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## What Emotions Are and Why We Have Them

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Emotions are what move us. Emotions are a driving force. In any one day, a range of emotions can take you on a rollercoaster that brings you up and then takes you down.

You know how it is: in the morning a project is cancelled despite all the work you put into it. You feel frustrated and angry. But then a friend phones with some good news. You're delighted. There's a long queue for lunch. More frustration. Back at work you're told that the project is back on after all. Joy! Then your brother phones to say he and his wife have separated. You're sad and disappointed. A colleague announces she's got a promotion (you are envious and regret that you didn't apply for the job). But your son texts to say he got a part in the school play. You're pleased and happy.

The emotional rollercoaster takes you up high where the view is great but then it suddenly plunges you down, turning you upside down and rolling you around, before taking you up on a high again.

Nothing vivifies and nothing kills like the emotions.

Joseph Roux

## **What are emotions?**

Emotions are an important part of being human; emotions cause us to feel, think and act in different ways – to do something or avoid doing something.

Emotions are complex reactions that engage our bodies and minds; they play an important role in how we think, feel and behave. In fact, any one emotion can be made up of thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Let's look at each of those aspects more closely.

### ***Behavioural aspects***

The behavioural aspect of an emotion is the most obvious, observable aspect. The behavioural aspects are concerned with how we respond to a situation; what we do or don't do, what actions we do or don't take. You can actually see the effect of the emotion in another person; you might, for example, see someone who is anxious wring and rub their hands. Someone else might tap their foot when irritated or impatient. Some of us bang the table with our fist when we are angry. Some people jump up and down when they are excited; when, for example, their team is winning.

### ***Physical aspects***

These are the physical changes: the internal bodily changes you experience – for example, increased heart rate, feeling queasy – when you experience an emotion.

When an emotion occurs, particularly a strong basic emotion like fear or anger, chemicals – hormones – secreted by the body's various glands are activated and spread to other parts of the body.

Your body's muscles, circulatory system, digestive system and organs such as your heart and liver shift from their normal level or function due to the effects of chemical and neural action.

Some of these physical responses can be observed, such as the constriction or dilation of the iris of your eyes, sweating and blushing. Other responses are relatively hidden, such as an increased heart rate, stomach activity and an increase or decrease in saliva.

Interestingly, some very different emotions provoke the same physical response. For example, excitement and anxiety can have the same sensations, such as rapid breathing and a pounding heart. In that case, what determines whether what you feel is happy or anxious? Your thoughts.

### ***Cognitive aspects of emotions***

Your thoughts – ideas, beliefs and mental images – are also part of an emotion.

For example, supposing you had an important interview, presentation or meeting tomorrow. Your thoughts might include: 'I don't know if I can do this – I might dry up and forget what to say.' You might get butterflies in your stomach; your heart rate increases and you start feeling hot.

In some ways, emotions are your thoughts felt physically; your thoughts can lead to a physical change.

Most women who have breastfed their child will tell you that they only had to *think* of their baby and they could feel milk come into their breasts. You don't, though, have to be nursing a baby to experience similar effects.

Imagine, for example, that you are given a big ripe juicy orange. Imagine yourself smelling the orange, feeling its texture, smelling its distinct citrus aroma. Next, see yourself cutting the orange into four quarters and taking one of those quarters and putting it into your mouth and taking a big juicy bite. If you imagined this clearly, you would notice that your mouth started to produce some extra saliva. You may have noticed your mouth puckering up and perhaps even watering.

Emotions are dynamic; any one aspect can trigger the other. How you think, feel and act are intrinsically linked.

If your computer has ever failed to do what you want, you may well have found yourself getting angry. Your angry response could begin with a *physical* reaction: a rise in adrenaline, rapid heart beat and breathing. This triggers a *behavioural* reaction: you thump the table. This is immediately followed by the *thought*: ‘Oh my God! Now I won’t get this work finished.’

Or, you could thump the table first. This could trigger a physical response: an adrenaline rush, rapid heart beat and breathing. Again, your thoughts follow close behind.

Or the angry response could begin with the thought: ‘Oh my God! Now I won’t get the work finished.’ This thought triggers adrenaline, which increases your heart rate and affects your breathing.

Usually, we’re not that aware of these different aspects of an emotion. Sometimes one aspect is so strong that it overwhelms and hides the other aspects. Other times, one aspect of an emotion may be so difficult that you automatically suppress that part. You might, for example, shut down or suppress uncomfortable thoughts.

