

Emotions and the OS Model. Belief System Sessions in practice

How emotions work inside the Human as a System model. What belief system sessions look like in practice, with a worked example and a counterexample.

On the surface, it might seem that a systems approach would not be a good fit for situations where strong emotions are present. Systems can be mapped, analyzed, and understood logically. Emotions appear to sit outside of logic completely - immediate, overwhelming, felt, and often irrational. One can know perfectly well that there is no danger and still feel afraid.

Because emotions appear to work outside logic, the ways of dealing with them appear to work outside logic too: feel them, process them, release them. This systems model does not dismiss the experience of feeling.

Instead, it places emotions inside a logical structure, as processes with concrete functions. Understanding those functions opens up ways of working with emotions that are difficult to see when emotions are treated as something outside logic.

Let us look at how emotions function in this model and what kind of work follows from that understanding, using the example of John and his deep-seated belief tied to an intense emotional response. This example shows both:

- how emotions are seen and approached in this model
- and what belief system sessions look like in practice

Role of Emotions in the Operating System Model

In the Human as a System Model, emotions play an absolutely crucial role in human experience and survival. They are part of an ultra-fast recognition system: they influence how a situation is read, communicate that reading to the user, and coordinate the response across layers. What does this mean in simple terms?

To survive, a person needs a fast recognition system. In most situations, one does not have time to analyze or reason. Animal instincts are extremely fast, but they are not enough for the complexity of human life.

The response needs to be coordinated across the entire system. Identifying “what kind of situation this is” needs to trigger a response across the whole system. If there is danger, the heart rate goes up, blood is directed to the muscles, and thoughts focus on which way to run.

Constant alert is exhausting. Staying in “ready for danger” state burns enormous amounts of energy. A “just relax” response is also necessary, along with every state in between. The “right” response needs to account for many possible situations and many possible reactions, yet still be fast.

A person needs to learn multiple automatic responses throughout a lifetime. From basic physical (hot stove → do not touch), through complex modern (Nigerian prince → do not click), to simpler social ones. (old acquaintance with difficult history → smile and nod, but keep going).

This is why, from the system perspective, emotions are incredibly effective:

They work fast, way faster than conscious thought processes.

They have a very wide influence, instantly coordinating the body, nervous system, and thoughts all at once.

They encode the reading of situations for faster future responses.

They communicate this ultra-fast reading to the “user” so a person can make immediate use of it.

These same qualities make emotions “problematic” in human experience:

- Speed comes at the expense of accuracy. The reading is instant, but not necessarily correct.
- “Widespread” often means overwhelming for a person experiencing an intense emotion.
- They not only encode experiences, but they also directly influence how one sees a situation.

In childhood, the process is mostly one-directional: situation → fear → encode as dangerous. In adulthood, it becomes bidirectional: active fear → interpret the situation as dangerous, even when no real danger is present (this is the mechanism behind trauma, PTSD, and anxiety loops).

John and his belief system analysis and training

Analysis

John presents with a correctly identified problem in his belief system. He is a well-off young professional with no money issues, yet whenever he is supposed to spend money on something non-essential, he feels intense anxiety. This causes problems in his relationship - his partner does not understand why they never go on holidays or why he never buys any gifts.

We discuss the role of emotions in the model, particularly the fact that emotional response to similar situations gets encoded early in childhood. John is able to link it to his childhood home on his own. When John was very young, there was a financial crisis at his home. His parents were extremely distressed, and John often witnessed his mother crying over money calculations.

After mapping the source of his emotional responses, John sees for himself that emotions are sort of artifacts - he has thousands in his account, and there is no logical reason to stress that much over 20 dollars. John also understands that emotions from childhood got reinforced each time the stress fired, and he wanted the stress to go away because “of how ridiculous that is”. His stressed reaction actually strengthened the stress response.

We apply a useful metaphor: if someone eats every day at 12.00 exactly, after a few months the body will start producing a hunger response automatically around that time: stomach grumbling, slight distress, thoughts about food. This is a conditioned response. There is no reason to stress about it - no one will die of hunger, and there is no health problem. There is just hunger and a choice about what to do about it. The same applies to conditioned emotions. Anxiety will fire around spending. This should be observed and noted, but nothing more needs to be done, including “feeling the emotions” — it would be like sitting and “feeling hunger” one knows is not particularly important.

