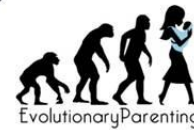


GROWING ORCHIDS

A COURSE ON RAISING THE HIGH-NEEDS OR ORCHID CHILD



Growing Orchids: Week 2 The Emotional Life of the Orchid

Welcome back to Growing Orchids! I hope you were able to take some time to really work through the struggles and strengths of your individual orchid child. This week I want to focus exclusively on the emotional life of the orchid. Their high sensitivity to their environment is most notable in terms of how they experience the social world around them, and this experience has implications for how we parent them. We'll start by looking at the neurobiology of some of these reactions then move to how we handle some of the ways in which this emotional life manifests itself – both the good and the bad – and what we can do to help in this regard. Finally we'll talk about the adult orchid and things we may see in those orchids around us depending on the type of upbringing they had and small changes we may be able to help them make. Homework this week is designed to help you proactively come up with techniques you can use that will benefit you when handling these emotional times with your orchid. As always, you are welcome to join me for office hours to go over any questions you may have.



Source: LiveScience

Section 1: Neurologically (and Biologically) Speaking

We should start with the brain and body. Why? Because I do firmly believe that it's important to understand exactly why our orchid children may react emotionally as they do, for as much as we know about it anyway. I think all parents have some level of understanding that the way their child behaves is limited by what their brain is capable of in a given moment or time, but sometimes it's really easy to forget that. This is why I want to drill that knowledge into your head even more.

1a. The Stress Response

Let's first go back to what we spoke about last week – the hypersensitivity and reactivity to stress. You see, for the orchid child, their response to stress is greater than for those we call dandelions and their long-term well-being is linked to their exposure to that stress. Our stress reactions start in the amygdala. Our amygdala sends a message to the hypothalamus which serves to command the rest of the nervous system to provide the appropriate response for the threat we sense, which includes immediate responses in the nervous system and then the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (or HPA) axis.

Remember that sensitivity to threat is a key component for our orchids, even though of us have a sensitivity to threat; however, for the non-orchid, the brain doesn't go into a flight, fight, or freeze response until there's a high enough level of threat, but if you do reach that point you can bet you're going to experience a stress reaction. The difference for orchids is that they are also quite acutely aware of even low-level threats, so what triggers this stress reaction is far less than what would trigger it for the dandelion. So we start with an amygdala that is primed to pick up on threat and will see it in places most of us would miss which then is coupled with an exaggerated stress response, or the hyperreactivity to stress.

Now the second component here is the idea of overwhelming information, or cognitive load. Let's remember that orchids are highly attuned to their environment, so much so, they often have sensory issues because they are taking in *so much* sensory information. Having *too much* information to process

is one of the things that can again affect our stress levels – adults (dandelion or orchid) included; as our cognitive load increases to the point of *overload*, so too does our stress response increase.

There is an important distinction here that must be mentioned: cognitive load doesn't just increase the stress response linearly because there's a degree of arousal that is actually beneficial to many cognitive and emotional tasks. Rather, it's the idea of *overload* that's crucial. Although cognitive overload can result in stress in and of itself, often it's that we reach that overload state faster when we're *already stressed*. Think about times when you've had a long list of things to do on your mind and suddenly everyone around you starts asking you questions and demanding your attention. Are you calm or do you find your stress levels rising higher? If you're like most people, your stress starts to rise because you are now exposed to too much information while you were already feeling higher levels of anxiety due to thinking of what needed to be done. However, if you didn't have a lot on your mind already (i.e., no preexisting stress) *or* there was only one person talking to you (i.e., no cognitive overload), you would likely handle the situation just fine.

This highlights that the notion of overload is specific to our situations and between individuals. For the orchid, the problem is that in a stressful environment (even moderately stressful), their threat activation can be high and then the sensory experience can result in cognitive overload; this means the brain simply can't process the information and results in strong emotional reactions. Thinking of it in dandelion terms, it might seem like being surrounded by 25 people, all talking at once, and knowing that you have to learn all the information they're sharing in order to pass an important test. We'd all understand if *that* person lost their minds and broke down. Unfortunately for the orchid, general day-to-day situations may lead them down this path, which others tend *not* to understand.

The thing to remember here is that when we see our orchids struggling with situations, it isn't because they are weak or cannot handle themselves, but rather they are expressing how the environment they find themselves in is triggering the type of stress reaction many can only imagine finding themselves in. Knowing this should help us in the types of environments we allow and create for our children (something that will come up again over the following two weeks as we discuss practical ways of handling common problems).