## The science of emotions

Feeling sad when a good friend moves away, anxiety before a test or exam, feeling thrilled that you've been offered the job, reacting with fear when you are watching a scary film – you might think you understand how you feel and what causes those feelings.

But just how is your brain influencing your emotions?

Your brain is made up of many different parts that all work together to process the information it receives. Emotional responses appear to come from one area of the brain: the amygdala; a small structure within the limbic system, one of the first areas in the human brain to develop.

The way the limbic system responds to experiences and situations is simple and basic. And because the limbic system regulates the emotions, your emotional responses are also simple and basic.

For example, even though another part of your brain can reason that when you're filled with fear watching a scary film, it is, in fact, *just* a film and you are not in danger, the limbic system cannot. It's not the thinking part of your brain. So, when you watch a scary movie and someone in that film is about to be attacked, you react automatically and immediately, without thinking.

So, the limbic system enables you to respond quickly, instinctively and without having to think about it. When you are in actual danger – if it is you that is being threatened with being attacked – you need to react quickly. There's no time to think, you need to move fast!

Another part of your brain – the neocortex – is the thinking, reasoning, part of your brain. The neocortex enables the most complex mental activity, such as conscious thought, language and spatial reasoning. However, it is much slower than the limbic system.

So if, for example, you suddenly see a car, snake, falling tree coming towards you, you're unlikely to use your neocortex to think through the potential danger – your limbic system will snap into action and make you react *without* thinking.

Rational thinking is sometimes too slow for handling a threat (a tree falling towards you). Sometimes, you need to react more quickly and basic emotions, like fear and surprise, help you do that. They are survival mechanisms and are hardwired into our biology, just like metabolic processes and muscle reflexes.

## Intuition

Another example of the limbic system in action are the occasions when you have a split second's awareness – an 'inner voice' that tells you something in an instant.

If you've ever had a moment where you felt as though something wasn't right – when things didn't seem to add up – then you've experienced intuition. Conversely, you could've experienced situations where everything *did* add up; everything did seem to come together to tell you to take action straight away. That's also your intuition – an immediate knowing.

You don't know why – you just feel it. Intuition cuts out all the thought and leaps straight to the answer. Sometimes referred to as gut feeling, that gut feeling – or a hunch – presents

itself to you as an immediate sensation. It is noticeable enough to be acted on, yet too quick for you to need to process and understand it.

Here's an example of intuition providing immediate knowledge.

Ruby was walking along a crowded beach in Spain with her three-year-old son Jack. Three local, middle-aged women were walking close by in the same direction. Every time her son stopped to examine a shell or pebble, the women slowed their pace. Ruby was only vaguely aware of this. At one point the women stopped abruptly in front of Ruby and Jack. Ruby bumped into them. She apologised and carried on walking with her son but was aware that the women had dispersed and walked off in different directions. Without thinking or knowing why, Ruby suddenly checked her bag. Her purse was gone. That immediate knowledge that something definitely wasn't right alerted her to take action. Ruby grabbed her son, ran after one of the women and started loudly remonstrating with her, accusing the woman of having stolen her purse. People around them stopped and stared and a nearby police officer began to approach the small crowd. Another of the women returned to the scene. Ruby felt a tug on her bag – she looked inside – her purse had been dropped back into her bag.

There's nothing mystical or coincidental about intuition; it's simply everything you subconsciously already know in certain circumstances, coming together at once. And to benefit from this knowledge – your intuition – you need to be aware of and tune in to what your senses are telling you; what your ears, eyes, nose, sense of taste and/or touch and the physical sensations are communicating to you. And you need to be aware of what past experience has taught you.

Everyone has intuition – it's a process that gives you the ability to know something directly without thinking. It bridges the gap between the conscious and unconscious parts of your mind, and between instinct and reason.

Intuitive messages are often keen and quick, which makes them easy to miss. So often, intuitive messages are drowned out by all the other internal and external noise and activity that is going on in and around you.

### **How to develop and hone your intuition**

To begin, listen to your body and the signals it is giving. In any situation.

By being aware of your physical feelings in everyday situations, when, for example, something doesn't feel right, or you feel unsure about something, you will be more likely to recognise that your body is warning you against something.

Listen to what's going on around you. Listening is different from hearing. Hearing involves being aware of sound. Listening involves concentrating on sound.

Stop and notice some of the sounds around you right now: traffic, the wind in the trees or the birds outside; the sound of the TV, radio or someone talking in the next room; the sound of your breathing. Or the sound of silence.

It's not just what you hear that can alert you to what's going on. All your senses are constantly picking up information from the world around you. Be aware of what you see – take notice, for example, of the changing light throughout the day.

