where she does math or crossword puzzles or plans a vacation to Europe. That's why we can outsmart her, learn all her favorite hiding places, when not to let her have the run of the house. And because she is not complicating her survival responses with a lot of thinking, when she wants to flee, she just flees if at all possible, or tries to fight, or stays absolutely still. She doesn't seem to worry much about consequences, such as 'If I leave, will my sister get my room? Can Lilly still come over if I'm in trouble? Or will my parents dock my allowance?' But children do think all these things because their brains are more evolved. They are much bigger than walnuts. They worry and try to come up with solutions to stay out of trouble, even if their solutions are driven by the best thinking of a five-year-old who is scared, immature, and needy. Children who want to preserve their connection with their parents above all else will likely come up with whatever strategy they

need to insure that bond. These child solutions can stay with us throughout life if they are never reexamined, especially if they get frozen into place by fear.

Children who repeatedly find themselves in these situations learn some bad lessons, and they miss learning some of the good ones. The bad lessons they learn are that adults can be very frightening and unreliable. The children then learn to hide what they are really feeling. The good things they don't learn are what positive steps they can take to rectify a situation. They don't learn the skills of repair and negotiation: 'This is your part, this is mine, this is what you need to do differently, this is what I will do.' They feel forced to take all the blame or they want to kick, scream, and throw it all off. So it is not only what the child does learn that creates problems later in life, but also what the child doesn't learn: the skills of self-regulation and relational regulation.

### The Development of a Sense of Self

The self is not developed once and for all, as you might construct a statue or a building, but in the ever-shifting sands of the world in which we live. It is a constantly evolving container that's developed in relationship to others (Moreno 1946).

Drawn from the cloth of our parents' personalities and the fabric of our early experiences, the self is a tapestry into which we have daily woven all of our varied perceptions and experiences. It holds, in its evanescent grip, our thoughts, concerns, dreams, fears, and aspirations. The self and the mind are fluid, adaptable systems. They are penetrable and porous, always interacting with the environment. They are never quite complete.

Trauma can have the effect of shutting down the cortex (van der Kolk 1994). Our thinking mind shuts down when our limbic/feeling mind becomes overwhelmed with fear. Relationship trauma can interfere with our ability to build and consolidate a sense of self.

Stress during childhood, when we have not yet developed to maturity, has a stronger effect than at other times in life. We simply lack the developmental equipment to process stress. We don't have the maturity to understand what's going on around us because the cortex, that part of us that thinks and reasons, is not fully on board until around age twelve. For years when we're young, we have to depend on others to borrow, in a sense, their selves and wear them as our own. We also borrow their emotional regulation and internalize it into our own self system. Who we are surrounded by as children and how we are seen and treated by those people remains with us as a template through which we see ourselves. It becomes who we are.

### Bringing Our Thinking and Feeling Minds into Balance

At the core of emotional sobriety is the ability to bring our emotions into balance so what we're feeling is within a manageable range. When our emotions are within a balanced range, a few things happen to bring that balance into our lives:

- Our balanced emotions spawn balanced feelings, and thoughts.
- Our balanced emotions, thoughts, and feelings spawn balanced behavior.
- Our relationship conflicts stay within a reasonable, manageable range.



- We're better able to tolerate the intensity of our emotions so we can use our thinking minds to decode our feelings.

When we operate within a manageable emotional and psychological midrange, we cope better with life's inevitable stresses and overloads.

Our cortex helps us to order our emotional and sense impressions and to make meaning out of them. The cortex loves facts. It lives to nail things down?to order, name, codify, and quantify. The limbic brain, on the other hand, feels and senses its way through life. It collects sensory impressions and emotional data that it feeds in great quantities to our thinking brain, to sort through and make sense of. The limbic brain processes our emotions. The cortex draws meaning from them.

Emotions Aren't Necessarily the Same as Feelings

Though we use the terms interchangeably, Antonio Damasio, author of *The Feeling of What Happens*, suggests that emotions and feelings are actually different, that basic emotions such as fear, grief, desire, rage, and love are hardwired into our bodies and happen 'atomically' while our feelings are processed by the thinking part of our brain (Damasio 1999). Our thinking, in other words, elevates our more primitive emotions to a conscious level where we can actually experience them. When we can decode and understand the emotions, we can incorporate them into our ever-expanding and evolving sense of self. Once we make our emotions conscious through thinking about them, we can begin to understand our feelings about them.

