

SELF-HELP BLOG: EMOTIONS (AU)

HOW EMOTIONS INFLUENCE US

Have you ever considered how much your emotions guide you through life? They help us see and interpret the world around us.

Feelings not only help us survive; they help us thrive. The emotions we feel actually compel us to take action, to behave in specific ways. They influence the day-to-day decisions we make, as well as play a part in how we make monumental life-altering choices.

Whether you know it or not, emotions are more physiological than psychological in nature. When we experience an emotion, we place a psychological significance on them, according to our internal historical perspective. Depending on what we've experienced, we assign them meaning.

Emotions influence our thoughts. They affect our physical body's actions. They impact our memories and help us to understand ourselves and others around us. They affect what motivates us, and conversely, what discourages us. Emotions even control the social order in our society.

At any given moment, more than a trillion bits of information assault our senses, all seeking and demanding attention. Our brains can only handle a smattering of this information and have devised a way to prioritize these messages. When sensory patterns are disrupted, the brain triggers biological responses, i.e., emotion.

Messages about bodily functions, such as pain and pleasure, or hunger and thirst, or changes in respiratory rate trigger emotions as well. We tend to respond more intensely to changes in hearing and smelling than we do by sight or sound.

Emotion physically triggers changes throughout the body. Muscle tone, heart rate, energy level, facial expressions, as well as the tone of voice are responses to these triggers. Think of the last time you were very interested in something. You experienced an outpouring of thoughts and ideas.

Now, think of the time you felt ashamed. Recall how difficult it was to concentrate on anything other than the emotion you were experiencing at the time. We can say that emotions have the power to distort, enhance, and disrupt all other mental processes.

Emotions are connected to our thoughts and memories. Without emotions, our memories would merely be a series of facts encoded in our brains; however, memories are colored by the emotion that was triggered at the time the fact occurred. They act as a sort of glue that helps to connect the facts about the event. In this way, they can be called up to re-experience.

It may surprise you to know that this "glue" is the reason you remember happy thoughts when you are actually happy, and sad thoughts when you are depressed.

Without emotions, our attitudes, beliefs, and values would merely be words without meaning. Emotions give those words their meaning. Our thinking processes are influenced by emotion, both in constructive ways as well as in destructive ways.

In the same way, emotions impact our ability to process intense interest versus shame, as in our example before, we may now understand why it may be more challenging to think clearly and critically when feeling such intense emotions, but it becomes more comfortable when we are not so overwhelmed by emotion.

Our emotional expressions can also guide the responses of others around us. Since facial expressions are one indication of the emotion we are currently experiencing, and therefore, are an indication of our psychological state, they suggest our intent and subsequent behavior.

This state may affect what an observer may do as a response to our expressions.

An example of this would be if you indicated fear in your facial expression, it's more likely that people around you would attempt to approach and comfort. If, however, you indicated rage, others would probably attempt to avoid you.

Studies have shown that people displaying almost slight smiles received more amounts of beverages poured for them than those who showed the opposite expression. Additionally, others were more likely to pay for those beverages of the more pleasant person than that of the opposite.

This indicates how subliminal expressions tend to influence the behaviors of others.

Also, in the same vein, emotional displays tend to evoke specific responses from observers. For example, distress evokes sympathy and support, while anger evokes fear in others.

So, what does all this mean for us?

As humans, we have six core emotions that are universally accepted and experienced: happiness, sadness, fear, surprise, anger, and disgust or contempt. Happiness and surprise are desirable emotions. They both enhance learning, and surprise also improves learning.

On the other hand, anger, fear, sadness, and disgust or contempt can drastically interfere with learning.

Emotions play such an important role in our lives, they've been a hot topic of discussion in the scientific community, particularly, in psychology, for more than a century.

Learning why we have emotions and why they're so important, is essential for us to understand.

We must put emotion in the right perspective and realize that emotions give meaning to our lives. Without emotions, the events of our lives would be meaningless.

Emotions help us to understand our world and help us to understand each other more fully. They help us learn how to behave in social settings. They help to facilitate interpersonal relationships. They help keep human societies together.

Emotions are aimed at helping us to achieve and keep values.

"In psychological terms, the issue of man's survival does not confront his consciousness as an issue of "life or death," but as an issue of "happiness or suffering." Happiness is the successful state of life, suffering is the warning signal of failure, of death." (Ayn Rand, The virtue of selfishness)