

The book cover features a large, bright yellow sun in the upper half, partially obscured by a large, semi-transparent yellow circle. Below the sun are stylized, rolling green hills in various shades of green, from light to dark. The background is a light cream color.

THE

MANAGING EMOTIONS,

PATH TO

FINDING HEALING, AND BECOMING

WHOLENESS

OUR BEST SELVES

DR. MARK MAYFIELD

In *The Path to Wholeness*, Dr. Mark Mayfield helps readers make sense of their feelings, emotions, and relationships to live happier, more fulfilling lives. I highly recommend it.

DANIEL G. AMEN, MD, founder of Amen Clinics and author of  
*Change Your Brain Every Day*

Emotions are often seen as a problem for our lives. Especially when our emotions are painful, we don't trust them and try to avoid them. Yet, as Dr. Mayfield explains, emotions are a blessing from God when we face, understand, express, and mature them. This process offers a significant contribution for our lives and growth.

JOHN TOWNSEND, PHD, psychologist, author of the *New York Times*–bestselling *Boundaries* book series, and founder of the Townsend Institute and Townsend Leadership Program

In the book you are holding, Dr. Mark Mayfield writes in a transparent and vulnerable manner, sharing from his clinical experiences and from his personal journey. We both found this book not only loaded with insight but also rich with application for readers. Do more than read this book—digest it, take notes, and pass it on to others who are thirsty to understand more of what a journey to wholeness offers.

DR. GARY AND BARB ROSBERG, authors, speakers, and marriage coaches at The Rosberg Group and America's Family Coaches

Language is a structured system of communication. Imagine, though, living your whole life being told that your mother tongue, the one that you speak most readily, is nonsense. Imagine, also, what it might mean to meet someone who not only believes that language to be valuable but also speaks it so fluently that your entire being cries out with relief. Our emotions are that language, and many inside and outside the church have been taught that it is worse than nonsense. In *The Path to Wholeness*, Dr. Mark Mayfield gives readers back the language they spoke with ease as young children and often feel deeply alienated from as adults. And in so doing, he has paved a path to healing for many.

TARA M. OWENS, CSD, CSDS, spiritual director, supervisor, and executive director of Anam Cara Ministries; author of *Embracing the Body*

*Managing emotions. Finding healing. Becoming our best selves.* Those aren't just the small-print words on the cover. They are the deep takeaways I believe you'll gain from reading this insightful, extremely honest, hope-filled, and faith-strengthening book. I've met Dr. Mayfield. Heard him impact and inspire large groups. *But this book is personal.* And I think it can be incredibly helpful to you at a deep, personal level. Especially if, like me, you need to gain wisdom in dealing with emotions. If you're ready to learn skills that can give you a genuine path out of fear, anxiety, and shame. And if you're ready to believe you can rewrite and live out a new narrative for your life story.

JOHN TRENT, PHD, president of StrongFamilies.com and coauthor of *The Blessing* and *Where Do I Go from Here?*

Dr. Mark Mayfield has given us a rich combination of brain science, trauma awareness, attachment theory, and related theology to help us understand our own emotional landscape. *The Path to Wholeness* provides language and guidance that will help readers know the steps to move forward in their own healing. Mayfield's wisdom is compassionately given from the perspective of someone who is genuinely journeying along with his readers.

JANICE McWILLIAMS, MDIV, LCPC, author of *Restore My Soul*

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*The Path to Wholeness: Managing Emotions, Finding Healing, and Becoming Our Best Selves*

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*To Hannah, Elizabeth, and August.*

*It is my greatest joy to be your dad. I pray that the message of this book and my own path toward wholeness have a lasting impact on you and the generations to come.*

*I love you!*



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# FOREWORD

## **IT'S BEEN A ROUGH ROAD THE LAST COUPLE OF YEARS**

. . . for everyone. I have been sharing a lot lately how prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we had a mental-health crisis in America and around the world. Since then, with lockdowns, loss, and loneliness; racial trauma; tension and rioting; the election mess; the race for a vaccine; the rollout; variants; tensions and war around the globe; shootings; and more, it was only intuitive to know that we would see a serious spike in mental health–related issues. And we have. We've seen increased stress and anxiety, and fear is dominating our culture. Depression, addiction, and even suicidality is soaring . . . even among our kids.

