

Emotional Evolution:

A Darwinian understanding of suffering and wellbeing

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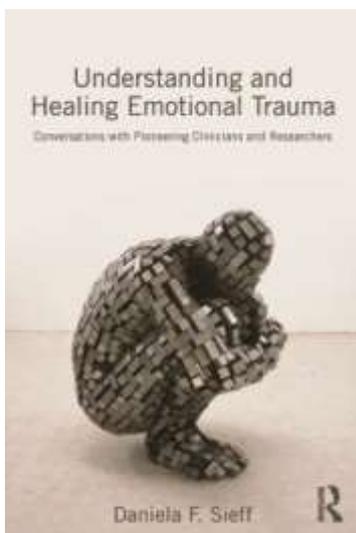
Chapter Summary

To understand emotional suffering, it is vital to understand what the underlying emotions evolved to do. Emotional suffering is caused by 'negative' emotions, which we generally see as undesirable and try to eliminate as quickly as possible. However negative emotions evolved over millions of years to warn us of danger and to motivate us to withdraw from threatening situations. Thus it is not always wise to eliminate these emotions; rather it is prudent to first explore whether our suffering relates to our circumstances, and if so, act accordingly.

Sometimes, however, we are assailed by negative emotions which seem inappropriate to our circumstances. Then we are diagnosed as having a disorder such as depression, anxiety or panic attacks. Evolutionary thinking helps to explain why we are susceptible to these 'disorders', and enables us to contextualise the dynamics involved in terms of what we have inherited from our distant ancestors.

Evolutionary thinking also elucidates why happiness is elusive, why we turn to self-blame when misfortune befalls us, and why will we sacrifice so much to remain within groups. It can even shed light on why psychological change is difficult. Most importantly, evolutionary perspectives help us realise that our emotional states result from our deep heritage rather than because we are abnormal, and that realisation makes it easier to develop self-acceptance and self-compassion.

Today we have a much greater understanding of the evolutionary forces that have shaped our emotional world than ever before. Incorporating this understanding into our lives, and our clinical practices, enhances our ability to alleviate emotional suffering and foster well-being.



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