Be more aware of how things feel to the touch, notice the different smells in the air.

Being more aware of your environment – the sights, sounds, smells and so on – on an everyday basis will serve you well when the crucial messages need to get through. In a range of situations, when things seem out of place or unusual, you will recognise it's your intuition communicating with you.

In any situation, be open to *all* the messages your intuition is communicating. Rather than interpret a single signal (unless it is overwhelming – there's a strong smell of gas or smoke, the other person is clutching a weapon, a group of people are all looking extremely agitated), be alert for a combination of signals.

When that combination of messages your senses are receiving does add up, your intuition will come through loud and clear! You simply need to stay focused, ignore distractions and act fast!

## The function of emotions

We've seen, then, that your brain functions to create the best response to a situation and it uses emotions as the catalyst to prompt you to act. Emotions move you. Literally.

There are three main areas where emotions are useful.

### ***Physical safety value***

As you've just read, emotions can prompt you to react quickly in response to danger. Emotions get your attention and demand a response; they motivate you to take action and keep safe.

It would appear that we have six basic emotions – fear, anger, disgust, surprise, sadness and joy. The main function of basic emotions like fear and disgust is to protect you. Disgust is an automatic response that we experience when, for example, we encounter something that could transmit disease and cause us to be unwell. Anger quickly transforms us into a state where we're ready to fight and fear can prompt us to flee from dangerous situations.

These emotions don't wait for you to think, to reason and to process what's going on. Instead, they instantly warn you of danger and get you to move out of harm's way immediately.

### ***Social value***

Basic emotions such as fear and anger may appear to be self-serving rather than altruistic. But emotions evolved not just to keep *you* safe, but to bind us together with others as we all have a better chance of surviving and thriving when we consider each other's needs, cooperate and live in harmony with each other.

Social emotions – also known as moral emotions – such as trust, guilt, gratitude, shame, compassion and love – enable us to live and work with each other. They regulate and guide our interactions; they allow us to initiate and maintain social ties and bonds that bring families, friends, neighbours and communities together.

To experience these emotions, you need empathy – an ability to understand how different circumstances and situations influence and impact each other. You need to be aware of how your behaviour would be received by other people; how you may be judged. For example, you may refrain from stealing because you know it will upset the other person and you

will be judged as a ‘bad’ person – and may then be ostracised from your community.

### ***Creative value***

Creativity is the ability to create and express – through art, poetry, music and so on – ideas and thoughts.

When it comes to creativity, emotions are a double-edged sword. Emotions can inspire or hinder creativity. Anger can inspire a dramatic painting. Despair and sadness, for example, can paralyse creativity. But despair and sadness could (and do) inspire beautiful, moving poetry and songs. In turn, creative experiences can provoke and inspire emotions. A poem or film, for example, can move you to tears. So can a piece of music.

If you’ve ever sat in heavy traffic getting more and more frustrated only to find yourself perking up because a favourite tune just came on the radio, you’ll know that music can completely change the way you feel. There’s nothing like putting on your favourite song to lift your spirits. But music can also make you sad or fill you with determination.

Emotions, then, help keep you safe, help you establish and maintain connections with other people and inspire your creativity. Emotions can enhance and widen experience. Emotions can block and limit experience.

### **Positive and negative emotions: why are some emotions ‘good’ and others are ‘bad’?**

When you feel good, you tend to open up and reach out. This provides the basis for positive social interactions. Typically, you are more tolerant, more open to new ideas and new

experiences. You feel more positive about situations and other people – generous and open to seeing possibilities.

Emotions that make you feel good can also motivate you to repeat an action or experience; the experience of joy is a pleasurable one, and motivates you to carry out the behaviour that led to the emotion. If you feel good, you have the confidence to broaden your experiences; to reach out and connect with others and make a contribution to the world.

Feeling good enables you to think and behave in an entirely different way from emotions that make you feel bad. Emotions can be seen as an organising response, because they focus our thoughts and behaviour.

Emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, guilt and regret narrow your perspective. You focus on what's wrong, deal with the immediate threat. When, for example, you are faced with an exam, you might feel anxious. But this anxiety can focus your thoughts and behaviour and make it more likely that you will revise. Of course, the anxiety might be so overwhelming that you avoid the exam altogether. Your flight or fight response is activated and may cause you to, in the example of anxiety about the exam, withdraw or freeze. In another situation – one where you are angry, for example – you might attack or defend yourself.

