STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING NEGATIVE EMOTIONS IN SCHOOL*

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Abstract

Emotions are part of our life and have the extraordinary quality of giving it color. These complex states of feeling generate a series of psychological and physical changes in the individual capable of influencing his thinking and behavior. Sometimes the intensity with which he feels them is so strong that the individual can be driven to take actions that, under normal conditions, he would not have done.

Starting from these realities, the present study aims to create, both, an inventory of the negative emotions students currently face in school, as well as an updated inventory of the strategies they use to manage them.

243 high school students participated in our exploratory research, based on the questionnaire, the resulting conclusions highlighting, in addition to the two inventories, the fact that beyond positive or negative emotions, it is more important to understand that any individual, and in particular the student is, in fact, subjectively confronted with stabilizing or destabilizing emotions, the strategies for their efficient management taking on extremely personal forms.

Key words: Positive/negative emotions; Stabilizing emotions; Emotion Management strategies.

1. What can we understand by "emotions"?

Explaining the concept of "emotion" is an extremely popular approach. Many authors have had this theme among their research concerns and the results of their studies have given the subject both notoriety and more clarity (Ekman & Davidson, 1994; Dixon, 2003; Blackman, 2009; Fehr & Russell, 1984; Fox, 2008; Ionescu, Jacquet, Lhote, 2002; Gaulin & McBurney, 2003).

Therefore, we do not intend to contribute significant new elements in the field, limiting ourselves to presenting only a few points of view, relevant in the context of the present investigative-statistical research.

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DEX defines emotion as "...an affective reaction of medium intensity and of relatively short duration, often accompanied by changes in the body's activities, reflecting the individual's attitude towards reality..." (*Dicționar explicativ al limbii române*, 2016, p. 312). According to the Oxford Dictionary, emotion is "a strong feeling arising from circumstances, mood or relationships with others" (Oxford Dictionary, 2019). In another approach, emotions are described as subjective experiences resulting from the agreement or discrepancy between a person's needs or expectations and reality (Băban, 2011).

Nicolae Sfetcu gives us an excellent review of the meanings and evolution of the modern concept of emotion. We thus learn that in research, the modern understanding of the notion of "emotion" denotes passion, feeling and affection (Dixon, 2003), unlike what was explained before the 1830s.

Emotions can therefore be seen as events or dispositions of variable, polar durations, placed on two continuous axes, from negative to positive valences, respectively from low intensity to increased intensity and in relation to which individuals have subjective, particular responses. Elaine Fox tells us that these responses can take the form of verbal, physiological, behavioral and/or neural mechanisms (Fox, 2008).

Emotion is in a permanent interdependence with the mood, temperament, personality, disposition and motivation of the person concerned (Sfetcu, 2020).

Most of the time, emotions are responses to significant internal and external events and result in a series of physical and psychological changes likely to influence behavior (Schacter, Gilbert, Wegner, 2011). Other authors have demonstrated that emotions are frequently the driving force of motivations (Gaulin & McBurney, 2003), facilitating adaptation to the environment, being the result of evolution (Ekman, 1992).

In terms of their social impact, emotions enable communication in a community, with positive or negative ethical charge (Fielding, 2015).

We therefore understand that emotions are closely related to the subjectivity of feelings, physiological responses or behavioral expressiveness.

Thus, at the basis of feeling emotions can be found factors that take into account the physical changes that occur, but also the method of interpretation of individuals in relation to them, following the production of the emotional event. We are talking about two essential elements: physical excitement and a cognitive label.

It also highlights the fact that emotions also have effects in our body, not just on a psychic level, as we would initially expect. Regardless of the type of emotion or its intensity, its effects are also noticeable at the biological level in the human body.

2. Types of emotions in educational context

Specialized literature abounds in classifications of emotions, starting from various criteria and from extremely varied perspectives (Ekman, 1992; Plutchik, 2001; Parrot, 2001).

We retain the typology offered by Alina Blagoi that tells us about the two established criteria for classifying emotions, polarity and functionality.