Training

Because the pattern fires around buying gifts, we set up a challenge together with John: He will buy a large bouquet for his girlfriend. Normally this stresses him, so he hesitantly buys a single flower and still gets uncomfortable, but the stress is manageable.

We discuss how much he can logically spend (a lot). The point is not to buy 100 roses, but to spend 3-4 times more than John is comfortable with. This will cause distress, and this is the point. This type of training is called low-stakes training.

John is instructed that if it gets overwhelming, he can go get a coffee as a sort of break, but he still has to buy the bouquet. Final price is not important - what is important is to:

- a) observe the thoughts that fire.
- b) see the strong emotion, say hello to it and continue regardless.
- c) discuss afterwards what he discovered.

Before the challenge, we make bets about how much time it will take, how much John will end up spending, and how difficult it will be. This makes John laugh, and he manages to approach the challenge with humor and curiosity.

The point of this training:

- This is not the classical exposure training (“See? The threat is there but nothing bad happens”), or at least not only.
- The training shows that emotions are relics in the sense that they can be evoked almost “on demand.”
- The key is to learn to notice emotion, name it, and not try to push it away.
- The second point is to stop treating emotions as “truth about the universe” but rather as a hypothesis on the situation that can, but does not have to, be taken into account.
- Learning to laugh at the predictability of these reactions is an extremely useful side effect.

What to expect as a result

A great advantage of a systems approach like this one is that it can focus on one element (belief system in John’s case), but have a positive impact across multiple areas.

Beliefs

John updates the core belief from “spending money (especially non-essential) signals danger and family distress” to “I am financially secure, and spending on experiences, gifts, or enjoyment is safe even if it does not feel safe in the moment.” The change generalizes: similar outdated beliefs in other domains weaken as he sees the pattern.

Strong emotions

The specific money-spending anxiety drops slowly with time, but this is not what is most important. The point is that John learns to live with anxiety firing and not getting overwhelmed by it. Over time, the conditioned response starts disappearing, but John does not feel like he is dependent on certain emotions to be there or to disappear.

Shame and Curiosity

John stops feeling like there is something wrong with him for “being this ridiculous”. He is particularly perplexed by how he can evoke his emotions on demand, which makes them “less real” and more like automatic buttons. He is interested in observing more.

Emotional intelligence

He understands the idea of “hypothesis, not data” very well and applies it in general. This makes life more manageable.

Resilience

By repeating little challenges, John starts feeling like a person who “can do hard things”. He actually wants to try other uncomfortable challenges, because of how going through them makes him feel like “a badass.”

Self-esteem

John felt “totally ridiculous” with his money-spending anxiety. The sessions led him to understand that this anxiety was just a normal learning process, so there is nothing to be ashamed of or beat himself up about. Rewriting a conditioned response makes him feel good about himself, so in addition to all of the above, John wants to work on other things.

A counterexample - why “just act regardless of the emotions” is not the right logical conclusion.

It might seem that the logical conclusion is to always put emotions aside “because they are not accurate”. This is not true from the perspective of this model. Let’s look at another example, this time simplified:

Mary believes that in order to be a good, acceptable person, she has to be “nice”. Each time she goes to see her friend circle, she feels anxiety that she repeatedly ignores and explains away.

We perform logical analysis to check if this is historical data that should be ignored. But we do not find any childhood programming linking social exposure to anxiety. Moreover, this only happens in this particular situation, with this particular group. Mary feels fine seeing other friends.

Looking at the role of emotions in the model, we decide to treat emotions as a potentially correct hypothesis about the situation. If this is the case, something makes them fire, informing Mary that this situation is unsafe.

The discussion reveals that her friends often mock Mary in a way that feels like they are all against her, but she says that “there is probably no big deal here”.

In this situation, the emotions are not artifacts. They are signals that Mary is missing something that her system flags. The solution is not to ignore the emotions and keep engaging with friends. Here, the strong emotions should be noticed, named explicitly, but then taken into account when making decisions.

X/0,