

Overcoming the Seven Deadly Emotions

MICHELLE BORQUEZ
author of GOD CRAZY



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Why We Have Emotions

The highest dream we could ever dream, the wish that if granted would make us happier than any other blessing, is to know God, to actually experience him. The problem is that we don't believe this idea is true. We assent to it in our heads. But we don't feel it in our hearts.

LARRY CRABB

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Emotions are part of the package of blessing and inheritance that we receive as humans. We are “fearfully and wonderfully made,” as one writer of the book of Psalms remarks. Our loving, living God didn’t want to shape us into unfeeling robots. This would’ve eliminated our privilege of free will. It would’ve meant that when we expressed our committed love and devotion to our Creator, it would be a programmed response instead of a deeply held passion and sense of gratitude for the God who made us, who knows how many hairs are on our heads, who knew us before we were ever born.

God is emotional when it comes to His children. He, like any good parents responding to the child they love, reveals His joy when we are obedient and unveils His anger when we ignore His leading or when we give ourselves over to the influence of anything outside of Him and His best. Yes, He knows how our lives will unfold and how many times we will repeat the same mistakes; nevertheless, I picture Him pacing back and forth with anticipation and great love as He awaits a prodigal son or daughter to return to the comfort and safety

of His arms. I see Him beaming with delight when His child, new to faith, takes her first steps in the direction of His leading. I see Him overcome by sorrow when He is holding us up during times of loss, illness, and pain.

Emotions Are a Gift

Emotions give our lives color, meaning, texture, and the ability to experience our journey deeply. They allow us to express our human experience to one another and to praise God from the depths of our hearts and souls. They help us convey the wave of energy that rises up in us as we experience the smile of a baby, the news of hardship, the toll of long-term struggle, the opportunity of our dreams, and the challenges and rewards of faith.

As I grew in my spiritual walk and matured as a person, I realized that my overly sensitive nature can be a gift if it is surrendered to the Lord. What I had once known only as weakness would eventually become a great strength for the purposes God had for my life. Compassion and mercy are the fruit of a more sensitive nature, and it comes naturally for me to intuitively pick up on the needs of others. When people are more sensitive, they tend to enjoy serving. They gravitate toward situations where they can nurture others. They are also very sensitive to their relationship with Christ—intuitively focused on pleasing Him, on serving Him, on fulfilling their purpose given by Him.

God can use your emotions for His glory, for the furthering of His kingdom. If you surrender negative emotions to Him and invest time managing and exploring your emotions, your life will be richer and more meaningful. But it has to become a choice in your life. We must learn not to rely on what we “feel” in the moment; instead, we need to learn to wait and evaluate why we feel certain things so that we can respond from a godly perspective.

This is not as easy as it sounds. And if anything, the people around us and the circumstances we are in tend to encourage emotional highs and lows. Friends who mean well can spur us on to ride the wave of

emotions as they become invested in our current drama or our predicament. We can fuel each other out of a sense of interest or concern and not even realize we are elevating the risk of deadly emotions.

We all tend to react when we have someone attack us verbally, or when someone cuts us off on the freeway, or when we feel someone is crowding our space, or someone is threatening our job security. Even if I act on my feelings and respond positively, it may not be the best way to respond in the situation. A positive response could still lead to a negative outcome simply because sometimes “no response” is the best plan of action. When we wait, rather than react to a situation or to initial feelings, we have a better chance of getting the outcome God desires.

What I’ve been privileged to discover along the way is the truth about how emotions are a healthy, wonderful part of who we are as God’s children and how some emotions, when left unchecked and untamed, can squelch life. They can actually consume our thinking, our belief, our trust, and our ability to live in God’s abundance. This is where emotions take a turn from function to dysfunction. From uplifting to destructive. From life-giving to deadly.

What Controls Us?

