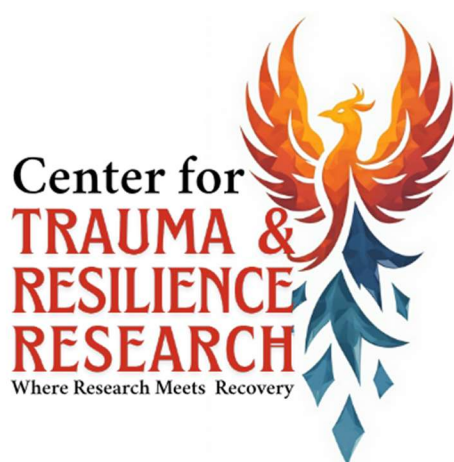


Valuing Negative Emotions: A Psychological, Cultural, and Theological Perspective

Dr. Meg Robertson

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600 1st Ave Ste 330
PMB 100974
Seattle, Washington 98104-2246 US
(541)630-3888; FAX: (360) 251-0821
Website: www.ctrinc.com
Nonsecure email: trauma.resilience.research@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0661-3461>
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Author Note

Dr. Meg Robertson
I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to
Margaret Robertson
Email: trauma.resilience.research@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the multifaceted role of negative emotions across psychological, cultural, theological, and cognitive domains. Contrary to Western cultural norms that prioritize positivity, research demonstrates that emotions like sadness, anger, guilt, and fear serve essential adaptive functions. Psychological theories underscore their value for emotional agility and resilience. Cultural studies reveal varying attitudes toward emotional expression, with Eastern cultures promoting emotional balance. Theologically, Christian texts acknowledge the spiritual significance of sorrow and lament. Integrating these perspectives enriches our understanding of human emotion, challenges prevailing stigma, and supports a more holistic model of growth and healing.

Keywords: Negative emotions, emotional resilience, emotional agility, cultural psychology, theological reflection, moral development, emotional expression, trauma-informed care, Christian counseling, affective cognition

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In contemporary American culture, positive emotions such as happiness, enthusiasm, and confidence are highly valued and promoted as indicators of success and personal well-being. This cultural disposition often regards negative emotions—such as sadness, anger, fear, and guilt—as undesirable or dysfunctional states to be minimized or avoided. Yet, emerging interdisciplinary research from psychology, cultural studies, theology, and cognitive science challenges this dichotomy. Rather than categorizing emotions as either positive or negative in value, scholars argue for a more nuanced understanding that appreciates the functional, relational, and moral utility of all emotions.

This paper aims to synthesize psychological, cultural, theological, and cognitive perspectives on the value of negative emotions. Through this integrated lens, we explore how embracing so-called negative emotional states can foster deeper self-awareness, resilience, moral development, and relational authenticity. Furthermore, a Christian theological perspective offers a compelling framework for integrating pain and sorrow into a meaningful life, emphasizing spiritual growth through emotional honesty. By recognizing the adaptive value of negative emotions, we can support a more inclusive and humane model of flourishing that is particularly relevant to education, counseling, leadership, and ministry.

Psychological Functions of Negative Emotions

From a psychological perspective, negative emotions are not merely inconvenient byproducts of distress but are essential to the organism's capacity to adapt and respond to environmental challenges. Psychologist Susan David (2016) argues that emotions such as fear, sadness, anger, and guilt act as internal signals that illuminate unmet needs or violated values. Fear, for example, alerts us to potential danger, prompting self-protective behaviors; sadness

enables emotional healing in the wake of loss; guilt guides moral reflection and reparative actions; and anger mobilizes response to injustice.

Wong (2011) introduces the concept of “*Positive Psychology 2.0*,” which moves beyond a simple emphasis on happiness and flourishing to include suffering and adversity as intrinsic elements of a meaningful life. This more balanced model acknowledges that emotional pain often functions as a catalyst for growth and transformation. Emotional agility—the ability to navigate emotional complexity without being dominated by it—is cultivated not through avoidance but through mindful engagement with emotional experiences, including those that are painful or uncomfortable.

Walker and Pitts (1998) also highlight the developmental importance of moral emotions like guilt and remorse in fostering mature moral reasoning. Children and adults alike develop ethical behavior not simply through cognitive learning but through the emotional experience of wrongdoing and the subsequent desire to repair and reconcile. Thus, far from being pathologies to suppress, negative emotions are indispensable tools for personal and interpersonal development.

Cultural Variations in Emotional Value

The value ascribed to emotions is deeply influenced by cultural norms and ideologies. In American culture, rooted in individualism and success-oriented values, high-arousal positive emotions such as excitement and enthusiasm are idealized (Tsai, 2007). These emotions align with cultural goals of self-expression and achievement. Conversely, low-arousal or negative emotions are often pathologized or dismissed, limiting the emotional range considered socially acceptable.

Contrastingly, East Asian cultures tend to emphasize emotional moderation and balance. Emotional maturity in these contexts involves the integration of both joy and sorrow, recognizing the impermanence and interdependence of emotional states (Qui et al., 2025). Negative emotions such as guilt and sadness are viewed not as weaknesses but as signs of relational attunement and ethical sensitivity. Harmony in relationships, rather than the pursuit of individual happiness, is often prioritized, allowing greater acceptance of emotional ambivalence.

This cultural comparison illuminates how the suppression of negative emotions in Western settings may contribute to emotional dysregulation, social disconnection, and even mental health issues. Embracing a more culturally inclusive model of emotional valuation could help broaden the Western understanding of emotional health. It would also support practices in education, leadership, and mental health that validate the full spectrum of emotional experience.