Emotions such as jealousy, anger and disappointment contract your world, whereas emotions such as hope, compassion and happiness expand your world and the possibilities in it.

### ***Emotions have a positive intent***

Judging emotions as 'positive' or 'negative', 'good' or 'bad' isn't very helpful. In fact, as we've just seen, all emotions have

a positive purpose – to keep you safe, develop and maintain social ties and to develop our creativity and self-actualisation.

So, why do so many of us think that certain emotions are bad or wrong? It's all down to the beliefs and expectations that we grew up with. For many of us, instead of being allowed to experience and express our feelings, our emotions may have been ignored, derided, belittled or denied.

For example, if you were frightened of the dark and told an adult 'I want the light on, I'm scared', you may have been told: 'Don't be silly. Of course you're not scared.'

Or, perhaps you once said you hated your teacher, friend, sister or brother. The response? To be told you were 'wrong' to feel like that.

The problem is, though, that these sorts of responses did little to teach you about understanding and managing feelings and emotions. Instead, these responses established ideas, beliefs and expectations that certain emotions are 'bad' or 'wrong'.

At one end of the scale, some of us have learnt to be restrained: to deny, ignore or suppress emotions. On the other hand, some of us have grown up in families where it was quite OK to openly express emotions and feelings – an open expression of emotions was normal, with hugs and kisses alternating between tears and angry shouting.

The idea that we should aim to only have 'good' emotions, such as happiness and compassion, although well intentioned, is not helpful because it suggests that we should try to eliminate anger and jealousy and other painful emotions.

All emotions have a positive intent – emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, guilt and regret might not feel good, but they do have beneficial aspects.

As I've already explained, if you are faced with an exam, you might feel anxious. The anxiety might prompt you to avoid revising or not even turn up for the exam at all! But it has a positive intent – the anxiety can focus you and motivate you to revise.

What about a difficult emotion, such as regret? How can that be positive? The positive intent of regret is to prompt you to reflect and learn from what did or didn't happen so you can avoid making the same mistake in future. Regret is only negative when we are stuck going back over what did or didn't happen and becoming bitter or depressed about it. But it's not the emotion that is negative; it's your unhelpful ruminative thinking and the failure to learn from what did or didn't happen and move on.

Our beliefs about 'negative' emotions contribute to why our emotions sometimes feel overwhelming, and unmanageable.

But try to keep in mind that emotions serve a positive purpose. Emotions are communicating with us. They motivate us to take action in some way. Therefore, when you ignore, suppress or deny an emotion, it prevents you from understanding or connecting with the important information your emotions are trying to convey to you.

When you believe that it's wrong to experience and express feelings and emotions (your own or other people's), instead of managing them in an appropriate way you may find yourself dealing with emotions in inappropriate, unhelpful ways.

Maybe you deny or play down the fact that certain events or situations have happened – for example, telling yourself that you didn't really want the job you've just failed to get – to avoid admitting your disappointment. Or you tell yourself you're not jealous of your sister or brother who your parents appear to favour more than you.

But emotions want to make themselves known; they want you to be aware of them, feel them and act on them in an appropriate way. Denying, repressing and burying feelings does not get rid of them. Instead, when an emotion is buried, it leaks out in other ways: either in passive aggressive or aggressive behaviour. We look at this more closely in Chapter 5.

So, we've seen what emotions are, where they come from and why we have them. We've also seen that emotions have a positive intent. The next step is to understand specific emotions – their nature, levels of intensity, the differences, similarities and relationships between them.

## Key points

- Emotions are complex reactions that engage our bodies and minds; they play an important role in how we think, feel and behave.
- Our emotions are generated by the amygdala; a small structure within the limbic system of our brains. The limbic system enables us to respond quickly, instinctively and without having to think. Another area of our brains – the neocortex – is the thinking, reasoning part.
- An example of the limbic system in action would be an occasion when you have a split second's awareness – an

inner voice – that tells you something in an instant. This is your intuition: an immediate knowledge.

- There are three main ways that emotions are useful: they help keep us safe, they help us establish and maintain connections with other people and they inspire our creativity.
- As well as enhancing and widening our experiences, emotions can focus or limit experience.
- Thinking of emotions as positive or negative, good or bad isn't helpful. Our beliefs about 'negative' emotions contribute to why our emotions sometimes feel overwhelming, 'wrong' and unmanageable.
- Although some emotions are painful, all emotions have a positive purpose. Emotions are communicating with us. They motivate us to take action in some way: to avoid danger and keep safe, and/or to develop and maintain our social relations and/or to develop our creativity and self-actualisation.