Who or what is holding the remote control on your life? Think about that. What dictates your decisions, your whims, your actions, your moods, your willingness to help others, your desires, your need for boundaries, your inability or ability to set those boundaries? When we are in bondage to deadly emotions, the enemy is able to punch those buttons and trigger the worst outcome. And let’s be honest here, we also do that to ourselves. The enemy can sit back and watch us self-destruct without lifting a finger. Left alone with our emotional baggage or out-of-control temperaments, we wander from the purpose of God and then completely miss the emotional freedom He longs for us to have. I’ve lived both sides of this, and I’m here to encourage you with the truth that this freedom from being controlled by emotions is worth fighting for, worth paying attention to, and worth the effort

you're making right now to explore these intricacies in your heart and mind and spirit.

An important truth was revealed to me years ago when my oldest son, Josh, was about two years old. I couldn't take him anywhere without him throwing a tantrum. He wouldn't stay in his stroller at the mall and he didn't like to sit in a highchair at a restaurant, and so I'd stay home. It seemed easier than dealing with the humiliation and exhaustion of those public displays. The freedoms of my life seemed worth sacrificing because the cost of taking him anywhere was too much for me to bear. I know you're probably thinking, *Michelle, you needed to let that child know who is boss*. Remember, he was my first, so please go easy on me.

Thankfully I had a great friend named Sarah who had three kids a little older than mine. She was a strong and loving mom. I loved going over to her house because she seemed to be in control of everything. Her home felt peaceful and not overwhelmed by emotional turmoil like my home. She asked me one afternoon to meet her at the mall. You know what my answer was. "I can't. Josh won't stay in his stroller. He hates being at the mall." Can you imagine her tone when she answered, "What? Are you kidding? Michelle, you need to take him to the mall every day. And if he throws a tantrum you take him to the bathroom and spank his little bottom. You keep going to the mall until he stops doing that." I love it when people are so straight with me.

I took her advice and guess what? It worked! I went on several excursions with the new confidence that I could take control of my tantrum-prone toddler *and* I could change the situation for the better. After that I never had a problem going to the mall or anywhere else. And my Joshua is now a fine young man. If it were not for Sarah, I may have continued living with frustration and helplessness, especially as Josh became older. If I hadn't taken her advice, I would've had a spoiled child on my hands, and all the rest of my children would most likely be spoiled too. And think how limited my life would be. I would've told God "no" when He asked me to go places because I was

too worried about sparking an incident. God can't use or direct someone who is always hiding from life or from the possible next step.

When we experience an emotion spiraling out of control, it is like a spoiled child wanting his way—only it's our flesh crying out, not a child. Our flesh cries out for what it wants, and when we continue to give in to its demands, we remain in bondage and forfeit the hope of living a healthy life of emotional freedom. As long as those emotions are controlling us and we're not fully submitted to Christ, we will feel miserable, depressed, anxious, guilty, shameful, angry, fearful, and insecure. It is our choice to follow God's advice and wisdom, just as it was my choice to take Sarah's advice and follow her mentoring lead. God has given us the tools to overcome the trials of the flesh, but we have to embrace His ways and not continue to give in to the desires of the flesh.

Personality, Behaviors, and Emotions

Serious. Silly. Type A. Free-spirited. Take charge. Behind the scenes. Controlled. No matter which personality or personal approaches to life we have, we are all emotional. There isn't one type of person or character who gets to claim they are emotion-free (though some will try, which we'll discuss). While many of us may have tried to rid ourselves of feeling emotions, this is not what God intends as a solution to overcoming deadly emotions. Ignoring or squelching all emotion would make us cold, distant, and definitely not open to intimacy.

For those of us who show our emotions more than others, this news is great news...it's freedom! But don't stop reading here. All of us, whether we wear our emotions on our sleeves or hold them close to our hearts, need to come to the place of allowing God to help us get ahold of negative, dangerous emotions and bring them under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Do you recognize when your emotions are getting out of control? Do you ever feel frustrated about decisions made as a result of reacting to a situation too quickly? We have all been there, believe me.