1b. Social Emotions

Interestingly, this hyperreactivity to stress isn't the only biological element that impacts the emotional world of the orchid child. The other big element here has to do with the activity in the Right Prefrontal Cortex (RPC). Research has found that children who are identified as orchids (due to their reactivity to stress) also show greater activation in general in the RPC which has implications for their emotional state.

We have to ask ourselves: What goes on in the RPC? The answer is that it is intricately tied to social emotions or behaviours. That is, it is linked to the experience of empathy, theory of mind, and self-awareness. These are all linked to our social world and so it shouldn't be too surprising that orchids – who are highly influenced by and aware of their environment – show stronger activation in the area of the brain associated with our social world.

Although we'll talk about each of these as they pertain to specific elements below, I want to first highlight what it is like for orchids so you may have a better understanding of what your child is experiencing. An orchid enters a social situation and first has the acute awareness of what others are thinking and feeling (the theory of mind component), even at younger ages, they tend to be aware of the emotional states of others around them (the cognitive states come later with development as they do for other children). Depending on the emotional state of the other, this may elicit a wide range of emotions, from similar ones (empathy) to other emotions that may be triggered. Of course the orchid also has good self-awareness (especially in time) such that they can struggle with knowing how they feel in response to others, but not necessarily have the capacity to handle that.

Because of this experience, the orchid can find social engagement difficult, depending on the environment and the state of others. Furthermore, many orchids can struggle in larger groups and this may be in part due to the fact that the social awareness of others is so strong that the orchid picks up on *all* the emotions and this increases the cognitive load to a point of overload. This is particularly problematic when kids are young and don't have tools to cope with these overwhelming situations that may not seem so overwhelming to us.

I remember the first time my orchid daughter tried to take a karate lesson. She was five and there were 30 kids in the class and some were goofing off, some were focused, but there was a lot to process going in. She struggled with the moves at the start and the teacher was a more curt and cold kind of person which she also picked up on and clearly didn't seem to enjoy as I think she felt she was failing. The yelling with each move was loud too. To most of us, this might have been slightly stressful, but no more. But to her, it took about 8 minutes before she ran out in tears with her hands over her ears saying, "It's too much, it's too much, it's just too much". Having to pick up on all that was going on in that environment was just, as she put it, too much.

It's important we remember this because when we talk about the typical issues in weeks 3 and 4, we want to remember that a lot of what our kids may struggle with is this idea of "too much" as it stems from the neurological differences between our orchids and others. This will influence how we introduce them to new things and how we help them cope. But know that they are not the kind to do well with just throwing them into a new situation because often there's just too much going on.



Source: Pixabay

Section 2: The Big Feels

Almost all of the parents who have orchids who I have worked with share one very common observation: *My child just seems to feel things so big*. It's true – orchids have big feelings and these often come out in ways we wish weren't so... visible. With the orchid there can be a lot of tears over a lot of different things. Orchids may be called dramatic or overly sensitive (as if it's a bad thing) or any number of suggestions that they are weaker than other kids or don't have the skills to cope like other kids do.

Hopefully given the above information on their neurological differences, you can better understand that this has nothing to do with being weak, but rather that their experience of the same situation is heightened in ways that tax them. If we all felt what the orchid feels, we would be equally as dramatic. Equally, it's important that parents realize that our orchids often have exactly the same skills as other kids in terms of emotion regulation, but the problem is, again, in the experience of these moments and with higher stress comes a lowered ability to utilize these skills (as it does for us all).

There are two main problems for parents of orchids that must be considered here as they navigate handling these huge emotions. The first is the issue of how triggering these emotions can be for us. Most of us were not raised in environments where negative emotions were acceptable to display; in fact, most of us were raised to view being upset as a "bad" thing. This has led to many of us as adults to struggle with how to accept and validate these emotions because our immediate response is to try and stop this display of emotion.

When we are triggered, we seek to stop the trigger because of the level of discomfort we feel as well as out of an attempt to protect our children. We feel that bad things happen when negative emotions are displayed and we don't want bad things to happen to our children so we try to stop them by any means necessary. Unfortunately, this never goes well with an orchid because of that whole sensitivity to others' emotional states. They know you're upset and will internalize that and take it to heart as if they have now done even more wrong; this will both exacerbate the current situation and can also lead to feelings of shame which can have negative long-term implications.