We're meant to experience our basic emotions in a split second, before we have time to feel our feelings surrounding them. That crucial one-tenth of a second may mean the difference between health or injury. So nature put first things first, safety above understanding. When we're terrified, the thinking part of us temporarily shuts down for some very sound reasons. We aren't supposed to be distracted by random thoughts when danger threatens. We're meant to be flooded with the adrenaline we need to fight or flee, or to freeze, to be absolutely still and remain unnoticed, to become 'invisible.' This ancient fear response happens before any conscious thought enters our process. It's part of what is referred to as the 'automatic response system.' Our emotion gets us to fight, flee, or freeze. How we feel and think about being almost hit by that car goes on hold while we do what we need to do to survive. Later, when we can afford the time, we may realize what a close call we had and experience all of the surrounding feelings that went on hold while our survival response took over.

On the other hand, when it comes to the more pleasant drives and emotions, we're meant to make love rather than think about love, which would do nothing to further our species.

### The Relationship between Emotion and Action

We cannot simply lie back and feel our emotions . . . the motor aspect of emotion involves both inwardly and outwardly directed discharge processes. Inwardly, the experience of emotions is accompanied by the release of hormones, changes in breathing and heart rate . . . changes in regional blood supply, and so forth. Outwardly, emotion manifests itself in various ways: through changes in facial expression, baring of teeth, crying, blushing, and the like, but also in complex behaviors like shouting, running away and lashing out (Solmes and Turnbull 2002).

This body involvement, this urge to act, is the key to understanding why we act out our emotions when we can't tolerate feeling them. Learning to tolerate experiencing our strong emotions and use our thinking minds

to elevate them to a conscious level where we can actually feel the feelings and think the thoughts surrounding them is key to developing emotional sobriety.

### Unfelt Childhood Emotion

Sometimes emotions from childhood can live within us in a frozen state if they were never elevated to a conscious level. A child who has been raged at over and over again, for example, may simply freeze, though he will not know why he is numbing himself. He may not be able to tell you how he feels. When, as an adult, he is around anger, he may freeze all over again and still not know why.

Therapy, recovery, and support groups are designed to help with this situation. As the frozenness of that inner child, for example, wears off in the safety of a therapeutic environment, he can now process the feelings that never really were processed to begin with, within the safety and support of a healing environment. This process allows him to self-reflect, to witness this situation from the past through his adult eyes of today. In this way he can process the feelings that went on hold, make sense of them through more mature eyes, and bring them into perspective and balance.

Homes that aren't calm—that are in what we might call chronic chaos—undermine our body's ability to maintain a regulated state. When we're scared too much of the time, our limbic system gets stuck at one or the other end of the emotional spectrum; we either feel too much or too little. We lose our ability to fine-tune, to self-regulate, to live comfortably in our own skin. We don't think through what we're feeling and bring it into a state of equilibrium, because we're either running from our emotions, or they are running ahead of us. At the most extreme level, thought and emotion become disengaged. We lose touch with ourselves.

This subject of finding emotional balance has riveted me much of my professional life, both because of my own background and because I have come to understand that curing people is not what therapy is about. Therapy is about helping people to restore the ability to regulate their emotional responses to life.

I came from a happy, successful family that encountered more pain than it could handle. My stable family became unstable, and my husband came from the same setup. On the surface it was alcoholism, but the alcoholism grew out of a family ecosystem that was perpetuating painful emotional experiences by not working problems through toward understanding and resolution. We went through our pain behind closed doors, and eventually those doors became hidden even from ourselves.

It has taken a good part of our adult lives to fully wrap our minds around what went wrong and how to fix it. That's the bad news. The good news is that we figured it out, or let's say we figured enough of it out so we could get out of our own way and lead happy, constructive lives.