According to their polarity, emotions are divided into positive and negative. Positive emotions occur when there is motivational congruence, that is, when concrete events are consistent with the person's goals. Complementarily, negative emotions appear when the concrete situation is in contradiction with the individual's goals, blocking them or making it difficult to reach them.

According to their functionality, emotions are divided into functional and dysfunctional. The functionality or dysfunctionality of an emotion is established according to its behavioral consequences related to the person's goals (Blăgoi, 2014).

Interesting for our study regarding the management of negative emotions in school is a classification offered by the Human-Machine Interaction Network on Emotion, taken from the Romanian literature by Marian Rujoiu (Rujoiu, 2015). In the respective research, 48 emotions were identified, divided into several categories, as follows:

Table 1. An inventory of positive and negative emotions

POSITIVE				
Positive and lively	*Positive thoughts*	*Positive and soothing*	*Care*	*Reactants*
Amusement	Courage	Calm	Affect	Interest
Delight	The hope	Thank	Empathy	Politeness
Euphoria	Pride	Relaxation	Friendliness	Surprise
Excitement	Satisfaction	Relief	Love	
Happiness	Trust	Serenity		
Joy				
Pleasure				

NEGATIVE				
Negative thoughts	*Negatives outside the control area*	*Negative and strong*	*Negative and passive*	*Agitation*
Doubt	Anxiety	Anger	Boredom	Stress
Envy	Embarrassment	sorrow	Despair	Shock
Frustration	Fear	Contempt	Disappointment	Tension
Guilt	helplessness	Disgust	Suffering	
Shame	Helplessness	Irritation	Sadness	
	Concern			

As the previously mentioned approaches have shown, both positive and negative emotions can, in turn, be divided into functional and dysfunctional emotions (Blăgoi, 2014).

3. Methodology
3.1. Objectives
Starting from all these theoretical considerations, to concretize our investigative approach we chose to focus on two objectives:

1. updating the inventory of negative emotions that students experience in the educational context they go through during their pre-university education;

2. updating the inventory of methods that they use in managing these negative emotions that they try.

Subsequently, we aimed to offer to all those interested in knowing the emotional spectrum with negative valences experienced by students in a school context, two inventories, with the necessary nuances and explanations (of emotions and associated management methods), which start exclusively from the perceptions subjective of the study participants in relation to the topics investigated in the research.

It should also be stated that no value judgments were considered regarding the efficiency or correctness of the ways of managing the negative emotions identified in the surveyed subjects.

3.2. Participants

A group of 243 students (138 boys and 105 girls) from the University of Craiova, in their first year of study at different faculties, aged between 18 and 22, participated in the research.

Being first-year students, we considered that the answers they gave to the questions asked can be attributed to students from the pre-university system, taking into account the minimal differences in age and level of training.

3.3. Instruments and procedure

The research was of an exploratory type, the investigative-statistical approach based on a questionnaire that contained only two questions.

Step 1

Specifically, at the beginning of the research, the 243 students were presented with the previously presented list of negative emotions (Rujoiu, 2015), and the meanings of the concepts associated with each emotion were explained to them.

This was done to ensure that each subject participating in the study would accurately indicate the emotion they felt, regardless of their level of intelligence and emotional development.

Step 2

Once this step was completed, the subjects were asked to answer the following questions:

1. *What negative emotions have they felt over time in the classroom?*

2. *How did they deal with them?*

Step 3

All these lists containing negative emotions were collected, centralized, those with similar meanings were brought together and only the first 20, whose frequency of occurrence was the highest, were retained in a single list. The negative emotions thus mentioned were collated, the redundant, non-serious or banal ones being eliminated.

Step 4

Students were asked to rank these emotions in order of frequency of occurrence. The resulting lists (containing the 20 emotions ranked according to

individual opinions) were brought together and, depending on the frequencies indicated and the positions occupied in the hierarchies of each student's options, were integrated into a final list, hierarchically organized, of the negative emotions felt currently in school by students (Table 2).

