

A Theory of Emotion

The basic idea: your feelings are your perception of the state of your body. (I use “feeling” and “emotion” interchangeably.) In reaction to changing circumstances, your body constantly adapts. For example, when you’re threatened, your body goes into “fight or flight” mode. If you are aware of your body, you realize you are having a feeling. If you are too preoccupied because you’re fighting or running away, you don’t notice any feeling. When you finally pause, you immediately notice how upset you are.

How about those times when nothing much seems to be happening? If you’re sensitive and can get out of your head, you will notice that your body is always in some state or other, and that you can put a feeling label to that state: content, cheerful, melancholy, anxious, etc. Often these subtle and ever-present feelings are out of our awareness – we’re too busy thinking and acting. But if we tune into what’s going on in our body, we can invariably identify a feeling. After all, our body is alive and constantly changing in reaction to what’s happening. Of course, in those situations when our body reacts strongly – for example, when we receive sad news and want to cry – the emotions are very evident. But they are always there to be found, if we look. (And the habit of often tuning in to the body and feeling our emotions seems to be correlated with good mental health. Similarly, failing to know one’s feelings seems to lead to negative mental and physical health consequences.)

So, once again, the fundamental idea: feelings are your awareness of what's going on in your body. This brings up the question of how many different ways your body can feel, and consequently how many emotions there are. Really, the answer is "many." The body is always adjusting its functioning, and the feelings are constantly shifting, blending into and evolving from one another as the body subtly (or abruptly) transforms itself. People who are sophisticated emotionally say that our emotional picture is like dynamic modern art, an ever-permuting blend of colors flowing together and continually creating new hues and patterns. For example, they might report "anticipation, coupled with a little fear and a tiny, bubbling joy." Most of us, however, aren't quite this perceptive. We might report feeling "pretty good."

For the purposes of this discussion, I'd like to simplify things quite a bit. I'll identify two major body states: aroused and calm. That is, the body is either filled with energy or it's relatively at peace. And I'll couple this with two basic life situations: threatened or secure. This gives us a 2X2 matrix in which the principal emotions can be placed:

	aroused	calm
threatened		
secure		

Now let's place the appropriate emotions in the four areas (with the corresponding behaviors in parentheses):

	aroused	calm
threatened	fear (fleeing or freezing) anger (fighting)	sadness (losing, surrendering)
secure	excitement/anticipation curiosity/exploration (seeking/striving) discovery/joy achievement/celebration (finding/succeeding)	enjoyment/appreciation satisfaction/contentment (consuming) nurturance/concern/love (sharing/caring)

It can easily be seen that threat leads to the three principal negative emotions: fear, anger, and sadness. When threatened, we either run or freeze, fight, or give up. Sadness, the least understood of these theoretically, in this view comes from any situation in which there is the perception that we can't win. Neither fleeing or fighting will succeed. So we surrender. In nature, this admission of defeat may serve to preserve an animal's life at the end of a fight.

Sadness is the response to loss, to the withdrawal of what is necessary to maintain and increase life. We feel sad when a situation is hurtful and we can't change it. If someone we love leaves, for example, we feel diminished because that person will no longer protect and nurture us, and we won't have the opportunity to share and celebrate.

This is a biologically-based theory. What brings positive feeling is that which supports and affirms life. Negative feeling comes from the loss of life, or the threat of loss. While in nature these circumstances are all physical – finding food or a mate, fighting or running from predators – in human society these things are often mental. We feel unhappy because we lose money, or we feel frightened by hearing about crime. Thoughts create environments in our head, and these scenarios then cause the body to react just as if we were experiencing them physically. The mechanism is the same: a perceived threat, either actual or imagined, causes the body to react and a negative emotion to be experienced. Similarly, imagined positive experience brings the same kind of happiness as that provided by the actual event.

To complicate matters, our perception of our feelings is itself a mental event, and can lead to further body reactions and feelings. This sometimes creates either an upward or a downward spiral. We feel how good we feel, which causes us to think positively and feel even better. Or we notice how bad we feel, which leads to self-critical or anxious thoughts and more bad feeling. One strategy for dispelling depression involves teaching people to accept the negative feelings that are a natural part of life without the self-blame that makes a passing feeling into the source of more negativity. And a strategy for controlling panic is to help people recognize that physical reactions like a pounding heart and shortness of breath are natural components of the “fight or flight” reaction, and do not signal a heart attack.