### What Are the Signs of Emotional Sobriety?

Well-developed skills of self-regulation

Ability to regulate strong emotions

Ability to regulate mood, appetite

Ability to maintain a perspective on life circumstances

Ability to regulate potentially harmful substances or self-medicating behaviors

Ability to live in the present  
Ability to regulate activity levels  
Ability to live with both social and intimate connection  
Resilience, the ability to roll with the punches  
Ability to regulate personal behavior  
Ability to own and process unwanted or painful emotions rather than disown them, split them off, or project them outside the self

### What Are Symptoms of a Lack of Emotional Sobriety?

Underdeveloped skills of self-regulation  
Inability to regulate strong feelings such as anger, rage, anxiety, sadness  
Lack of ability to regulate mood, appetite  
Lack of ability to regulate behavior  
Not being able to put strong emotions into perspective  
Lack of ability to regulate substances or self-medicating behaviors  
Inability to live in the present  
Lack of ability to regulate activity level (chronically over- or underactive)  
Inability to live comfortably in intimate relationships  
Lack of resilience or the ability to roll with the punches  
Tendency to try to get rid of painful emotions through defensive strategies such as transference (transferring painful feelings from a relationship from the past onto a relationship in the present), projection (projecting unwanted feelings outside the self onto another person or situation, disowning them), and splitting (throwing unwanted feelings out of consciousness)

### What Are the Solutions for Coming into Balance?

Learn the skills of mind, body, and emotional self-regulation  
Resolve childhood wounds so they don't undermine self-regulation  
Learn effective and healthy ways of self-soothing and incorporate them into daily life  
Learn effective ways to manage stress  
Maintain a healthy body; get daily exercise, rest, and proper nutrition  
Process emotional ups and downs as they happen and learn to consciously shift feeling and thinking states  
Learn to use the thinking mind to regulate the feeling, limbic mind  
Develop inner resources: quiet, meditation, spiritual pursuits

F -Develop outer resources: work, hobbies, social life, community

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## Most helpful customer reviews

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Great book, but bad reading

By BryanML

I'd give this book a 5 star review due to the depth of research the author has done about emotions, substance abuse, and what she calls "relationship trauma." However, I must warn you, I'm listening to the audible book as well as have the kindle version and the reader mispronounces a lot of words( she pronounces amygdala as "amy-glada" and pronounces dissociation as "diss-association." Obviously the reader didn't look up the words in the dictionary so she pronounces the words completely wrong.

69 of 70 people found the following review helpful.

ONE BOOK TO RULE THEM ALL. Excellent integration of up-to-date research.

By Thomas Luttrell

I am a Ph.D. candidate of Marriage & Family Therapy and work as a Marriage and Family Therapist Intern. I have run psychotherapy groups for several years already with addicts and their families, and I've been trained in multiple therapy modalities (EFT, SFBT, Gestalt, CBT, MI). This is a book that I wish I had written.

Even though I posted this review nine months ago, I continue to recommend this book to both my colleagues and friends. I still have not found any books as comprehensive and balanced, as this book offers the latest research and integrates a spectrum of our field's freshest relationship theories into one book. She helps us move closer toward a "Grand Unified Theory" of therapy and integrates attachment theory, attachment injuries, updates in the codependency literature, research on emotions, PTSD, ADHD, grief, depression, anxiety, and more, and she makes it applicable to the lay person as well as to the therapist.

This book can help clients understand how therapists can help, while giving therapists an updated look at how research on attachment theory can be integrated with the fields of substance abuse. For example, a lot of people still treat substance abuse using old models, using cognitive-only approaches, outdated notions of codependency, and overlooking the role of the brain, emotions, biology, trauma and the family system. She validates the newer approaches of using more experiential, emotionally-focused and systemic approaches with addicts and families and gives us clear language to explain why it works.

Dr. Dayton stops us before we "throw the baby out with the bathwater." The pop psychology concept of "codependency" was popular in the addiction recovery field, but it was criticized mainly because there is little or no scientific evidence to support basic tenets of codependency theory, it became so watered down that it was useless, it seemed that every behavior was codependent, and was generally used as a derogatory label that tended to apply more often to women. Thus, Dr. Dayton prefers to talk about "relationship trauma."

Nevertheless, Dr. Dayton provides her own definition of codependency, but links it to the latest research on adult attachment. You may also be interested in some recent research on codependency & attachment styles I came across by Whiteleather & Doumas (2004). [...] Using the four quadrant model of attachment styles, they correlated the concept of "codependency" with the anxious/preoccupied attachment style.