The bottom line: People are exhausted and emotionally shot. Traumatized. As a matter of fact, one of the big themes at recent Christian counseling events has been collective trauma. People everywhere are shell-shocked, hurting, confused, angry, and searching frantically for help, hope, and encouragement.

What is encouraging is that people are still looking to God and to faith-based mental-health and ministry leaders, and they want their faith addressed as part of the healing journey.

## THE PATH TO WHOLENESS

One thing is clear to me: We don't need God less; we need him more in such a time as this. Especially in the counseling office.

Enter Dr. Mark Mayfield. Mark has been on a journey since he was a boy to find emotional freedom and peace. He knows brokenness and pain. Darkness. And light. He has found hope and healing.

Since then, God has taken Mark down numerous paths to equip and train him to speak and give words of life to others. And he has developed a strong, bold, and hopeful voice. The work you now hold in your hands, *The Path to Wholeness*, offers clarity and focused direction on pressing though challenging and confusing past emotions, current chaos, and toxic issues and paves a road to emotional freedom.

Anchored in a heart for God and filled with clinical wisdom, this book is a traveler's gift.

May God work in and through you as you read and apply its content and then continue on the road forward.

*Dr. Tim Clinton*

*president of the American Association of Christian Counselors and executive director of Liberty University's Global Center for Mental Health, Addiction, and Recovery*



Part One

EMOTIONS  
DEVELOPED



# THE NEED FOR LANGUAGE

*“Your emotions make you human. . . .  
Even the unpleasant ones have a purpose.  
Don’t lock them away. If you ignore them,  
they just get louder and angrier.”*

SABAA TAHIR, *A Torch against the Night*

## Definitions

*Emotions:* The psychological states brought on by a neuro-physiological change associated with thoughts, experiences, and behavioral responses, with a degree of pleasure or displeasure.

*Feelings:* The perceptions of events within the body (the conscious experience of emotional reactions) and the intentional choice to make meaning from those perceptions using language and past experiences.

*Principles:* “Fundamental truth[s] or proposition[s] that [serve] as the foundation for a system of belief or behavior or for a chain of reasoning”;<sup>1</sup> basic or general truths on which other units or traits can be based.

**AMY'S BODY LANGUAGE SAID IT ALL.** She sat on the couch across from Tim, slightly turned toward the door, arms folded and lips pursed. It was as if she was either trying really hard to keep a secret or doing everything she could not to explode.

The energy in my office was tense. I could feel it, and my stomach was agreeing with me as it did somersaults. Amy was upset, and the whole room knew it. Tim had chosen to sit in an armchair on the other side of the room, away from Amy. His body language also communicated everything. He was lost and defeated. He sat with one leg propped up on the seat and the other dangling off. His arms wrapped around his leg as he brought it close to his chest. He was hurt, and he was trying hard to protect himself. Amy and Tim had been coming to me for couples counseling for nearly three months. We had been working hard to uncover the layers of hurt and misunderstanding that had built up over their fifteen years of marriage.

I cleared my throat and said, "I find it interesting that you chose to sit in separate spaces today. Usually you sit on the couch together and attempt to show that you love each other. Today it feels like the veil is lifted, and I am finally experiencing the real you." I paused and looked at Amy and Tim. Amy caught my gaze and quickly looked away. Tim didn't even bother looking up. I let the silence linger. By this time, the tension in the room was palpable. I felt it, and they felt it, too, as they shifted and squirmed in their seats.

Finally, Tim said, "What's the point of this? We are never going to be on the same page."