Theological Interpretations of Negative Emotions

Christian theology provides a robust framework for understanding and valuing negative emotions. Throughout Scripture, emotional honesty is not only permitted but encouraged. The Psalms offer vivid expressions of despair, anger, fear, and longing, affirming the spiritual legitimacy of lament. These texts present emotional vulnerability not as a failure of faith but as a profound act of trust in God's responsiveness. Matthew 5:4, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted," proclaims divine blessing upon those who grieve.

Jesus himself modeled a full range of human emotions. He wept over the death of Lazarus (John 11:35), expressed anger at the moneychangers in the temple (Matthew 21:12-13), and lamented his suffering in Gethsemane (Luke 22:42-44). These moments highlight the theological affirmation of emotional depth and provide spiritual validation for the experiences of

grief, frustration, and anguish. Far from being incompatible with spiritual maturity, such emotions can be part of sanctification and deepening reliance on God.

The writings of theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Henri Nouwen further illustrate that suffering and vulnerability can be pathways to grace. Bonhoeffer's prison reflections demonstrate how sorrow and confinement can yield spiritual clarity, while Nouwen's notion of the "wounded healer" redefines emotional pain as a resource for pastoral empathy. Integrating negative emotions into theological reflection enhances not only personal spiritual growth but also equips leaders to offer more compassionate care.

Emotion and Language Processing

Emotion is not experienced in isolation from cognition and communication. Language shapes how individuals perceive, interpret, and express emotional experiences. Jończyk (2016) explores the neuro-pragmatic interactions between language and emotion, highlighting how both native and non-native speakers navigate affective expression through linguistic frameworks. The ability to verbalize emotion is not merely a communicative skill but a cognitive act that contributes to emotional regulation and integration.

Moreover, emotional articulation plays a key role in interpersonal relationships. The capacity to name one's feelings enables more precise self-understanding and fosters relational empathy. In multilingual contexts, individuals may access or express emotions differently depending on the language used, which can have implications for counseling, education, and cross-cultural communication.

Whissell (2023) expands this understanding by illustrating how emotional expression is mediated by culture, cognition, and narrative. Emotionally intelligent language facilitates learning, creativity, and ethical reasoning. Thus, the interplay between language and emotion is

not only academic but deeply practical, influencing how communities talk about pain, justice, and healing.

Educational and Leadership Applications

In educational and leadership contexts, negative emotions often emerge during periods of transition, challenge, or failure. These moments offer powerful opportunities for growth when leaders and educators are equipped to respond with emotional awareness rather than avoidance. Mourlas et al. (2009) argue that both cognitive and emotional factors must be integrated into educational design to support adaptive learning and well-being.

For example, students who experience anxiety around academic performance may benefit from guided reflection on their emotional responses. Rather than dismissing fear as irrational, educators can validate the emotion and use it as a starting point for developing coping skills. Similarly, moral emotions like guilt or regret, when addressed constructively, can promote ethical learning and accountability.

In leadership, acknowledging negative emotions fosters trust and authenticity. Leaders who admit to their own struggles, or who hold space for others' distress, model emotional maturity and compassion. Trauma-informed leadership, especially in faith-based or caregiving organizations, emphasizes the importance of emotional safety, relational attunement, and the therapeutic potential of shared vulnerability.

Implications for Practice

Understanding and valuing negative emotions has practical implications across multiple domains. In counseling, normalizing emotions such as grief, guilt, and fear decreases stigma and enhances client engagement. Trauma-informed care models encourage clinicians to view

emotional pain as a signal rather than a symptom to be eradicated. This perspective helps build therapeutic alliances and supports long-term resilience.

In pastoral care, leaders can draw from biblical narratives and theological principles to accompany others in their suffering. Rather than offering premature reassurance, effective pastoral presence involves listening, lamenting, and pointing toward redemptive hope. Faith communities that honor the full emotional range create space for authentic fellowship and mutual care.

In education, fostering emotional literacy supports academic and personal development. By teaching students to identify and articulate their emotions, schools can nurture more reflective and empathetic citizens. This is especially important in a digital age, where emotional discourse is often flattened or fragmented by online communication. In social media analysis, as Wu et al. (2020) demonstrate, understanding emotional cognition enhances the ability to interpret public sentiment. Applying deep learning models to online discourse can identify collective experiences of anger, fear, or grief—data that may inform public health, policymaking, or community support initiatives.

Conclusion

In a society that frequently equates well-being with the absence of distress, this paper affirms the intrinsic value of negative emotions as vital components of human flourishing. Emotions such as fear, anger, guilt, and sorrow are not mere obstacles to be overcome but signals of deeper truths, invitations to reflect, and pathways toward transformation. By synthesizing insights from psychology, cultural studies, theology, and language sciences, we see that these emotions foster resilience, moral insight, empathy, and spiritual depth.

Psychologically, negative emotions are functional responses to life's challenges, offering data about personal values and relational dynamics. Culturally, the acceptance of emotional suffering varies, with collectivist societies often providing a model for balanced emotional life. Theologically, negative emotions are not contrary to faith but embedded in its expression, with Scripture and Christian tradition offering a compassionate vision for suffering. Linguistically, our ability to name and communicate emotions influences how we process and integrate them. And practically, educators, counselors, and leaders are called to create environments that support—not silence—emotional honesty.

Ultimately, valuing negative emotions allows individuals and communities to live more fully, love more deeply, and lead more authentically. As we make space for the darker hues of emotional experience, we enrich our understanding of ourselves and one another. This holistic view honors the full range of human affect and aligns with a vision of flourishing that embraces brokenness as a place where healing, meaning, and grace emerge.

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