How many times have you responded with regrettable statements

or actions when someone hurt you or talked about you behind your back? Or you've misread a situation or a friend's comment and turned up the volume on your rage or jealousy? We've all made decisions based on feelings instead of what God wants from us at the moment. Feelings will lie to us, deceive us, and that is why it's so important to learn what God's Word says about these potentially destructive forces in our lives.

The Internally Explosive Person

We must remember that what we hide still has power over us, but when we bring things out in the open, they begin losing their grip immediately.

JOYCE MEYER, *MANAGING YOUR EMOTIONS*

"The truth will set us free" (John 8:32). In her book *Managing Your Emotions*, speaker and author Joyce Meyer stresses the importance of being honest when you are feeling down or moving toward negative emotions. It helps others know it's not about them. I tend to try to keep quiet when I am feeling a lot of negative emotions. I used to suppress them so that I wouldn't emotionally explode or do something I might regret. Most often I tend to be volatile during a certain time of the month (Can you relate?). Now I try to acknowledge these fleeting emotions and deal with them. And if I do explode when one of my kids doesn't do a chore or when someone negates something I care about, I acknowledge the rise of the anger or the sense of pride or whatever it is. I then apologize and keep myself honest.

I went with a new friend to lunch one day, and she began describing her personality using words like "unemotional" and "solid." She went on to say how she is usually quite calm in situations that would trigger most women to become highly emotional.

Okay, there are a lot of these people out there who claim they are unaffected by the types of situations or moods that influence others. But there is usually something else going on. There is usually a truth behind such self-imposed stoicism. This was the case with my friend.

After a while she admitted that being forced as a child to shield her heart from the rejection and verbal abuse of her parents had caused her to shut down emotionally and lose touch with her truest feelings. While her personality is rather introverted, it was clear that these experiences from her childhood and wounds from her recent past were the real reasons that she kept her emotions locked up tight.

You see, she wasn't an unemotional person. She would most likely be considered an introvert, yes, but the emotions were there, boiling below the surface. No one knew because she came across as calm, quiet, and collected. Her version of "calm" really was about remaining a safe distance from anything or anyone that could hurt her. She'd learned this response.

I'm sure you've heard the story about the frog that willingly stays in a pot of water as he is being boiled alive. This example is so relevant to our emotional shielding and self-protection that I want to reiterate it. When the frog first gets thrown into a pot of cool tap water, which is resting on a soon-to-be activated stove burner, he is completely unaware of his destiny. He, like any frog in water, is happy and content swimming around. He has no idea that his situation is about to change. As the water slowly heats up, the frog is still unaware, splashing around, occasionally lifting his head above the water line to see his surroundings. The process is slow; he doesn't detect each small rise in temperature. Nevertheless, the change is occurring and pretty soon it will all be over for the poor little frog. It isn't until the water is at a full-throttle boil that the frog realizes that life as he's known it is over. He is cooked and frog legs are served up with a side dish of asparagus. (No, I didn't test this illustration to see if it is factual.)

Calm, collected introverts or unemotional people may hold their feelings close to their chests, and like the frog in the slow warming water, allow their feelings to slowly heat up over time until suddenly they are boiling inside. When another person irritates those old wounds or triggers former emotional hot spots, suddenly the "calm" person is overcome by these emotions and even surprised by them. They have ignored the low-level emotions for so long that they feel

bombarded by these strange sensations and aren't able to process them. The person who incited these emotions wonders what in the world happened. When emotions left simmering on the burner hit that boiling point...stand back!

People Pleasers

The compassionate person responds to the needs of others. The empathetic person relates to the needs of others. But the people pleaser tries to *second guess*, *juggle*, and *protect* the emotional needs of others. Considering that most of us aren't even sure how to discern our own emotions, the idea of trying to protect or sidestep the emotions of others to avoid causing problems is almost humorous...and most often disastrous. Many of us fall into this category. We sacrifice our own well-being, purpose, opinions, and leading to please people who come at us from the right and left. We're often ignoring God's voice from above.