Table 2. A hierarchy of negative emotions felt in the classroom

Rank	Negative emotion	Short description
1	*Boredom*	state of mind that occurs in the face of a lack of distraction or stimuli
2	*"I do not like!"*	sensation produced as a result of an outcome that was not expected or desired
3	*Disappointment*	feeling of disappointment. It occurs in a situation where things are not going the way the person expected
4	*Discouragement*	feeling that occurs in association with disappointment and frustration and that reflects the inability to identify a solution to the felt negative situation
5	*Stress*	state of tension and an alarm reaction of the body
6	*Frustration*	inability to satisfy a goal or desire
7	*Anxiety*	state of restlessness, involving high physical and mental arousal
8	*Concern*	state of heightened concern about a problem or situation
9	*Irritation*	acute feeling of annoyance, temporary outburst of anger
10	*Shame*	discomfort due to an action in which the person felt humiliated or because of the fear of being ridiculed or that someone else will
11	*Anguish*	state of mind involving restlessness, arising as a result of worry or distress
12	*Soul pressure*	feeling that involves an emotional charge that produces fatigue
13	*Sadness*	feeling of emotional pain, caused by a trigger and involving pessimistic, vulnerable and tearful thoughts
14	*Guilt*	feeling of responsibility regarding an event or action, of a negative nature
15	*Desperation*	arises from the loss of patience, when what the person is facing is considered irreparable or due to the impotence of being able to overcome it successfully
16	*Anger*	specific feeling that tends to accompany the expression of this anger: shouting, sudden actions, violent behavior, etc.
17	*Resentment*	hostility towards someone, because of a previous unpleasant situation with that person that could hurt or offend you
18	*Indignation*	anger against a person or action to be considered unjust
19	*Fear*	anxiety due to the perception of danger
20	*Disgust*	feeling of antipathy related to something or someone, which produces rejection

Similarly, following the same steps, it was also done in terms of obtaining the list of strategies that the students used to manage the negative emotions felt (Table 3).

Table 3. A hierarchy of strategies used by students to manage negative emotions felt in the classroom

Rank	Description of the method
1	Postponing/avoiding dealing with activities/people that are perceived as sources of negative emotions (procrastination)
2	Excessive consumption of food, alcohol, tobacco or drugs
3	Mental inactivity: playing sports, watching movies, social media abuse, sleep
4	Reveria – withdrawal into an imaginary world
5	Excessive spending of sums of money
6	Turning to other unimportant/non-priority activities to forget the negative emotion/state felt
7	Adopting a hostile/mean/aggressive attitude and behavior towards others
8	Understanding the causes behind the emotions felt and trying to eliminate them
9	Isolation from group and peers
10	Gambling and sports betting
11	The lie/omission
12	Directing unfair/unjust/incorrect accusations at others
13	Excessive criticism
14	Victimization

4. Results and discussion

The concept of "emotion" is similar to that of "time", we know what emotion is, but if we are asked, we cannot find the words to formulate an answer.

Although a multitude of authors have formulated definitions and launched explanations necessary for its understanding, the concept continues to wear particular, individual meanings.

Emotions are in reality our relationship to external factors that determine our certain thoughts. They form the basis of our typology and highlight how we respond to named factors.

Every thought we have, in turn, determines an emotion, because they work together, the intensity of which can be variable, and this ultimately determines a new reaction at the biological level in the body. It is noteworthy, in terms of controlling emotions, that only 10% is related to an event, while 90% is our ability to react positively or negatively.

The classifications of emotions are multiple, ranging from basic elements to elements that are part of more complex structures. The ways of interpreting their cataloging, even if they are vast, are based on a few essential elements and refer to two singular categories: positivity vs. negativity, respectively functionality vs. dysfunctionality.

Moreover, it goes without saying that the feeling of emotion is a deeply subjective phenomenon, the same event being emotional for one person, while for another it is neutral. For someone, receiving a red rose generates a positive emotion,

while for another individual this event reminds of the loss of a loved one and takes on a negative affective tone.