The second problem is that our society is not structured in ways that are supportive of supporting an orchid. Whether it's the issue of time needed to help an orchid calm or the public struggles that come with having a child who may melt down in public, there are barriers to us caring for our kids in ways they need. Not all of us have jobs that will allow us to be late because our orchid had a hard morning and needed to cry for 45 minutes at daycare drop-off. Not all public places are supportive of stopping and caring for a crying child, with parents at times being asked to leave in the midst of just working to calm their child. And that's not even considering the public shaming that can go with handling big emotions in public.

Although these problems can occur for any child who has a meltdown (they all do), the fallout can be particularly bad for orchids. Again, the issue of social awareness means that our children can pick up on any of the social cues – like being asked to leave – as a personal statement on them and take them to heart. It also means if we are rushing or trying to get them calm in a more frantic manner, they can pick up on those emotions and internalize them as well. They don't see these problems as being external to them, but rather a part of why they are wrong.

What can you do?

In handling big emotions with an orchid, you need to focus on the following elements:

1. Remain calm. Now that you know that your child is going to be highly attuned to your emotional state, hopefully you can see the importance of why you being calm is so critical. Not only will you being calm help avoid adding any fuel to the fire, but you will also help your child regulate as they will use you as their anchor from which to come down from this heightened state. I recommend practicing deep breathing on a regular basis so that when you are triggered here, you can more easily remember to use this technique to keep yourself calm in that moment.
2. Don't say much. This is related to the issue of cognitive overload. Our orchids struggle with too much information and when they are triggered, any more information is just too much to process and will exacerbate the situation. This is often compounded as we use words and reasoning aimed at calming (e.g., "Calm down, you're okay") but which doesn't match the emotional experience of the orchid (remember they are self-aware) and so this creates more panic because it can seem we don't understand what they are experiencing and this increases their stress levels. The only things you should be saying are related to empathizing with their experience (e.g., "I see this is really hard") and reaffirming that you're there for them (e.g., "I'm here for you"). That's it. Now as an added bonus, I find keeping quiet is a way for many parents to also help calm themselves because when we do reason with someone and they don't change, it can increase our stress and then we end up behaving in ways that aren't beneficial for our orchids.
3. Provide touch. Touch is crucial for the co-regulation of our orchids. It's crucial for all kids, but given the extreme emotional states our orchids can find themselves in, providing touch is our master tool for helping them calm themselves. Just holding or cuddling or hugging our orchids or rubbing their back can provide critical input that allows them to get to a more regulated state and move on.

4. Teach calming techniques. It is essential that we start early in teaching our orchids how to use techniques like deep breathing to calm themselves. They won't necessarily be able to use these skills right away because of how distressed they get, but as you teach them how to do this, you can start to call upon them to use these skills once their distress has lessened a bit. For example, if your child is experiencing big emotions, you need to empathize and hold them and when you see that the distress is lessening, you can ask if they think they could take a few deep breaths to calm down. In general, mindfulness techniques are excellent things to incorporate into your schedule with an orchid.
5. Never threaten or punish. "If you don't calm down, we're leaving" is one of the worst things we can say to any child, but even more so for orchids. They have so little control over these big emotions and they pick up on any criticism and internalize it so deeply that these techniques often lead to intense internal distress. And if you punish your orchid for these big emotions, you are simply telling them they are wrong for struggling and they will internalize that and experience shame for who they are. Needless to say, there are no good outcomes associated with repeated feelings of shame.
6. Teach observation techniques. In my house we call it "the body scan" and we started it earlier with our daughter who would be seemingly fine, then lose it and be unable to figure out what went wrong. In the body scan, we stop and pay attention to all the little things our body is telling us. For example, are we hungry? Tired? Lonely? Upset, even just a little? By discovering these emotions early, we are better able to deal with them before they overwhelm us, which is exactly what happens to the orchid. And because orchids are so much more likely to be focused on others, they can often lose sight of themselves. If you do a body scan a couple times a day, it can help develop these crucial skills.

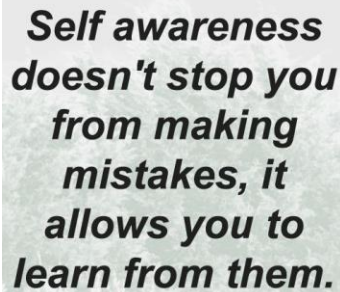
Extra: Fight, Flight, or Freeze?

Now, there is one added wrench that some of you may experience. We all know the stress response is separated into three types of responses: fight, flight, or freeze. Many orchids seem to display as flights in their big, scared, sad response. However, not all of them do. Some will fight and some will freeze and these can be harder for us to identify and we may feel the need to respond in ways that are detrimental to the orchid.

