

# Keeping Cool in the Heat: Mastering Strong Negative Feelings

By E. Daisy Anderson

*"We cannot be truly in relationship with God without being in relationship with one another."  
- Muriel Bishop Summers*

Last summer at Canadian Yearly Meeting (CYM), Ministry and Counsel presented a package on sexual abuse. Strong feelings were aroused. There are other issues with the potential for eliciting emotions i.e. same sex marriage or Christocentric language. I will use sexual abuse to illustrate how feelings can sever spiritual connections and relationships. Push our buttons; emotions erupt; and we react. And reactions can be hurtful. I ask: "How do we stay grounded in the spirit when we face emotional issues?"

Confronted with emotional issues, we must first separate the story from the feelings. It was the aroused feelings and reactions that caused the hurt at CYM, not the content of the package.

Feelings are integral to our humanity. Feelings can be intense, mild, thrilling or painful. Feelings talk through words and body language. Strong surges of uncontrolled feelings can shut us down spiritually. We do not listen, we become defensive, and our thinking is distorted.

To look at the source of our strong feelings, reflect on Advices and Queries #11: "What unpalatable truths might you be evading?" We may have been hurt, or possibly hurt another. Using the example, sexual abuse, we are all touched by it in one way or another. We may have experienced such violence or know someone who has. Many of us have negative feelings that can surface when the topic is discussed.

Strong negative feelings increase our vulnerability to hurt and be hurtful. We may try to protect ourselves by blaming, shaming or humiliating. Hurtful actions have no place in resolving sensitive issues. The difficulty of addressing sexual abuse is compounded by the secrecy we try to keep to avoid shame and feeling blamed. Owning up to our feelings and reactions takes courage.

When we master our feelings, we choose our reactions. We are calm and thoughtful, increasing our openness to spiritual guidance.

Strengthening our skills in the use of our feelings is lifelong. A few may need to take the extra step of reviewing past hurts and guilt. If we frequently retreat from life, run in circles, drown our sorrows in alcohol or prescription drugs, then we are not only limiting our own lives but likely the lives of others. It may then be wise to revisit our past, rewrite our understanding of it, all the while building our calming skills.

Amidst differences, empathy cools heated emotions. When we put ourselves into another's shoes we feel their pain and joy, we see their side of the story. Resolution comes much easier if both those who were hurt and those who may have hurt are empathetic. How can you be angry at someone when you understand and feel as they do? If we are filled with empathy, debate just dissipates and resolution ensues. A good dose of empathy helps keep perspective.

We alter the emotional tone of discussions with our word choice. Emotionally provocative words escalate and inflame "you said, I said" debates. Examples are words that infer blame or deceit. To test if a phrase is inflammatory, ask: "Is this a fair way to say ... ?" The word "victim" can bring forth images of sadness, anger and frenzy. We can be damaged by interpersonal violence, and not be victims. It is preferable to say something like: "a person who experienced ..."

Searching our hearts, walking in another's shoes and choosing our words lead to calmer discussions on difficult topics. Building relationship with one another, we grow in relationship with God. ✱

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