Dr. Dayton defines codependency using an integration of attachment theory and Bowen family systems theory which I agree with and couldn't have said better: "Codependency, I feel, is fear-based and is a predictable set of qualities and behaviors that grow out of feeling anxious and therefore hypervigilant in our intimate relationships. It is also reflective of an incomplete process of individuation...Though codependency seems to be about caretaking or being overly attuned to the other person, it is really about trying to fend off our own anxiety." (p. 150-151) I believe that both codependency AND counterdependency are maladaptive behaviors used to manage anxiety about relationships--both are terms that I'm seeing appear more often

recently. Dr. Dayton believes that these anxious or avoidant behaviors are the result of attachment injuries, or relationship traumas as she calls it.

She EVEN shows how humor and psychodrama are healing, both of which I believe are powerful therapeutic agents. She describes the theories of humor and how laughter is healing, when I thought I was the only therapist who was interested in that. Yeesh! She got (almost) everything that I feel is important, including spirituality.

If I was to write the next reincarnation of her book, I would want to include more Christian spirituality, but that's only because my undergraduate degree is in theology. My ONLY minor criticism was when she connected the Greek concept of "agape" love with romantic love (page 122) and said that it was too "unstable" for the foundation of a family. I don't believe Dr. Dayton truly understands what agape love means. Agape is by definition an unconditional decision to love somebody despite feelings, and therefore is the MOST stable form of love, something we need more of in our relationships. In the Bible, "agape" is used to describe God's unconditional, unmovable love for us despite the things we do wrong.

The only other concern, which is not a bad thing, is that perhaps Dr. Dayton tries to do too much in her book! Whole books have been written on the topics for each chapter, so that she can't dive in too deep on any of them. Her book is monumental in putting all of this into one book. But, at least I can highly recommend this book as a good integration of a broad spectrum of theories for the professional who works with relationship traumas and helping people become more emotionally aware, as well as an advanced overview for the general audience.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Transformative.

By Dr. Susan Petro

This is an incredibly informative and transformative book. Unfortunately, the author gets off to a bad start in the first few chapters as she immediately delves into the neurophysiology of relational trauma, important but not the first topic I'd use to start. I was greatly rewarded for my persistence though as her message is fresh, succinct, and tremendously enlightening to anyone who has lived through dysfunctional family systems, alcoholic or otherwise. Her chapter on resilience was worth the price of the book alone. Highly recommended.

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# EMOTIONAL SOBRIETY: FROM RELATIONSHIP TRAUMA TO RESILIENCE AND BALANCE BY TIAN DAYTON PDF

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## Review

'A holistic approach to healing the mind, body, and spirit--which is the essence of healthy recovery. . . . An essential guide to healing the hole in the soul, the hurt in all of us.'

--William Cope Moyers, Author of Broken

## About the Author

Tian Dayton, Ph.D., has a doctorate in clinical psychology and is Director of Program Development and Staff Training for the Caron Foundation in New York City. Dr. Dayton is a nationally renowned speaker and workshop facilitator and the author of fifteen books on self-help and psychological issues. She is a frequent guest expert on MSNBC, CNN, NBC, Montel, John Walsh, Rikki Lake, Geraldo, and others.

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## What Is Emotional Sobriety?

Curiously the subject of emotions was studied very little until the past couple of decades. Previously we were worshippers of the mind. We lived as if our emotions were incidental little things that leaked out over sentimental songs or bubbled forward during evocative occasions like beach walks, graduations, or weddings. We imagined our thoughts ruled the day and emotions followed neatly in line.

But recent research in neuroscience suggests just the opposite. Emotions, it turns out, impact our thinking more than our thinking impacts our emotions. The emotional part of our brain actually sends more inputs to the thinking part of our brain than the opposite (Damasio 1999). In other words, when our emotions are out of control, so is our thinking, and when we can't bring our feeling and thinking into some sort of balance, our life and our relationships feel out of balance too.

Emotional sobriety encompasses our ability to live with balance and maturity. It means that we have learned how to keep our emotions, thoughts, and actions within a balanced range. Our thinking, feeling, and behavior are reasonably congruent, and we're not ruled or held captive by any one part of us. We don't live in our heads, our emotions don't run us, and we aren't overly driven by unconscious or compulsive behaviors. We operate from a reasonably integrated flow and enjoy a life experience that is more or less balanced and present-oriented. We're not 'off the wall,' and at those moments when we do fly off the wall, as all of us do

and probably need to now and then, we can find our way back again.

