

Emotional Guardedness and Your Health

Emotional What?

Emotional Guardedness is a tricky thing. It describes how much we keep our guard up with others and not let them see parts of ourselves that we don't want others to know about us. Those of us who are more emotionally guarded care more about what other people think about us. We may also try harder to avoid potential conflict with others and be more concerned about their disapproval.

One big problem with emotional guardedness is that practically no one sees themselves as emotionally guarded. We may think this is something others don't see in us, because we often don't see it in ourselves. However, we all have our blind spots and others close to us are more likely to see this than we are ourselves.

Why Is This Bad?

On the one hand, it doesn't sound so bad to care what others think of us or to avoid conflict. In fact, it is good for us to care what others think. Most successful people owe part of their success to giving a good impression. But, this can go too far in even small and subtle ways. When we spend energy being concerned about what others think of us (even when we are not aware of it), we are contributing to our own stress.

For one reason, we cannot control what others think of us. We can put ourselves on an unending treadmill trying to keep up an image that we want to present. This means we have to always be alert and on guard to be aware of what others are thinking. Instead, we are usually better off if we are authentic and natural simply being who we are.

What Can We Do?

Once we think we understand what emotional guardedness is, we can ask someone who is close to us whether he or she thinks we are guarded. If we don't have someone we think we can ask, then that can be a sign in itself that we may be more guarded. We can look for opportunities to be more open and sharing with people we know we can trust.

We can also notice if we are too afraid simply be who we naturally are with all of our flaws instead of trying to be someone we are not. If we are simply not skilled in some area, it is OK to admit that. If we are nervous giving a speech, it is OK to be nervous. Everyone is not skilled in SOME area, and everyone can be nervous giving a speech.



What Science Tells Us

Heart patients who were more emotionally guarded were more than twice as likely to have another heart attack or die during the 6 years of this study.

Denollet, et.al., Health Psychology, 2008 (27):302-308

Individuals who were more emotionally guarded were more likely to respond to stressful activities with higher blood pressure than persons who were less guarded when they were examined three years later. Guardedness can have long term effects.

Rutledge T and Linden W, Annals of Behavioral Med. 2003;25(1):34-40

Asthma patients who were more emotionally guarded showed more problems with their breathing after being exposed to a stressful event than patients who were less guarded.

Feldman JM, et.al., Psychomatic Medicine, 2002,64(2):294-301

How Does This Affect Us?

When our guardedness makes us always have to be aware or alert to how we are perceived by others around us, our mind has to work overtime beyond what we usually require of it. One way to think of it is, if our mind is working overtime, then it is charging our bodies time and a half. There is a chronic wear and tear that can make us more susceptible to stress and disease. It can affect our blood pressure, our lungs' functioning, and the likelihood of another heart attack.

Written by:

Psychologists Dr. Kent Eichenauer and Dr. Glenn Feltz
Developers of the **Psychosocial Risk Factor Survey**
www.prfs1.com

Delta Psychology Center
Urbana, OH
www.deltapsychologycenter.com