There's nothing wrong with working hard to please our families, our spouses, our bosses, our coworkers, our church families, and others who are connected to us. But if we ignore our true feelings over and over because we're fearful of people or their potential responses, nothing is ever resolved. And we are never honest with ourselves or others. When we shut our emotions completely off due to pain, heart bruises from our past, fear of people, or even because our personality is more prone to do so, God has to open our eyes so we'll see our denial. He has to reactivate those places in our hearts that have dried up from lack of attention, air, and nurturing. Without this help, those negatives play a part in altering our ability to truly feel all God intended for us to feel: to love deeply, to have intimate relationships, to experience deep friendship, and to have joy in experiencing the freedom He speaks of in His Word.

The Externally Explosive Person

We all have our moments of emotional outbursts, but there are those who allow their emotions to completely control every moment, often triggering reactions to almost everything that offends them. This

is usually a result of behavior learned while growing up or an internal stress thermometer that is out of whack. It's one thing to watch a two-year-old throw a tantrum, but it's quite another when you see an adult explode all over the clerk at the grocery store over incorrect change. I see this behavior more and more as our society becomes a boiling pot of extreme pressures.

There is little excuse for exploding all over people when we feel hurt or angry, but unless we truly submit our lack of self-control to God, it may feel next to impossible to change this cycle of behavior. Peace comes from hearing the Word of God and from meditation in prayer. Prayer and the hearing of God's Word are the first steps to calming the fiery furnace that burns inside. When we are overloaded in our responsibilities, when we are stretched beyond imagination in our personal lives, how else can we exercise self-control?

I've learned to detect when I am getting to the point of overload. I work very hard to keep the stresses of everyday life out of my home in order to make it a haven of peace for my family. Occasionally the stress of juggling the personal lives of my kids triggers my explosive behavior. When they all need to be somewhere at a certain time, and I need to be at an appointment, and dinner still needs to be put on the stove, I feel myself getting angry. Unless I take action, it's not long before I'm yelling at the kids and anyone who comes across my path. The best thing is for me to avoid situations where I feel this overwhelmed and give myself a chance at sanity and my family a chance at unity.

It's not the end of the world if the kids can't go to every event or participate in every sport. Sometimes we are so focused on making up for what we didn't have we deprive our kids of the very thing they need...peace. I've also learned some practical solutions. If I know I have a heavy day ahead, I may put dinner on in the morning so all I have to do is come home and serve it. Also, to avoid feeling as if I'm going to explode at the next person who crosses me in some way, I make sure my spiritual and personal life is in order. God is a God of order, and sometimes as believers it's easy for us to think that His job is to pick up the messes we've caused.

The Lord cares about our growth and challenges us to mature throughout His Word. When we submit ourselves to a life of order, peace comes in our homes and our hearts. When we come to the place where we accept changes in plans, learn to accept that not everything will always fall perfectly into place, understand we may have to wait patiently in line, or relax when we get caught in traffic on the way home—we will begin to feel peace instead of turmoil. There will always be out-of-control moments, and in those times we must lay our idea of perfection aside and accept change, failures, and disappointments.

Do you tend to explode all the time? Ask yourself these questions:

1. How is my exploding changing my situation?
2. How does my behavior impact others?
3. What is really going on inside of me?
4. Am I angry at the person or with myself?
5. What are some ways I can add order to my life and get help?

These are just a few questions that will help you get on the path to self-control. Abusing others because we haven't instituted peace in our disordered world is not what God intended.

Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:57).

Do these people we've been talking about sound familiar? Our personalities, heart bruises, self-protection, fear, and desire to please people instead of God can cause us to react strongly to situations. What I hope you glean from this book is the ability to respond in a way that is glorifying to others and to God. When we allow deadly emotions to control us, we are setting ourselves up for ruined marriages, friendships, families, jobs, and so on. We won't thrive and experience all God has for us.