Amy huffed and contorted her body even more toward the door as if she were getting ready to run. "Tim," I quietly said, "can you expand a bit more? I have a hard time believing you are ready to throw away fifteen years of marriage."

## THE NEED FOR LANGUAGE

Tim sat up straight in his chair, looked at me with some intensity, and said, “You are right! I don’t want to give up! But we are speaking two different languages. I don’t know how to get through to her.” With those words barely trailing off his lips, Amy turned around and squared off with Tim.

“Exactly!” she shouted. “We are speaking two different languages. Someone needs to translate for us.”

I will never forget that exchange. It was heated, it was emotional, and it defused the tensions. They were starting to talk to each other instead of at each other. They were starting to get to the root cause of their turmoil.

We spent the next hour and then subsequent weeks unpacking and exploring that exchange. As things became clearer, it was evident that Amy and Tim each thought they were communicating clearly, and in some ways they were, but their definitions, their language, and their experiences around what they were attempting to communicate were entirely different. The result was that they were missing each other on all levels. Their struggle centered around their internal and external understanding of intimacy. Tim saw intimacy through the lens of relationship, quality time, and service to his wife. Amy saw intimacy as physical touch that could lead to sex. For years, they were using the same word to communicate completely different ideas.

Can you relate to Amy and Tim? I know I can. My wife, Sarah, and I had a similar argument early in our marriage, and we struggled to work through it. This is one reason I chose to write a book on emotions. It is clear to me that we are somehow missing the mark.

We are missing the mark in how we talk and teach about emotions in our society, our school systems, and our churches. We are

missing the mark in how we help people navigate emotional turmoil. Despite the wealth of information available about emotional and mental wellness, some people will never gain access to it. We have a systemic problem that needs to be addressed.

Everyone, regardless of education level, socioeconomic status, religion, and so on, should have equal access to information about mental and emotional health. In case you can't tell, this is something I am very passionate about. I don't like creating a system where there are "haves" and "have-nots," but many times this is what the education system does, and to some degree, what the mental-health field does. I want to demystify these topics and make them accessible to everyone.

In New Testament times, there was a group of religious people called the Gnostics. The Gnostics believed they had secret knowledge about heaven that no one else had access to. Sometimes I feel that way about academia and the mental-health field. We have our theories, our research, and our information, but we don't readily simplify and translate it to be consumed by the masses. I want these concepts about emotional and mental wellness to not only reach your cognitive mind but also to reach your emotional mind. I want you to mull over these concepts, ruminate on them, wrestle with them, and then integrate them into the fabric of who you are.

### **Waves and Emotions**

Waves are hypnotic, rhythmic, wild, and dangerous. To an experienced beachgoer, the waves are a predictable friend, welcome and calming. But to someone who hasn't spent time near the ocean, they can be terrifying and unpredictable. How can the same waves have two different effects? Perspective and experience. If that is

true, how does someone gain perspective and experience? The answer is time and exposure. Emotions are the same way. For one person, they are a welcome interaction; for another, they are terrifying. Same emotion, different perspective, different experiences. Is one right and the other wrong?

Have you ever stopped to consider what an emotion is? I mean really putting some thought into it. Most people don't have a good answer to this question, which surprises me. I have devoted my life to the study of the human condition. I sit with people on a daily basis, helping them make sense of this messed-up world, and often, their messed-up life within it. I teach coping skills, breathing techniques, and mindfulness exercises. I help people make sense of their pasts, their childhoods, and their trauma. I've been trained in cognitive behavioral therapy, eye movement desensitization reprocessing therapy, and many other areas, but if someone were to ask me to succinctly define what emotions are and how they originate, I am not even sure how I would answer that. How would you answer?