Psychologists have had a difficult time agreeing on the principal positive emotions, perhaps because the bodily reactions accompanying

positive life circumstances don't seem to be as different from one another as are the negative reactions. For example, enjoying a meal and feeling satisfied by it blend together in our experience. But we generally don't have any trouble telling anger from fear or sadness.

In my view, there are four fundamental positive emotional groups, each of which contains a number of related feelings. (By no means is my listing of these feelings exhaustive; I've only attempted to mention some of the most prominent shades of emotional experience in each group.) Excitement/anticipation/curiosity/exploration has to do with the biological drive to seek the things that give us life: food, shelter, sex, companionship, etc. Discovery/joy/achievement/celebration has to do with finding them. These are the high energy feelings.

Enjoyment/appreciation/satisfaction/contentment has to do with consuming the goods of life. And nurturance/concern/love is focused on giving life to others, and thereby promoting the survival of the species. These are the more settled feelings.

All other feelings are variations or blends of these principal groups, and depend on context. For example, the exhilaration you feel on a roller coaster is a blend of fear and excitement. Disgust is a mix of anger and fear. Contempt is anger in the presence of diminished threat. Playfulness can involve many permuting feelings. And so forth. Each feeling is a modification of the basic ones that fits the specific situation.

Guilt and shame are especially interesting. They are mixtures of the basic negative emotions that arise in response to particular kinds of thoughts about how one has acted. Guilt blends sadness and fear, and

comes up when thinking about actions that have hurt others. Shame arises when considering personal failings, and mixes sadness and self-directed anger.

Our thoughts are important in the emotional process in three ways. First, as discussed above, we create scenarios in our minds that we react to as if they existed physically. Imagining danger floods us with the same adrenaline as an actual threat does. Second, as we have also seen, our perception of our feelings can lead to thoughts which then create further feelings. If we're wise, perceiving that we are sad, for example, will lead us to think things that will cheer us up, rather than bringing on self-critical thoughts that will send us further down. And third, the mind constantly assesses the actual situation we're in as either supportive or threatening. A small, cute dog running up to us is immediately judged to be a positive event and brings a happy anticipation...unless we happen to be afraid of dogs, in which case the mind expects mayhem and we become terrified.

Some of these mental judgments happen instantly – they are built into us as reflexes and affect all of us in the same way. A charging grizzly sets off an immediate and major alarm bell in everyone. A caress makes everybody smile. But most mental reactions are a consequence of learning. We are conditioned to think in a certain way, depending on what has happened before in similar situations. In the above example of the approaching dog, our reaction is determined by our previous history with dogs. Past positive experiences lead to pleasant expectations; former misadventures now cause dread and fear. Another example: if one of my students has done well in school, she will feel excitement the first time she enters my classroom. But if she

has had bad experiences earlier in her educational career, I'll see an unhappy, wary face before I've said a word.

As we learn more about the complex and subtle reactions of the body in various contexts, we'll be able to pinpoint more precisely the underpinnings of each of our many emotions. Perhaps we'll get to the point of identifying recipes: loneliness, say, occurs in this particular set of circumstances attached to these kinds of thoughts, and is a mixture of these neurotransmitters, those hormones, and a specific pattern of neurological activation. For now, the best we can do is sketch the basic body states and the major feelings associated with them, and speculate about how the many additional feelings arise.

So, the theory in a nutshell: Body reacts, mind pays attention to body, and we have a feeling. Two basic body states, aroused and calm. Two fundamental situations, threat and safety. The four possible combinations yield the principal negative emotions – fear, anger, and sadness – and the four principal positive emotional groupings. All the other emotions are variations and blends of these. The mind assesses each actual situation we face and remembers what happened in the past in similar situations. It also creates mental situations that we then react to as if they were actually happening. Sometimes these mental situations are self-judgments that create further reactions. And if we're not too busy eating, mating, fighting, fleeing, or walking around lost in thought as usual, we pay attention to our body and there they are, the peaks and valleys of life – our feelings.

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