### Feelings Came First

Emotions came long before thinking in our human evolution. The limbic system developed eons before the prefrontal cortex or the thinking part of our brain.

Emotions are adaptive, telling us all sorts of very important things. They tell us what is important to us and how much attention to give it. Madison Avenue has known about this for a very long time. Advertising often seeks to grab us at the gut level. Our feelings inform and affect many of our decisions.

Darwin felt that our emotional system was highly conserved throughout evolution because emotions are so critical to our survival. The cave woman who loved her babies and felt fear when they were threatened was the one who survived and kept our species alive. She is the DNA strain that led to us.

Developmentally speaking, feelings predate thoughts. The limbic system that governs our emotions develops before the thinking part of our brains or our prefrontal cortex.

### Finding Our Feeling Rheostat

Emotional sobriety is about finding and maintaining our emotional equilibrium, our feeling rheostat, the one that helps us to adjust the intensity of our emotional responses to life. Emotional sobriety is tied up in our ability to self-regulate and to bring ourselves into and maintain our balance.

But how do we achieve this living in balance? Is it something we can train ourselves to do? If we didn't learn adequate skills of self-regulation in childhood, can we learn them in adulthood? And how do we fall in and out of balance?

Science now can describe in comprehensive detail just what goes on in the body when we experience emotions, or to take it one step further, how our body works with our mind to experience, process, and create our emotional world. Science can also describe in some detail what happens to us, physically and emotionally, when we fall out of balance.

Emotions occur in the body as well as in the mind. When we're scared, for example, we tense up. Who can't relate to this? Maybe we're in fourth grade and the teacher puts us on the spot: we don't know the answer, and we feel a moment of panic. Our palms sweat, our hearts beat fast, we tense up and sit overly alert in our chair. The blood leaves our head and goes straight to our muscles. Our mind seems to turn off, and we can't think of the answer we're sure we know. Our cortex, which is our thinking brain, can freeze up when we get scared. But our emotional or limbic brain keeps operating. If the stressor is momentary, being thrown into this mind/body conundrum is no big deal. We'll take some deep breaths, relax, and come back to normal.

But if the stress is chronic, it can impact our internal regulators. We can get stuck in our prepare-for-stress mode. Our nervous system becomes keyed for overreaction, or under-reaction. We move from one to ten and ten to one. We live on the extremes rather than in four, five, or six. Emotional sobriety is about learning to live on middle ground.

### It Takes Two to Become One

We learn the skills of self or what we call 'limbic regulation' from those who surround us when we are young. As children, if we get frightened or hurt, for example, we look to our mothers, fathers, and caregivers to help us to feel better, to sooth us and woo us back into balance.

Children are dependent on their parents for nothing less than their survival. Because of this, what goes on in those primary relationships affects us on a deep level, at that survival level. Who am I in relationship to you? Do I please you? Am I safe in your arms? Do I have a place in the world? Will I be fed, understood, and cared for? These kinds of fundamental issues are part of early life.

Here's an example. We're on the spot again, but this time we're little, we're being blamed for something, and we can't figure out what we did wrong. We did the same thing yesterday, and no one got mad. Our parent is yelling at us. They look out of control, with arms flying around and eyes filled with fury. It's as if another person has taken over their body and that other person is scary. We are two feet tall. They are huge. We are barely able to tie our shoes or open the refrigerator. They can drive a car and buy groceries. We can't run because they would catch us. We can't fight; they'd win. So we freeze, and all sorts of what we call survival responses swing into action. Our bodies start pumping out adrenaline, for example, in case we need to flee for safety or stand and fight. But we can't do either. We're stuck.

What happens when home is scary, when the family we are growing up in becomes a source of ongoing stress? What about when our fight/flight apparatus gets mobilized not because we're staring into the spear of an adversary or a bear is lumbering toward us, but because our mother is depressed and lost in a world where we can't connect with her or our father is on a drinking binge and hurling abuse of all kinds that reverberates around the house and throws everyone's emotional state out of whack? What if our parents are getting divorced and our lives are being turned upside down? How is our development affected, in other words, when the very place that represents home and hearth feels threatening?