This sparked my interest, and I wondered why I wasn't specifically taught this in my master's or doctorate counseling programs. As I began to ponder the classes I took, and now, the classes I teach at Colorado Christian University, I've come to realize that such courses assume we all know what emotions are and how they fundamentally operate. I sat with this realization for a couple of days, and as I did, I became more and more disturbed. Why? We'd been thinking we'd been speaking the same language, using the same nouns, verbs, and adjectives to describe our experiences, our stories, and our narratives, when in essence, we had been completely missing each other. I then began to wonder what other factors were contributing to this catastrophic misunderstanding:

- **Psychological expectations get in the way of effective communication.** What are psychological expectations? Typically, these are the “shoulds” in a relationship. For example, my wife *should* know that when I get home from a long day at work I need twenty minutes to decompress before I engage with the family. Or my daughters *should* know the rules of respect in the home and not talk back to their mom or me. The problems start when these “shoulds” are not fully communicated or clearly understood by the entire family.

It is the same with emotions. We are communicating constantly, but only 10 percent of what we communicate is verbal, which means that 90 percent is nonverbal. And between 50 and 75 percent of the nonverbal is the psychological (unspoken and assumed) “should”! This means we assume that others have the same perspective on and understanding of our emotions as we do. Moreover, we often have different interpretations of what is being communicated versus what is being received. If this remains in the unspoken psychological realm, we will constantly be frustrated and discouraged. I will talk later in this book about the remedy to this problem.

- **We all had different experiential models, so we all have different starting points.** Think about it. Where did you learn about emotions? Most of us learned from our early relational models—our moms, dads, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, teachers, and friends. Just like psychological expectations, much of our learning came from observation and our own conscious or unconscious interpretation of that observation. We watched those closest to us, we saw how they responded to events, to their spouses, to stress, and we

made mental models of what we saw. Eventually those models became our own. For example, I struggle with using tone when I communicate. It could just be because I have a streak of Italian in me, or it could be because of what I observed growing up. When I am upset or frustrated, I can sound mean and condescending to my wife and children. I have been working on reversing this for the past fifteen years and am getting better, but where did I learn it? I did not wake up one morning and think, *I'm going to use a mean, sarcastic, and condescending tone with my wife and kids so that I can hurt their feelings.* I learned it specifically from watching my dad and grandfather. Now, before you get upset with me for “outing” my family: My dad and I have talked through this at length, and he, too, has made significant strides to change. I remember one conversation he and I had where he disclosed that he had learned how to communicate by watching his dad, and he confessed that “at least I wasn’t as bad as he was.”

Can you start to see how complicated this can become? For many of us, generational patterns are unintentionally passed on, and until we become aware of these patterns, we are unable to make the necessary changes. Unfortunately, there isn’t a how-to book for this. We try our best, we do “better” than our parents, and we do what we can not to mess up our families. It is a sobering fact that my kids are watching and observing me, and I have to be very intentional about what models I am passing down to them.

- **We lack shared vocabulary, further complicating communication.** I always say that language creates culture and culture creates direction. Far too often, I’ve found, there is a lack

of emotional vocabulary in our culture. *Mad*, *sad*, and *glad* are about as far as many of us get. So when we are faced with complex emotions, we feel lost, confused, and unable to speak the necessary language. To make matters worse, we may think we are speaking the same or “right” language, but we are actually saying something completely different. Not only does language create culture—it can also create mutual understanding through shared experiences or commonality.

### **Emotional Immaturity**

“You are so immature!” Kylee yelled from across the playground. “Grow up!” I shouted back. “You’re the one who’s immature!” The exchange went back and forth a couple more times, and then we parted ways. Reflecting on that memory, I smile, because I’ve forgotten why we were so upset with each other. It was probably something to do with “girls have cooties and boys drool,” and we became incensed by those comments and began the frivolous exchange. We were in second grade, and we were emotionally immature. Has anything really changed as we’ve gotten older? Maybe we’ve become more sophisticated in our banter, but the underlying message is still similar to that second-grade exchange.

Have you noticed? We are an emotionally driven society. We often react before we think. We respond with how we feel, or at least how we think we feel. But what if the majority of us are getting it wrong? We believe our emotions to be true because that’s how we “feel” in the moment. But with added context and awareness, we realize we’re getting it all wrong.