If you have an orchid who fights, you'll see them acting aggressively when stressed out or upset; this often has parents get angry in turn and can feed a negative cycle whereby the orchid continues to act out and internalize that they are "bad" for the emotions they can't control. In this case you still need to be calm and provide the same help as above, but may need to take them to a safe space where they can act out in a safe manner.

If you have an orchid who freezes, you may not see much of a reaction as they turn inward during these times of distress. You may think your orchid doesn't feel much in response to these situations or that they don't care, when in fact, they feel and care greatly. Your job here is to notice this in your child and be able to offer comfort even when the obvious behavioural cues are absent.

Notably, in both of these cases, once you have provided enough comfort and their distress levels lower a bit, you will likely see tears come. When these orchids' level of stress is low enough that they are out of their strong stress response, they can experience the distress and with you being there to comfort them, they can allow themselves to cry over what happened and then move beyond it. But if you aren't offering that comfort at the start, they may not be able to hit this stage.



***Self awareness
doesn't stop you
from making
mistakes, it
allows you to
learn from them.***

Section 3: Self-Awareness

As mentioned above, self-awareness is one of the traits or behaviours linked to the right prefrontal cortex. Orchids tend to be very self-aware once they are of an age where they have the cognitive capacity as well as the emotional capacity to be aware. Often in early to middle childhood, orchids *in positive environments* can be described as emotionally mature for their age. My husband often states that our daughter is more emotionally aware than he's ever been and I would second that about myself as well.

Unfortunately, we may see the opposite in children who are not as fortunate to have the right environment. They can find themselves struggling to understand their own emotional state or actions in response to their emotions. In environments where orchids experience more stress, their ability to learn about themselves is compromised. Think back to last week when we talked about the strength of memory for orchids when in a positive environment; the orchid has exceptional memory when feeling safe and secure, but has an abysmal memory when stressed out. Learning about ourselves requires us to form memories about events and our responses to them; an orchid who is regularly feeling stress will struggle to form the requisite memories to build up an appropriate sense of self-awareness.

[I want to note here that this is different from the type of awareness I spoke of earlier when talking about the body scan. Orchids can struggle *in the moment* to be aware of their physical sensations as they take in so much from others, but when they *reflect* on their feelings, actions, and the like, they often have awareness that surpasses us adults.]

I have seen both sides of this in action in orchids. In one case, I know of an individual (older now) who is very likely an orchid who was raised by loving parents who just didn't always know how to provide the environment needed. Nothing dramatic happened, but there were typical stressors like divorce and struggling in school. He was loved and cared for throughout these events as many modern parents would do; however, currently he is unable to acknowledge or is unaware of why he does what he does or why he feels what he feels. Ask a question about emotions and you'll likely get "dunno" as an answer even as he can acknowledge that the behaviour may not be ideal. Obviously this makes change very difficult.

On the flipside, I turn to my daughter. Recently there was an event that I felt highlighted this so much that I took notes before even offering this course. She came up to me and her dad one day and said, "I know why I've been bugging D (her older half-brother) so much." We know she likes to bug him and kind of attributed it to being a younger sibling. Apparently we were wrong. She went on to explain that he had made comments about wanting to be back with his friends (he lives away and visits for chunks at a time) and being excited to see them again and this really hurt her deeply, but she didn't say it to him, instead she started bugging him in hopes of making him feel as bad as she did. But now that she realized what she was doing, she wanted to stop and so by telling us, she wanted us to speak to him about how his words were hurting her and then she will work on not bugging him which would be easier if she wasn't feeling hurt herself. And yes, she explained it using all these words. She had just turned nine less than a month earlier.

I use this example not only because it really highlights the level of emotional thinking that orchids can display, but it also highlights that they are *still children* and having awareness doesn't mean they will immediately behave in some mature fashion as we might be tempted to expect. She was still bugging her brother (and yes, she continues to do so at times as a younger sister) because she is still a child whose brain is still developing and who still needs guidance and help and understanding.

It can be incredibly hard to temper our expectations when we see high levels of understanding coming from our kids, but we must; if we don't we run the risk of parenting in ways that then change this environment from a positive to a negative one for the orchid. For you as a parent, I find tricks to remind yourself of your child's age can be helpful. When I'm talking about a situation or thinking about how to respond, I self-talk myself through it and always start with, "S/he is only X" referring to their age; this helps me remember that although our orchids can seem so old at times (or so young if dealing with big emotions), they are still children who need our help.