Seligman mentioned that "emotions determine the quality of our lives. We manifest them at work, in communication with friends, in our contacts with relatives and in our relationship with ourselves, in everything that is really important to us. Emotions can save our lives, but they can also cause us strong negative emotional experiences" (Seligman, 2002).

However, the conclusions we could draw by analyzing the results of the present study are interesting.

4.1. About the negative emotions felt in school

1. Point out that the dominant negative emotion in school is boredom. This, associated with those on places 2-4, allows us to draw the conclusion that the inability to create challenging educational contexts, likely to arouse students' interest, sometimes corroborated with the lack of involvement of the teaching staff in building a modern lecture/lesson framework, generates a destructive set of negative emotions with a destructive impact regarding the student's reporting to the class/school;

2. At the same time, since the student realizes that what is happening is not right, he often feels stress, accompanied by the frustration that he cannot do anything to change the state of affairs in the classroom, all these feelings being part of the development and the manifestation of various forms of anxiety;

3. This possible reality is completed by the particular events felt in extremely subjective ways and experienced distinctly by each student present in the school environment, where we can find the anxiety felt when he did not prepare his homework, the despair that he could not follow a new schedule of training/preparation, anger at being rejected by a colleague, sadness when experiencing a breakup, or upset that a colleague did not complete their assignment for a project.

4.2. About the methods of managing negative emotions used by students

When dealing with methods of managing negative emotions, we can easily draw a parallel, based on similarity, with the inventory of psychological defense mechanisms. Seen from this perspective, the inventory presented by Crașovan Dănuț Ioan is comprehensive and enlightening (Crașovan, 2020; 2021).

Methods of managing negative emotions can be divided into two broad categories: ineffective methods and effective methods. The ineffective ones are mostly aimed at managing the moment, experiencing and reacting, while the effective ones aim to solve the problem, remove the cause of negative emotion.

From this perspective, an analysis of the list of strategies used by students, and especially of their hierarchy, is extremely interesting and leads us to revealing conclusions.

a) Of the 14 strategies identified, 13 fall into the category of ineffective strategies;

b) The first 7 strategies, in order of the frequency of their appearance/use, are from the category of ineffective strategies;

c) Only the eighth strategy is the one that leads us to an approach based on rationality, understanding the problem and finding a solution to solve/manage the negative emotions felt over a long period of time;

d) A number of strategies used by students are of concern, such as: Exaggerated consumption of food, alcohol, tobacco or drugs or Gambling and sports betting, methods that reflect at least a mediocre level of education in terms of managing emotions negative.

"Negative emotions are a normal, healthy and helpful part of life. These emotions are not a sign of weakness or low emotional intelligence. Trying to hide negative emotions can lead to additional emotional pain. No emotion is without purpose. We need to explore and understand more about the purpose behind each emotion" (Zivac, n.d.).

Detecting the signals of inefficient management of emotions, especially those mentioned before, is essential, because for every problem identified at the level of a person, its solution comes with a multitude of benefits that attract fruitful development, well-established interpersonal relationships, the development of coping strategies teamwork or educational benefits.

When the wrong or less correct approaches are known, they can be modified, adopting attitudes that really help to identify the problems, finally bringing an amalgam of solutions from which the best can be selected for application, or can select various depending on the applicability they have, the person or group of people they are used, the social environment and not only and a lot of other factors that stood to a degree, be it greater or less at the basis of the appearance of these problems.

Managing negative emotions is a highly individual matter. Unfortunately, no one teaches us, during middle school, what are the healthy ways to report the problems we face, how to think, and how to distinguish between effective and ineffective methods of managing emotions. In today's school, all this approach is, unfortunately, an initiatory route for each student, and the evolution and emotional health of the young person later depends on the more correct way and the less correct one discovered by each.

Providing the adolescent with effective emotion management strategies early on, teaching him how to properly relate to reality and how to rationally process the events you experience is the solution for an emotionally healthy future society.

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