Deadly Emotion Is the Enemy's Counterfeit

God's plan for us, His desire for us, is to live in peace, joy, and victory. He wants us to be set free from emotional bondage that destroys what He is building in us and through us. When we feel controlled by the seven deadly emotions—fear, jealousy, lust, anger, stress, shame, and pride—we often blame others, our personalities, our upbringing, or even God for making us this way. But the real reason those emotions are controlling us is because we haven't surrendered this area of our lives completely to God. Instead, we are giving ourselves over to the enemy's counterfeit responses. It's so easy for our emotions to quickly take us from a place of light to a place of darkness. If you're buying into the counterfeit life, you're not living the authentic, God-centered one.

By God's grace we are given a way to counter the counterfeits! The truths in God's Word are the keys to unlocking the freedom we so desire. Learning how emotions control us and understanding the lies we are deceived by will empower us to work out our emotions in a way that brings victory to our lives instead of destruction.

How much greater would it be if our responses led to a place of victory instead of a place of sinful behavior? The feeling of being out of control is similar to the feeling we get when we drop 15 feet from the highest peak of a roller coaster. Our stomachs feel as if they dropped to our feet, our minds spin with confusion, and just when we feel we have recovered and are soaring toward more positive heights, here comes the next big drop. But unlike the roller-coaster scenario, in life we don't see the next big drop coming up. We move along and everything is just fine. We could even be on top of the world...and then we get a phone call, we hear a story, we get a negative response from someone, and we are in a dark place, a depressed state, and we react with anger, jealousy, or fear. When we are headed for a dark response, we immediately need to take our thoughts captive and shed the light of truth on them. God reveals His truth to us in His Word. This is where the freedom lies.

We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Once we learn how to use God's Word as a source of truth against the emotions that hold us captive, we are able to walk in victory rather than remain victims. Why am I staying depressed for days because Sally was mean to me or my boss didn't affirm me? Why do I fall into a state of despair after I make a mistake? Why do I allow jealousy to destroy my relationships? Why am I up and down in my emotions?

Situations may seem unredeemable, like we've hit a dead end. But there is nothing we can't overcome with Christ's strength. Nothing! And with the right tools we will be on our way to a new place of growth in our lives.

Deadly Emotions Disguised

It says in 1 Peter 5:8 that "the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." He has come to kill, steal, and destroy, but I don't think that most people really understand how Satan attacks us *behind* the walls of our minds and hearts. If he can work his way into our minds, he can affect us where it hurts the most...our way of interpreting, sensing, seeing, and responding to the world and our circumstances. As rational and logical as we like to come across to others, most of us are controlled by what we feel, not by what we think.

Emotions that have gone awry are far more dangerous than more obvious outward sin because they can go for years without being detected or managed. We write off the emotions as legitimate responses because of our mood, situation, or energy. Have you ever used "I'm sorry, it's just that I'm so tired" as your catchall excuse for bad behavior or an outburst? We may think we're fooling the outside world and maybe we even manage to fool ourselves, but the real trouble is brewing in our private world where God sees us and knows us.

Deadly emotions can be tucked away in the shadows of our strengths. I am sensitive, and the manifestation of sensitivity emerges in the form of service, compassion, and care, but the deadly emotions lurking in the shadows are fear and pride. My worry about the needs of others leads me to be “a rescuer.” Rescuing people doesn’t sound so bad, but when we rescue someone we are trying to take on God’s job. God doesn’t require you or me to be Him. As a new believer I wanted to save everyone. Over time I realized that God is the only One who saves, and I have to point people to Him, not to me. Pointing people to me would be a way of getting attention and feeding my pride. Consider how closely your actions are intertwined with your driving needs and deadly emotions. Think of times in the past week when you have tried to serve the deadly emotions instead of using the strengths God has given to you to serve Him.

Let’s examine how we currently deal with deadly emotions (or how we don’t deal with them) so that we are willing and able to let God direct us to the path of freedom.