In addition, knowing that our orchids are going to be so aware of their own emotional state, but not necessarily know how to behave in response to it, it is important to provide that learning experience for them. To do this, we must remember that children learn well from stories that speak to them in ways that alleviate, rather than heighten, their anxiety, which means the story can't focus on them. Orchids especially struggle with these big feelings and don't necessarily know they can ask for help in coping unless we've made that particularly clear. Reading lots of stories on emotions and how we handle them or taking time each day as a family to talk about what we felt that day – the good and the bad – and how we responded to those emotions can help our children learn different ways of responding to these

emotions. And if there is a particular behaviour you want them to learn – like taking a moment to breathe when angry – talk about that a lot when you’re all in good moods to help reinforce that as an option.

The last thing to remember here is that being self-aware can be lonely. Because we often don’t talk about our mistakes or our negative emotions, it’s easy for orchids to think they are alone in these emotions or in their behaviours. They can see other people make mistakes, but if they aren’t feeling bad about it, it can seem qualitatively different than their own experience. It is so important that our orchids don’t feel alone as they navigate their own world. I find that whenever you see your orchid struggling with an emotion or a behaviour of theirs, you should share it. By this I mean share with them a similar experience that you may have had. Knowing they aren’t alone alleviates a lot of anxiety for orchids and reinforces that you are a person they can talk to because you have the requisite knowledge of how to get through these difficult times. I’ve been doing this for years with my daughter and now whenever my daughter is reflecting on her own emotional state or behaviours she’ll always start by asking me if I’ve ever done anything like it. And trust me, chances are I have, and so have you.



Source: Pexels

Section 4: Awareness of Others

This awareness of other people and their emotions – no matter how subtle – is one of the main features that orchids have, in line with their sensitivity to their environments. Humans are naturally aware of other humans and we pick up on nuanced cues to emotions and thoughts, something that seems to be heightened in the orchid child. There are various ways in which this impacts the orchid child, all of which are related to this social world that we find ourselves in.

4a. Empathy

The first feature to discuss here is empathy. Depending on the environment an orchid finds themselves in, they can be highly empathic or seemingly very low on empathy. We start with the fact that orchids

are so very sensitive to the cues of others and so they will pick up on other people's emotional states very readily – often before others have noticed. This means when they are faced with someone else in distress, they will notice it very quickly and be affected by it.

For young children of all kinds, picking up on negative emotions leads to their own experience of distress in response. In babies we call it 'emotion contagion' and as children get older they start to be able to separate their emotional state from the one they observe, though this is a process that takes time to develop and is ongoing throughout our lives. Because orchids are also quick to experience stress, depending on the type of emotion they are picking up, the strength of it, and their ability to know how to cope with it, they may start to feel very strongly in response to another's emotional state. The distress they experience is their own, but it is due to the experience of the other.

In the empathy literature we refer to this as 'personal distress' and it is a component of empathy, but not the type of empathic reaction we hope to see in children. Most of us expect to feel some personal distress, but our empathic concern is greater and we move away from our personal distress towards the other in order to help them. An orchid in a flourishing environment is able to do this (at a developmentally-appropriate age), but an orchid in the wrong environment can get stuck in the personal distress, unable to get out of it and thus fail to demonstrate the type of empathy one would expect.

How do we as parents facilitate this type of empathic concern over the strong experience of personal distress? Let's take a look at some key elements:

1. When our children are young, we need to focus on simply helping them regulate. We may find it odd that someone else is hurt and we have to comfort our child more than the hurt child needs comforting, but modeling the regulation through co-regulation is key. This means a lot of physical contact and empathy regarding their emotions for as much as is needed. Now this starts being necessary at birth, but continues for years and years and years. I still have to help my daughter regulate sometimes, though as she's gotten older it's almost never in response to someone else's plight, but rather her own.
2. As they become older (typically in the 2 years of age range), we need to explicitly identify the personal distress AND how to move beyond to help it. This means we may need to voice that we too feel sad seeing someone so sad, but that we are still going to help. You should always ask your child to come with you to help so they get a sense of what this process of helping involves. This stage will continue for quite some time as our children will show some times of being able to overcome their distress to help, but not always.
3. When our kids struggle to overcome their own distress, it's important to allow space for that, even if you have to go help someone else first. Never make them feel bad about struggling to get beyond their own upset because that will just make them feel worse. If they can't overcome their distress in time to help in the moment, then you should highlight ways for them to check in on someone after the fact or do something else after. This helps to show the orchid that they can always effect some change, even if they have struggled first.