The child looks to the parent to learn whether or not he should be scared and how scared he may need to be. Even a barking dog, fireworks, or a thunderstorm can frighten a child out of his wits. The child is completely dependent on his or her parent to act as an external regulator because his or her own internal regulators won't be fully developed until around age twelve or so. This is why the small child is so vulnerable to emotional and psychological damage when the home is chaotic. Not only is what's going on frightening him and throwing him out of balance, but if the parent is the one who is scaring him, the child loses access to his path back to regulation. He's scared, and no one is telling him it's okay, cuddling and reassuring that life will soon return to normal or that he will not, in any case, be abandoned to manage all by himself.

It's time for a caveat, though. I don't want anyone to get the wrong idea. Life can be difficult. It's designed to be challenging. All homes fly out of balance some of the time. All parents lose it occasionally; then they repair the damage and everyone's fine, even better sometimes, having come through a problem and learned a little something or having felt misunderstood and disconnected and found their way back into a comfortable space. Ideally families tolerate moments of imbalance and find their way back to balance.

Evolution favors adaptability and flexibility because life is constantly changing. We're not meant to live by some rigid ideal of perfection. It's not natural. What we want to develop is flexibility, adaptability, and resilience. We want to sink and then swim again, to lose our balance and have some sense of how to get it back, which actually develops a broader and more complex range of skills and abilities in us than trying to live a phony or contrived sort of balance. It even creates new learning and hence new neural wiring.

As I write this it makes me think of how my cat somehow knows that I want to corral her so I can take her into the city with me. Every week, when Monday morning comes, she can just somehow hear me think. She can hear my husband think, too. We are thinking, 'catch the cat.' And she immediately slinks away, under the



bed, into a closet, somewhere hidden, somewhere she feels is safe. If we have been stupid enough to leave the door open, she shoots outside. Then we're really in for a hair-pulling, nerve-bending couple of hours.

Our sweet little kitty's instinct to escape is inborn. She has a brain the size of a couple of walnuts, but still she has all the survival instincts strewn throughout her brain and body that we will read about in this book. Her scanning instinct is so honed that she can truly read our minds. All we have to do is think about catching her and she does one of three things. She puts her back up and hisses, flees the room as fast as her little legs will carry her, or freezes dead in her tracks, like some exotic forest animal that somehow got transported from the branch of a ginkgo tree to our wall-to-wall carpet. These fight/flight/freeze responses are all part of her animal brain/body system, her limbic system.

But what she doesn't have that we humans have is a well-developed prefrontal cortex, a place where she does math or crossword puzzles or plans a vacation to Europe. That's why we can outsmart her, learn all her favorite hiding places, when not to let her have the run of the house. And because she is not complicating her survival responses with a lot of thinking, when she wants to flee, she just flees if at all possible, or tries to fight, or stays absolutely still. She doesn't seem to worry much about consequences, such as 'If I leave, will my sister get my room? Can Lilly still come over if I'm in trouble? Or will my parents dock my allowance?' But children do think all these things because their brains are more evolved. They are much bigger than walnuts. They worry and try to come up with solutions to stay out of trouble, even if their solutions are driven by the best thinking of a five-year-old who is scared, immature, and needy. Children who want to preserve their connection with their parents above all else will likely come up with whatever strategy they need to insure that bond. These child solutions can stay with us throughout life if they are never reexamined, especially if they get frozen into place by fear.

Children who repeatedly find themselves in these situations learn some bad lessons, and they miss learning some of the good ones. The bad lessons they learn are that adults can be very frightening and unreliable. The children then learn to hide what they are really feeling. The good things they don't learn are what positive steps they can take to rectify a situation. They don't learn the skills of repair and negotiation: 'This is your part, this is mine, this is what you need to do differently, this is what I will do.' They feel forced to take all the blame or they want to kick, scream, and throw it all off. So it is not only what the child does learn that creates problems later in life, but also what the child doesn't learn: the skills of self-regulation and relational regulation.

### The Development of a Sense of Self

The self is not developed once and for all, as you might construct a statue or a building, but in the ever-shifting sands of the world in which we live. It is a constantly evolving container that's developed in relationship to others (Moreno 1946).

