
Oppositional Emotions and “The Stance of Opposition”: Exploring the Ethical Dimension to Emotions

In SEE Learning we identify certain emotions as “risky.” Emotions are risky when, if left unattended or allowed to grow very strong, they prompt us to engage in behaviors that would harm ourselves and/or others. Since SEE Learning is about our own personal experience, what is most important is discerning for ourselves what counts as a “risky emotion” for us.

In chapter 1 we explored the idea that generally no one wants to be hurt or harmed. Instead, we prefer being treated with kindness and compassion. This appears to be universal even among non-human animals. It is no surprise then that many philosophers, scientists, and religious thinkers have come to the conclusion that not harming others is an important foundation of ethical behavior. We can call this “the ethic of non-violence.” This is a foundational concept that is also often called “the Golden Rule”: to treat others as you yourself would want to be treated. This means treating others with kindness, compassion, honesty, integrity, generosity, and forgiveness, since this is how we would like others to treat us.

If ethics is about how we treat others and want them to treat us, then we can see that emotions can play a role in ethics. This is because our emotions and feelings have a large impact on how we behave. For example, we have explored that if we are stuck in the high zone or low zone, we are less likely to engage in productive ways, and more likely to engage in unproductive ways.

We can learn to identify emotions in different ways. We can study them objectively from a third-person perspective (*what we observe in the world as an objective outsider, like a scientist studying it*). We can also study them in our own subjective experience from a first-person perspective (*what we experience and observe about ourselves*). And thirdly, we can study emotions in others from a second-person perspective (*what we observe about another and what we think about that*). Why would we study emotions in so many different ways? Because the better we can identify risky emotions, the better we can manage them. We are dealing with harmful behavior at a fundamental level: in our own minds and hearts.

In addition to just recognizing risky emotions, we can also cultivate emotions and mindsets that are opposed to them. For example, what is the opposite of jealousy? What is the opposite of compassion? What is the opposite of anger?

Oppositional Emotions and “The Stance of Opposition”:

Exploring the Ethical Dimension to Emotions (continued)

We can even develop a “stance of opposition” towards those emotions and mindsets (including thinking traps) that we believe are harmful to ourselves and others. For example, if we decide that prejudice towards others on the basis of their gender, religion or ethnicity is wrong, then we identify prejudice as a risky mindset that we do not want. We then commit ourselves to opposing that risky mindset whenever we see it in ourselves or others. Similarly, we commit to cultivating its opposite (or antidote). We may decide that the opposite to such prejudice is a feeling of common humanity and the fundamental equality of all persons, and a commitment to fairness, justice, and impartiality. If so, we commit ourselves to cultivating that in ourselves and others. We cultivate a “stance of appreciation” for these good qualities.

When we develop these stances of opposition and appreciation, we have taken up a commitment to lead an ethical life. We are not merely stating outwardly that we are opposed to prejudice, we are inwardly watching for prejudice within ourselves and opposing it when it arises. Like any skill that we regularly practice, we should get better at this over time. Our internal tendency towards prejudicial thinking should weaken, and our commitment to, and conviction in, the fundamental equality of all persons should grow and become ever firmer. Over time, our understanding of prejudice can become clearer, as will our understanding of common humanity and equality.

The basis of this ethical life is a stance of nonviolence or non-harming. That means refraining from harming others or, if that is impossible, minimizing the harm that we do to others. If others do harm us, we will rarely see those actions as ethical. By the same token, others will not see our actions as ethical if we are harming them. Since we live in communities where we are interdependent, trying to refrain from harm can serve as a foundational ethical principle for our individual and collective well-being. The stance of opposition helps us to do this, because we are on the lookout for those mental states and emotions that might lead us to harming ourselves and others, advertently or inadvertently.

The stance of opposition also helps us maintain “emotional hygiene.” Physical hygiene means the ability to identify what is healthy from what is not. Learning about physical hygiene tells us about things like germs and pathogens so that we can be on our guard against them. It also tells us how to engage in productive behaviors that maintain and bolster our physical health. Emotional hygiene does the same, except on the level of emotions and mindsets. Without understanding the pitfalls of risky emotions left unchecked, and without having a stance of opposition, our practice of emotional hygiene could be limited. If we do develop a rich understanding of our own and others’ emotions, we can practice emotional hygiene in a way that promotes our own and others’ well-being.

Graphic Organizer

Four "A"s Protocol Template

Assumptions	Aspirations
What assumptions does the author of the Stress Contagion article hold?	What parts of the Stress Contagion article did you find personally meaningful and that you would want to engage in?
Agree	Argue
What do you agree with in the Stress Contagion article?	What do you want to argue with in the Stress Contagion article?