4. Help them understand that one of the ways to help their own distress is to help others. This is often overlooked because it sounds so wrong (who wants to makes helping others really about helping yourself?), but yet it's very helpful. There are adults who get stuck in their personal distress and simply can't act as needed because we were too afraid to make other people's negative situations about them. But here's the thing: knowing that something can help us feel better is not antithetical to it helping others as well. Sometimes our orchids benefit from knowing that *they* will feel better by helping others because as the other person's distress lowers, so too can theirs. As they get older, you hope the motivation isn't just to ease their own discomfort, but if that always plays a role in them showing empathic concern, that's not such a bad price to pay.
5. Use stories and play to help them practice acting on empathic concern. When reading stories ask what they could do if their friend was upset or if playing a game, have a character get sad and see how your orchid responds. It is much easier for all kids to learn things through play when they are not distressed themselves and so this provides opportunity for the brain to learn different response patterns in a safe and healthy way.

4b. The Shame Spiral

One area that many parents struggle with is the sense of shame that we can see in our children. They are acutely aware of their expectations for themselves (and this bleeds into their awareness of others) and when they fall short, they can experience such profound and deep negative emotions.

This is really a mix of their other- and self-awareness as they tend to feel this way in response to perceived mistakes in other people's minds. Given their other-awareness, they know what is expected of them (or at least think they do and they're often right even if the expectation is wrong) and if they cannot live up to it, they internalize these mistakes as being about them as failures. Their self-awareness means they often pick up on their mistakes in ways no one else might and are acutely aware of their own behaviours with respect to these expectations.

For example, if an orchid perceives that you expect them be kind to others (a very normal expectation), anytime they deviate from this, they can internalize it to a degree that is unhealthy. They may get mad a friend (again, a normal reaction) but then feel that this reflects on them as a person and that they are no longer a good person because of this failure. This can lead to big emotions over small mistakes, but only because they see these mistakes as a threat to their social world and to the love they require.

Of course this can also happen when we correct them in any way. The explicit correction is a signal that they have not lived up to some expectation and this can cause very big emotions, including the shame and self-loathing that can be beyond difficult to witness. This means that when we give corrections we have to do it as gently as possible (something we'll talk in depth about in the discipline section next week) in hopes of getting our point across without the associated shame.

Although avoiding the shame spiral is best, it's not always possible, not matter how attentive or caring we are either because we may not even know what triggered the shame or we simply didn't know how to get across this information in a way that didn't elicit it (likely because the expectation was one they

had of themselves too). Thus we must have ways to help our orchids out of this once they fall into it. Often our first reaction is to minimize the event in hopes that will alleviate shame, but this will not often work well with an orchid. In fact, it can make it worse because they can start to feel bad about feeling bad.

The first thing is to start with love and the reminder to your orchid that you love them no matter what. Sometimes they may struggle with this and tell you “no” and the crucial part is that you keep telling them you do. Your job is to overcome those negative voices in their head to make sure they know they are absolutely loved, unconditionally loved. I often have said to my kids in these moments, “Nothing you could do could ever make me not love you. I will always love you.”

Once you overcome those negative voices then you can move towards restructuring the thinking behind the shame. Because shame is a social emotion, it’s often driven by others and is thus much harder to address, but in the case of the orchid it can be driven simply by the *thought* of what others will think. This means you have a chance to flip this around and change the way your child perceives the emotion instead of trying to minimize or negate it. That is, you can focus on what the potential benefit of this emotion could be for your child. For example, you can explain that this feeling is likely signaling something to them that they need to take note of and likely doesn’t mean anything about anyone else. So those bad feelings are their own body’s way of telling them that they didn’t like something. If they can learn (over time, lots of time) that they can use this information to make decisions about how they want to move forward, it can empower rather than disempower them.

Now sometimes they have been shamed by others and sometimes even for reasons we can understand. Kids do shame each other and if a child has violated a social norm or been mean and then shamed for it, we don’t want to minimize this learning opportunity either. In these cases, the focus on learning comes from the idea of making amends and so we can highlight how we all make mistakes, sometimes we face consequences from them from others, and we can only control what we do which is to make amends for our behaviour if that’s necessary. They may need help making amends, but once it’s done they often feel a huge sense of relief and they can continue to grow as beautifully as before.

Finally, sometimes they are shamed for the wrong reasons and our job here is to help them learn that others can be wrong. For whatever reason, so many orchids seem to ignore this fact and think instead that they alone are wrong and others are always right. We must work to change that by highlighting why this shaming was wrong and how the other person could have handled the situation differently. It may also help to talk about the underlying motives others have for shaming, which often stem from feeling badly themselves.