Drawn from the cloth of our parents' personalities and the fabric of our early experiences, the self is a tapestry into which we have daily woven all of our varied perceptions and experiences. It holds, in its evanescent grip, our thoughts, concerns, dreams, fears, and aspirations. The self and the mind are fluid, adaptable systems. They are penetrable and porous, always interacting with the environment. They are never quite complete.

Trauma can have the effect of shutting down the cortex (van der Kolk 1994). Our thinking mind shuts down when our limbic/feeling mind becomes overwhelmed with fear. Relationship trauma can interfere with our ability to build and consolidate a sense of self.

Stress during childhood, when we have not yet developed to maturity, has a stronger effect than at other times in life. We simply lack the developmental equipment to process stress. We don't have the maturity to understand what's going on around us because the cortex, that part of us that thinks and reasons, is not fully on board until around age twelve. For years when we're young, we have to depend on others to borrow, in a sense, their selves and wear them as our own. We also borrow their emotional regulation and internalize it into our own self system. Who we are surrounded by as children and how we are seen and treated by those people remains with us as a template through which we see ourselves. It becomes who we are.

### Bringing Our Thinking and Feeling Minds into Balance

At the core of emotional sobriety is the ability to bring our emotions into balance so what we're feeling is within a manageable range. When our emotions are within a balanced range, a few things happen to bring that balance into our lives:

- Our balanced emotions spawn balanced feelings, and thoughts.
- Our balanced emotions, thoughts, and feelings spawn balanced behavior.
- Our relationship conflicts stay within a reasonable, manageable range.
- We're better able to tolerate the intensity of our emotions so we can use our thinking minds to decode our feelings.

When we operate within a manageable emotional and psychological midrange, we cope better with life's inevitable stresses and overloads.

Our cortex helps us to order our emotional and sense impressions and to make meaning out of them. The cortex loves facts. It lives to nail things down?to order, name, codify, and quantify. The limbic brain, on the other hand, feels and senses its way through life. It collects sensory impressions and emotional data that it feeds in great quantities to our thinking brain, to sort through and make sense of. The limbic brain processes our emotions. The cortex draws meaning from them.

Emotions Aren't Necessarily the Same as Feelings

Though we use the terms interchangeably, Antonio Damasio, author of *The Feeling of What Happens*, suggests that emotions and feelings are actually different, that basic emotions such as fear, grief, desire, rage, and love are hardwired into our bodies and happen 'atomically' while our feelings are processed by the thinking part of our brain (Damasio 1999). Our thinking, in other words, elevates our more primitive emotions to a conscious level where we can actually experience them. When we can decode and understand the emotions, we can incorporate them into our ever-expanding and evolving sense of self. Once we make our emotions conscious through thinking about them, we can begin to understand our feelings about them.

We're meant to experience our basic emotions in a split second, before we have time to feel our feelings surrounding them. That crucial one-tenth of a second may mean the difference between health or injury. So nature put first things first, safety above understanding. When we're terrified, the thinking part of us temporarily shuts down for some very sound reasons. We aren't supposed to be distracted by random thoughts when danger threatens. We're meant to be flooded with the adrenaline we need to fight or flee, or to freeze, to be absolutely still and remain unnoticed, to become 'invisible.' This ancient fear response happens before any conscious thought enters our process. It's part of what is referred to as the 'automatic response system.' Our emotion gets us to fight, flee, or freeze. How we feel and think about being almost hit by that

car goes on hold while we do what we need to do to survive. Later, when we can afford the time, we may realize what a close call we had and experience all of the surrounding feelings that went on hold while our survival response took over.

On the other hand, when it comes to the more pleasant drives and emotions, we're meant to make love rather than think about love, which would do nothing to further our species.

### The Relationship between Emotion and Action

We cannot simply lie back and feel our emotions . . . the motor aspect of emotion involves both inwardly and outwardly directed discharge processes. Inwardly, the experience of emotions is accompanied by the release of hormones, changes in breathing and heart rate . . . changes in regional blood supply, and so forth. Outwardly, emotion manifests itself in various ways: through changes in facial expression, baring of teeth, crying, blushing, and the like, but also in complex behaviors like shouting, running away and lashing out (Solmes and Turnbull 2002).

