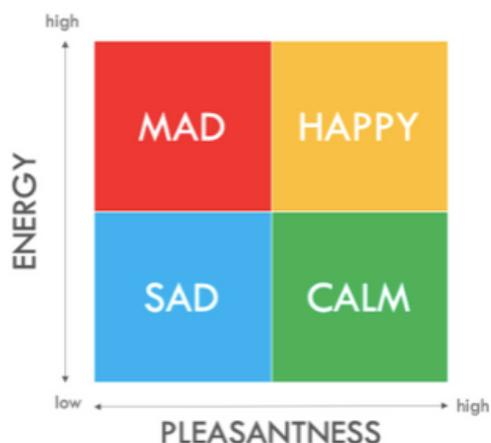


Feeling It

Love, fear, loathing - we all experience a range of emotions in our lifetime and yet many people would be hard pressed to define what an emotion is or why we have them. From a psychological perspective we tend to break emotions down into two key components, physical and cognitive.

- The physical consists of the internal sensations that we notice occurring in and on the surface of our body. E.g., a heavy heart, shaking with anger, tears of joy.
- The cognitive consists of the thoughts and stories we tell ourselves about these sensations. E.g., this is sadness because my dog is unwell.

The Yale Centre for emotional intelligence describes and maps emotions along a continuum of energy and pleasantness:



Why do emotions matter?

Beyond feeling good (sometimes) and annoying us (other times), emotions act as messengers that provide important information to help guide our behaviour. Our body receives sensory input from our environment, like the smell of fire on a hot summer's day, and this sends a series of chemical messengers throughout our body that our mind then interprets and labels based on past experience and future expectations. E.g., this prickly sensation in my chest could be fear (bushfire season) or perhaps excitement (BBQ lunch with friends).

Emotions and the urge to act

All of our emotions come with an important message or signal that urges us to act in a specific way to ensure our survival. Unpleasant emotions (fear, anger, sadness) signal a threat or danger and the urge is to fight, take flight or freeze in response. The pleasant emotions such as love, excitement and contentment act as a signal for safety and opportunity, and the urge is to lean in, try new things and savour the moment. All these emotions are nature's way of programming us to survive and thrive in life.

EMOTION	MESSAGE	URGE
Fear	Danger	Fight, hide or run
Shame	Disapproval	Withdraw
Happiness	I am safe	Approach
Gratitude	I have all I need	Savour and appreciate
Anger	My goal is blocked	Attack
Jealousy	Others want what is mine	Protect
Envy	I want what they have	Control or seek out
Love	I am safe and cared for	Connect and be kind

“Sometimes I think, I need a spare heart to feel all the things I feel.”

Sanobar Khan



But I don't like this emotion!

It is quite likely that you have some emotions that you prefer - like contentment, gratitude, joy - over others - like sadness, jealousy and fear. The important thing to recognise is that we can not have one without the other. When we learn to skillfully interpret and process our emotions (emotional intelligence) then we can navigate our world with a little more ease and achieve our important life goals.

How emotions derail us

The trouble with strong or high energy emotions, like anger and excitement, is that they can be overwhelming. Strong emotions urge us to take action now, without thinking of the consequences. Our rational thinking brain (pre-frontal cortex) is bypassed and we are overwhelmed by the urge to act - don't think, do!

This is our innate survival response assuming that every threat or opportunity is immediate and physical. It fails to account for our virtual life or imagination - the threats and opportunities that are part of our past or future, but not actually happening right now. E.g., anticipating my future tax bill (anxiety) or reflecting on past tax refunds (joy).

Emotions are neither good or bad, they simply are. Our emotional responses are shaped over time by our past experiences and our expectations. The emotional signals we get can sometimes be confusing or hard to interpret, especially when we are given strong cultural messages that don't fit with our actual experience e.g., real men do not cry (turns out they do).

Helpful or unhelpful?

If we experience anger in response to an immediate and physical danger (about to be attacked by a dog) and our urge is to fight back - this can be helpful. If we have the same emotion in response to a disagreement with a loved one, then the urge to fight is perhaps not so helpful.

Often when we act on an uncomfortable emotion it is to relieve our immediate discomfort, rather thinking about the impact on others or the longer term consequences.

E.g., when we blame others for our mistake as a way of discharging our frustration or anger. When we do this we are engaging with our emotional response, rather than the situation at hand and can often make things worse in the long run.

As humans our job is to navigate our emotional life and respond in ways that are adaptive for the World we live in and the valued life goals we set for ourselves and our community.

Mastering your emotions

The problem we face is not in the emotions themselves, it's that we are too often slave to them, rather than master of our emotional life. Here are some steps to help you begin taking ownership your emotions:

Notice: Get good at recognising and describing your emotions. Notice the physical sensations in your body. Notice the thoughts that come with this emotion. Try mapping the emotion in terms of energy or pleasantness (low, neutral or high). E.g., Unpleasant, low energy, in my gut.

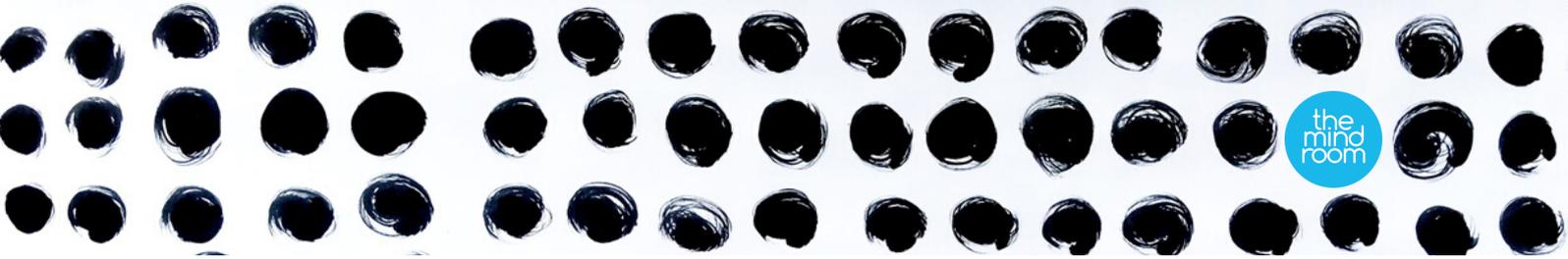
Name: Practice naming the emotion and the urge to act that accompanies it. Just acknowledging it can help tame it. E.g, This is fear and I want to run away. E.g., This is boredom and the urge is to leave or pick up my mobile.

Breathe: When the energy behind an emotion is high or loud it is hard to think clearly, so instead take a deep and slow breath. Repeat. This activates the parasympathetic nervous system, telling the body it is safe to calm down. E.g., Breath in through the nose and out through the mouth. 4-seconds in, 2-sec hold, 6-sec out. Repeat.

Reflect: Is this emotion serving me well right now? Should I listen to its guidance or is there another way to respond? Will it bring me closer to my valued life goals or further away? E.g., If I act on this urge it might look like I do not respect or care for the people talking.

Act: What action could you take right now that would bring you closer to your valued life direction? E.g., Stay present and focused and leave my phone alone until the end of this conversation.





Resources:

Read

[How Emotions Are Made](#), Lisa Feldman

[Fear and Love on a Shaky Bridge](#), Melanie Tannenbaum

[How You Deal With Your Emotions Can Influence Your Anxiety](#), Alexandra Sifferlin

Watch

[Listening to Shame](#), Brene Brown

[You Aren't At the Mercy of Your Emotions](#), Lisa Feldman

Do

[Mood Meter](#), Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence

[The Atlas of Emotions](#), Paul & Eve Ekman