As I was exploring this thought, I began to question anything and everything I’ve been taught about emotions—about pain, joy, suffering, contentment, excitement, peace, and so on. What if for

generations we've been (albeit while doing the best we can) teaching and emulating the wrong things? What if there is a better way to engage and interact with our emotions that can make us a deeper, more seasoned society? What if the relearning of our emotions and our emotional experiences could actually create greater unity rather than widening the divide of tribalism? I'm not promising this—I'm just intrigued by the possibility.

Emotions are neither good nor bad; they just are. I need you to reread that and let it sink in. When we are quick to label something as good, the assumption is that the other side of the spectrum is bad. So if joy is good, then sadness is bad. We see this type of logic played out all over our society. *Raiders football team bad, Broncos football team good. Republicans bad, Democrats good. Evangelicals good. . .* Why is this? For one thing, it is human nature. Our brains and psyches believe they can only handle black-and-white thinking. But in actuality, the lack of complexity actually slows down the brain's growth and functioning.

### **Thought Generator: Creating an Emotional Backlog**

I don't know about you, but I often have thoughts swirling around in my head. Most of the time they are truly random: *What did I have for dinner last night? Did I turn the light off in the bathroom? Why did that guy look at me like that yesterday—did I have something on my face?* My wife often jokes that I don't have a turn signal and tend to jump from one thought to another. She's right, but the jumps make complete sense to me! Maybe you can relate. Our brains can generate up to fifty thousand thoughts a day. That is a lot of randomness. But many times, my thoughts are not random and can spiral into toxic or negative patterns. This is often the case

with the negative stories we've told ourselves or heard from others our whole lives.

The story that was repeated throughout my life was that I was an awkward loser who was oversensitive. Though I have done extensive work in this area of my life, that story can creep in at odd or unannounced times. If it were just a thought or a series of thoughts, it wouldn't be that big a deal, but there is always, and I mean always, an emotion that goes with it. This is a key component that is often missed in this conversation, and it makes all the difference. Why? When we miss the emotion attached to a thought, we begin to stack the emotion like a teetering Jenga game. When that emotion is not recognized and processed, it stays, and then the next emotion experienced is stacked on the previous one until the tower falls, creating a cascading avalanche of emotions. It is like a toddler mixing all the Play-Doh colors into one brown mess. If we had simply recognized and processed the original emotion, the entire catastrophe could have been avoided.

### **Purpose of This Book**

This book is written for you, and it is written for me. It is an intentional wrestling with a concept that "should" be common sense and "should" be easy but isn't. Emotions are confusing, frustrating, and scary, but they don't have to be. It is my desire that you slow down and explore each concept in this book. Yes, the concepts are broken up into distinct chapters, but they intersect on many different levels.

Each chapter will start with definitions so that we can create common language. Then I will share principles that will guide the conversation. Finally, at the end of each chapter, I will provide questions for reflection and specific action steps.

I will ask you to look inward at your own experience and your own history. I will ask you to reflect on how these things have shaped, informed, and influenced you, your family, and your relationships. I will challenge you to dissect your current understanding of emotions, your emotional vocabulary, and your emotional responses. Then I will provide practical and actionable steps to rethink and rework how you see and experience emotions. If you take the time and slow down, this book can and will be transformational for you and those around you. Why? Because this practice forces you to stop, sit with, and reflect on your internal status, and when you genuinely do this, you will be compelled to action—and eventually, to change. So I invite you to join me on this journey. Pull out a new journal and unwrap a new pen; take notes; write down your thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and let's embark on this path together.

### ***Questions for Reflection***

1. How would you describe your emotional vocabulary?
2. What has been your experience with emotions throughout your life?
3. How would you rate your emotional intelligence?
4. What emotion has been most uncomfortable for you? Why?

### ***Action Steps***

In your journal, write out your most pervasive emotion. Track it this week and see how often it pops up and what circumstances surround it.