4c. Gaslighting

One of the things that parents (and teachers) of orchids need to be aware of is the risk of gaslighting them when it comes to their perceptions of our emotions. Orchids are highly aware of their environment and this means they often will pick up on the slightest flash of anger or frustration or distress, no matter how well we try to hide it. They will respond to these emotional states as if we had

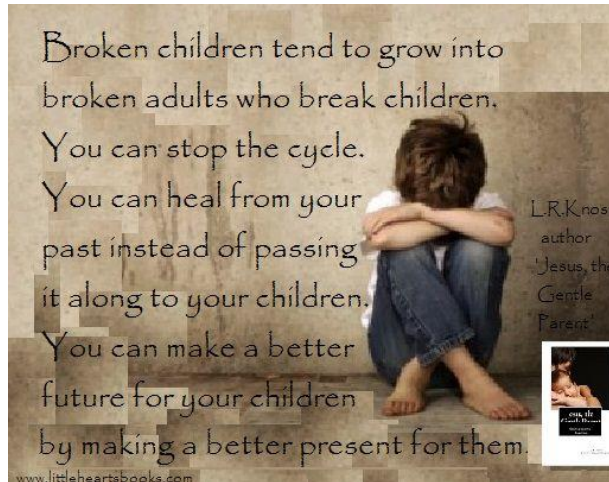
expressed this negativity as a full-blown rage or meltdown. Thus how we respond to this perception is critical.

My own daughter is a classic example of how this works. She'll do or say something and on our faces, we can betray some level of frustration or annoyance at the situation (obviously this doesn't happen all the time, please know, but it does happen). She then will fall into that experience of distress which I can see on her face quite clearly. Previous to realizing the extent of the shame spiral, my husband or I might say, "We're not angry!" and she'd tell us she saw it in our face. We might double down and say, "No you didn't – we're not angry at all". And the truth is that we *aren't* angry at that moment, but we did have that moment of anger or annoyance and that's what she responded to; if we deny it we either make her doubt her own experiences or we shut off communication with her. Neither of these is ideal.

As adults, it's normal for us to experience these emotions briefly and then either not really want to admit to it (or think we've recovered quickly enough for others not to notice) or not even acknowledge it. The problem – as I have learned first-hand – is if we can't acknowledge it, we are in essence telling them they are not seeing what they are. We are gaslighting them. This is not a healthy thing to do to a child, but definitely not a healthy thing to do to an orchid child. Because orchids are so sensitive to their environment, if we try to make it seem like they are wrong in what they are picking up, we're setting them up for distress and struggles in later social situations because the tools they have to navigate their environment won't be correct.

I have found it quite helpful to simply acknowledge the momentary emotion and specify between brief annoyance or frustration and actually being upset or angry. Teaching our orchids that we all can have those quick responses, or triggers – especially if it changes a plan we may have had or we're in the middle of something or it will make us late – is normal, but how we respond after that flash is of the utmost importance. For younger children who may not be able to vocalize what they saw, it can be good to start by just saying out loud how you felt. You should also explain why it made you feel that brief moment of annoyance or frustration as it's important the child knows it's not about them or their requests or what they did, but about the effects that often come with these things. For example, "Sorry, I was a little frustrated because I realized you needing to stop to pee again means we'll now be late and I just panicked over that, but it's really not a big deal and you need to pee! So let's stop at the next gas station." Acknowledging what they very likely picked up on validates their experience, then contextualizing it so they don't internalize the emotion as being about them is equally important, and finally talking about where you are at in that moment allows them to move beyond any negativity they felt from your response.

That shame spiral described above can be much worse if we don't have the self-awareness or strength to admit to these flashes of emotion. It's not always easy, but trust me, it's worth it. Given their emotional sense is one of the orchid child's strengths, we really don't want to do anything to diminish it, right?



Bonus: The Adult Orchid – Emotional Struggles

When we think about the emotional life of adult orchids it's different. Not because the experiences or strengths and weaknesses are different, but because the manifestation is different. When we look at the emotional life of our children, chances are most is written all over them in one way or another; however, as we age, we learn to hold things in and sometimes the way it manifests can be utterly confusing to those around us. As discussed last week, there are risks of mental health problems when raised in the “wrong” environment, and most stems from their emotional life.

So what about the typical emotional life? What if you're an orchid who doesn't have “serious” mental health problems, but still struggle in many areas of one's social and emotional life?