This body involvement, this urge to act, is the key to understanding why we act out our emotions when we can't tolerate feeling them. Learning to tolerate experiencing our strong emotions and use our thinking minds to elevate them to a conscious level where we can actually feel the feelings and think the thoughts surrounding them is key to developing emotional sobriety.

### Unfelt Childhood Emotion

Sometimes emotions from childhood can live within us in a frozen state if they were never elevated to a conscious level. A child who has been raged at over and over again, for example, may simply freeze, though he will not know why he is numbing himself. He may not be able to tell you how he feels. When, as an adult, he is around anger, he may freeze all over again and still not know why.

Therapy, recovery, and support groups are designed to help with this situation. As the frozenness of that inner child, for example, wears off in the safety of a therapeutic environment, he can now process the feelings that never really were processed to begin with, within the safety and support of a healing environment. This process allows him to self-reflect, to witness this situation from the past through his adult eyes of today. In this way he can process the feelings that went on hold, make sense of them through more mature eyes, and bring them into perspective and balance.

Homes that aren't calm?that are in what we might call chronic chaos?undermine our body's ability to maintain a regulated state. When we're scared too much of the time, our limbic system gets stuck at one or the other end of the emotional spectrum; we either feel too much or too little. We lose our ability to fine-tune, to self-regulate, to live comfortably in our own skin. We don't think through what we're feeling and bring it into a state of equilibrium, because we're either running from our emotions, or they are running ahead of us. At the most extreme level, thought and emotion become disengaged. We lose touch with ourselves.

This subject of finding emotional balance has riveted me much of my professional life, both because of my own background and because I have come to understand that curing people is not what therapy is about.

Therapy is about helping people to restore the ability to regulate their emotional responses to life.

I came from a happy, successful family that encountered more pain than it could handle. My stable family became unstable, and my husband came from the same setup. On the surface it was alcoholism, but the alcoholism grew out of a family ecosystem that was perpetuating painful emotional experiences by not working problems through toward understanding and resolution. We went through our pain behind closed doors, and eventually those doors became hidden even from ourselves.

It has taken a good part of our adult lives to fully wrap our minds around what went wrong and how to fix it. That's the bad news. The good news is that we figured it out, or let's say we figured enough of it out so we could get out of our own way and lead happy, constructive lives.

### What Are the Signs of Emotional Sobriety?

Well-developed skills of self-regulation

Ability to regulate strong emotions

Ability to regulate mood, appetite

Ability to maintain a perspective on life circumstances

Ability to regulate potentially harmful substances or self-medicating behaviors

Ability to live in the present

Ability to regulate activity levels

Ability to live with both social and intimate connection

Resilience, the ability to roll with the punches

Ability to regulate personal behavior

Ability to own and process unwanted or painful emotions rather than disown them, split them off, or project them outside the self

### What Are Symptoms of a Lack of Emotional Sobriety?

Underdeveloped skills of self-regulation

Inability to regulate strong feelings such as anger, rage, anxiety, sadness

Lack of ability to regulate mood, appetite

Lack of ability to regulate behavior

Not being able to put strong emotions into perspective

Lack of ability to regulate substances or self-medicating behaviors

Inability to live in the present

Lack of ability to regulate activity level (chronically over- or underactive)

Inability to live comfortably in intimate relationships

Lack of resilience or the ability to roll with the punches

Tendency to try to get rid of painful emotions through defensive strategies such as transference (transferring painful feelings from a relationship from the past onto a relationship in the present), projection (projecting unwanted feelings outside the self onto another person or situation, disowning them), and splitting (throwing unwanted feelings out of consciousness)

## What Are the Solutions for Coming into Balance?

Learn the skills of mind, body, and emotional self-regulation  
Resolve childhood wounds so they don't undermine self-regulation  
Learn effective and healthy ways of self-soothing and incorporate them into daily life  
Learn effective ways to manage stress  
Maintain a healthy body; get daily exercise, rest, and proper nutrition  
Process emotional ups and downs as they happen and learn to consciously shift feeling and thinking states  
Learn to use the thinking mind to regulate the feeling, limbic mind  
Develop inner resources: quiet, meditation, spiritual pursuits

F -Develop outer resources: work, hobbies, social life, community

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