Am I Emotion Phobic?

Brené Brown is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand their emotional life. My first contact with the term "emotion phobic" came while reading her book 'Rising Strong.' Before I learned the definition of the phrase, I knew it was me.

Realizing I was "emotion phobic" made sense of my life. It helped me understand my emotional avoidance and suppression and why I so desperately needed an emotional education, those years of work to develop emotional awareness and intelligence.

What my experience in leadership has taught me as a leader of both secular and spiritual organizations is how common it is for people to be unaware of, neglect, or ignore their emotional life.

When we lack emotional depth, our lives begin to run an emotional deficit leaving us dissatisfied, discontent, and lonely because of emotionally distant relationships.

Running an emotional deficit in our lives is like dehydration which 75% of Americans experience.

> CBS reports that while most people know perfectly well that water is the way to go, up to 75 percent of the American population fall short of the 10 daily cups prescribed by the Institute of Medicine – which, in medical terms, means that most people in the U.S are functioning in a chronic state of dehydration.
> 75% of Americans Suffer From Chronic Dehydration, According to Doctors

Water logic reports that "Despite the negative health and cognitive effects of dehydration most adults go through their daily lives in this state."

Let me suggest that we are not only chronically water dehydrated but also emotionally dehydrated, and that the reason for the latter is our emotional phobias.

What is Emotion Phobia and Why is it Unhealthy?

> Miriam Greenspan, a psychotherapist and the author of Healing Through the Dark Emotions, was interviewed by Jungian therapist Barbara Platek in The Sun Magazine. The article has been required reading in my classes since it first appeared in 2008. Greenspan explains why she believes our culture is "emotion phobic" and that we fear and devalue emotion.
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> Rising Strong, Brené Brown

Brené Brown uses the work of Miriam Greenspan to help us understand emotion phobia. Her analysis makes clear that when we are "emotion phobic" we "fear and devalue emotion."

If you like me are or have been "emotion phobic," then you know that despite our resistance to emotional relationships and experiences it is actually what we desire.

> But despite our fear, there is something in us that wants to feel all these emotional energies, because they are the juice of life.
>
> Rising Strong, Brené Brown

Even as I write there is a smile, a chuckle in my heart in recognizing my "emotion phobic" tendencies, then reflecting on the words of Brené Brown I am reminded, many of the disappointing, self-destructive, self-sabotaging, dysfunctional, and painful relational experiences in my life have come from my emotional phobias.

> When we suppress and diminish our emotions, we feel deprived. So we watch horror movies or so-called reality shows like Fear Factor. We seek out emotional intensity vicariously, because when we are emotionally numb, we need a great deal of stimulation to feel something, anything. So emotional pornography provides the stimulation, but it's only ersatz emotion—it doesn't teach us anything about ourselves or the world.
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> Rising Strong, Brené Brown

Emotional Phobias lead us to "suppress and diminish our emotions." After a time, we become emotionally deprived or dehydrated. This emotional deprivation or dehydration leaves

us in a state of emotional hunger or thirst at which time we start pursuing emotionally intense stimulation to satisfy our appetites. Being emotionally numb we choose what Greenspan calls "emotional pornography" or unhealthy emotional pursuits instead of healthy ones.

Being "emotion phobic" is both humorous and serious. We need to be able to laugh at the foolish relationship mistakes we have made because of our lack of emotional understanding. At the same time, we need to apply serious effort and honesty in our effort to conquer our emotional phobias, so we build healthy rather than unhealthy relationships.

Conquering Our Emotional Phobias

> I don't think we can learn much about ourselves, our relationships, or the world without recognizing and getting curious about emotion.
>
> Rising Strong, Brené Brown

Conquering our emotional fears and tendency to devalue emotion is a lifelong process. The best place to start is by providing substantial answers to the following questions.

1. How do you see yourself suppressing your emotions?
2. How do you see yourself diminishing your emotions?
3. Can you identify areas of your life where you feel emotionally deprived?
4. What unhealthy emotional pursuits reveal your emotional hunger?
5. What relationships can you invest in to satisfy your emotional hunger in healthier ways?

The next step is to do the type of soul searching described in "Leadership and the Crisis of the Soul," then go to work building the type of friendships described in "The Lost Art of Friendship."

One last thing to remember, personal growth should be a joy not a burden, a period of discovery and breakthrough resulting in a happier and more satisfying life.

My personal experience breaking free from being “emotion phobic” as well as the conversations I have had with those who have done the same has taught me that no matter how difficult the work involved, breaking free from emotional deprivation and dehydration is one of the most satisfying things we can do in life.