The following are the problems that may be more common with adult orchids:

1. **Shut-off emotionally.** Linked to “the big feels”, this is likely the orchid who grew up with their emotional responses being deemed “bad” or “troublesome”. If they reacted in class, they got in trouble. If they got upset at home, parents just tried to keep them quiet. This can lead to children not only being overwhelmed with the amount of emotional input they receive, but internalizing the experience as being indicative of them being “bad”. If we feel our experiences of emotions are bad then we are bound to work to shut them off. We can often view this as being intentional, but it's more likely unconscious for the orchid.
2. **Volatile emotions.** Sometimes the adult orchid struggles with regulating emotions – good or bad – and has such strong experiences and expressions of emotions that it affects their social interactions. They can be the life of the party one day, sullen the next, and exploding with anger another day. When we think about the type of reactivity they have to their environment, we can understand why they may respond so strongly to what is going on around them. In these cases the child orchid may not have gotten in trouble for their big feels, but likely also never received the assistance needed to regulate these strong emotions.

3. **Always stressed out.** We all know those people that seem to be constantly on edge; they are ready to snap or fall apart at a moment's notice. The world around them just seems too much. Given this is part of the orchid's constant struggle, it should be no surprise that many adult orchids can struggle with stress-related illnesses and behaviours in their adult life as well. This is often due to the lack of learning emotion regulation skills and having that fully supported environment.
4. **Can't handle others' distress.** Do you know the orchid who simply can't handle when someone else is upset? Depending on the person, they may get angry about it and respond harshly or they may need to walk away because they can't see it in others. Given the strong awareness of others' emotional experiences, this is often due to being stuck in the personal distress side of things. When we examine how personal distress impacts people, we see both of the above responses depending on what they are able to do in the moment depending on their situation.
5. **Sabotaging.** The adult orchid may find themselves sabotaging relationships or situations when they feel uncomfortable. If the adult orchid hasn't been allowed to feel unconditionally accepted, chances are they will find ways to try and turn their relationships into conditional ones, ones in which they expect themselves to fail at. This may manifest more frequently if the adult orchid was one who was more likely to experience the fight response when stressed and thus was treated as one who was always creating trouble and this has become internalized.
6. **Can't say no.** Because the orchid experiences others' disapproval so much more than their dandelion counterparts, they can struggle to maintain boundaries and say no when things are too much. They may find that it is easier to say yes than handle the anxiety of disapproval, particularly if they were not raised to regulate their emotional experience to other people.
7. **A life of shame.** That shame spiral can follow orchids for most of their lives and can become exacerbated by struggles in some of these other areas noted above. For example, an orchid who can't say no and takes on too much may face more disapproval when they cannot follow through and this becomes internalized as being about them. Or if they struggle to maintain relationships, they can internalize this as being about them, particularly if they've been sabotaging them. However, this experience of shame may be one of the core processes behind the heightened risk for mental health disorders and thus it's imperative that it be worked on as soon as possible.

The question now becomes: What does the adult orchid do?

There are a few things you can start to do on your own, but I should add that therapy may be a wise idea if you can find someone who you mesh well with (and you can afford it). Working through our history is often difficult, but can be very freeing. If therapy isn't an option, there are workbooks written by psychologists that may be helpful, but it will depend on your specific situation as to which books would be of most use for you.

In addition to therapy I recommend meditation and mindfulness work. There is growing research that mindfulness is highly beneficial to all of us, but is especially good for helping us work through difficult situations. It can bring us awareness of our emotional and cognitive states and provide the framework

for handling difficult emotions or triggers. There are so many apps for this – many of them free – I recommend trying a few to see what works for you.

Many people have found journaling to be very beneficial in this regard so if you are a writer or have time to reflect on the day, writing about your day each day can help. The key here is not to worry about what you write, so much as allowing the free flow of thoughts on your day. You may only start with a couple sentences *and that's okay!* With practice it will be easier for you to allow your thoughts and emotions to come to the surface.

In fact, anything that helps increase self-reflection and acceptance of emotions will be valuable. There are likely many more ways to do this than I can think of or are aware of, but the key is to focus on being aware of your triggers, your emotions, and then accepting these as valid. You may not like experiencing them, but they are valid responses and with time you can learn that they are there and do not define you.

If you are with an adult orchid, please validate their emotions, as you would for your orchid child. If the adult orchid in your life never had that type of validation, then you can serve as the gateway to accepting and learning to live with emotions of all kinds. You can also model and provide guidance on how to work with these emotions to express them in healthy ways. Just please know this is going to be a long process, one that will be filled with ups and downs and will be in large part dependent upon the willingness of your partner to work on change.

This is the end of Growing Orchids: Week 2: The Emotional Life of the Orchid