
Emotion Awareness

What Are Emotions?

What are emotions, really? Most simply, emotions are signals that help you respond to what your brain thinks is happening. Here's how they work: the brain responds to internal and external cues (events or observations from our environment). Then the brain produces biochemical messengers, which we experience as emotions. These emotions motivate us to make choices. For example, the emotion we know as anxiety helps us choose to avoid danger. Anger helps us choose to fight when we feel threatened. Sadness helps us choose to withdraw when we need to process a loss or failure.

From birth, our amazing brains are evolutionarily wired to protect us from harm—to help us survive. That means any time your brain is sensing a threat to your well-being, it will do everything it can to send you emotional messages to motivate you to protect yourself. You may have heard about this process referred to as “flight, fight, or freeze,” all of which are common responses to intense emotions.

However, while our emotional wiring has been adaptive for the survival of the human race over time, the survival wiring doesn't always serve us when it gets activated in a non-survival situation. Over time, your brain develops a “negativity bias,” whereby it constantly scans your environment for anything negative that could be interpreted as a threat so it can protect you. The downside of this protective negativity bias is that you can end up in a state of constant anxiety, or you can be easily triggered—whether or not there is an actual threat.

Author and psychotherapist Tara Brach explains how the negativity bias impacts us: “The emotion of fear often works overtime. Even when there is no immediate threat, our body may remain tight and on guard, our mind narrowed to focus on what might go wrong. When this happens, fear is no longer functioning to secure our survival. We are caught in the trance of fear and our moment-to-moment experience becomes bound in reactivity. We spend our time and energy defending our life rather than living it fully” (2003, p. 168).

EET can help you learn how to respond to non-survival emotions using skills that will help you respond effectively.

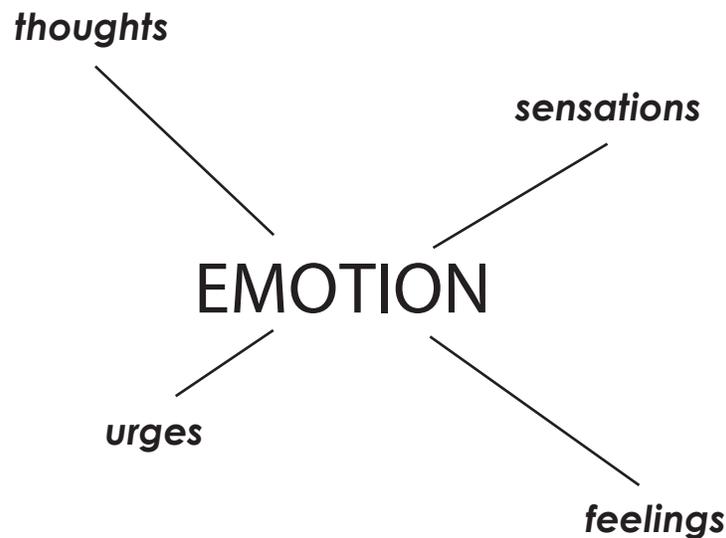
Why Do Some People Struggle with Emotions?

You've probably noticed that some people tend to be more emotionally reactive than others. We are all unique human beings, and how we experience emotions also depends on the wiring in our brains. While we are all born wired for survival, some of us are born with a tendency toward heightened emotional sensitivity. Others develop this tendency as a result of difficult experiences that leave them more emotionally reactive to certain cues.

If you are someone who has heightened sensitivity, you may have an increased vulnerability to stress. Even more, the heightened sensitivity to certain cues can become so ingrained and the emotional reactions so automatic that you may forget you have choices when you get triggered. Unfortunately, this emotional reactivity can negatively affect your well-being, quality of life, relationships, personal goals, and long-term health.

For this treatment, we will focus on how you can respond to distressing emotions and increase your emotion efficacy. You will learn how to stop being controlled by your emotions, how to respond in ways that reflect your values, and how to create more of what you want in your life.

Anatomy of an Emotion



There are four components that make up your experience of an emotion:

- **Thoughts:** Thoughts are the content of what you're thinking. For example, "I never do anything right," or "I want to get out of here."
- **Feelings:** Feelings are the label or interpretation we give the emotion, for instance, sadness, frustration, joy, and so on.
- **Sensations:** Sensations are anything you feel in the body. This might be a sense of looseness and ease in the body when relaxed or muscle tension when anxious.
- **Urges:** Urges are impulses to do something—or not to do something. Examples include the urge to leave, the urge to yell, the urge to withdraw.

Let's consider one example: If something great happens, you may have the thought, "There is so much to look forward to!" The feeling may be excitement. You may notice sensations of looseness and energy in your body. You may experience the urge to engage with people and/or dance around.

Two more examples: When you feel sad, you may have the thought, "I will always be alone." You may sense tightness in your stomach and a lack of energy in your body. You may have the urge to withdraw from people. If someone threatens you, you may feel angry, you may think, "How dare he say that?!" You may notice the sensation of increased heart rate and energy. You may have the urge to attack the person.