



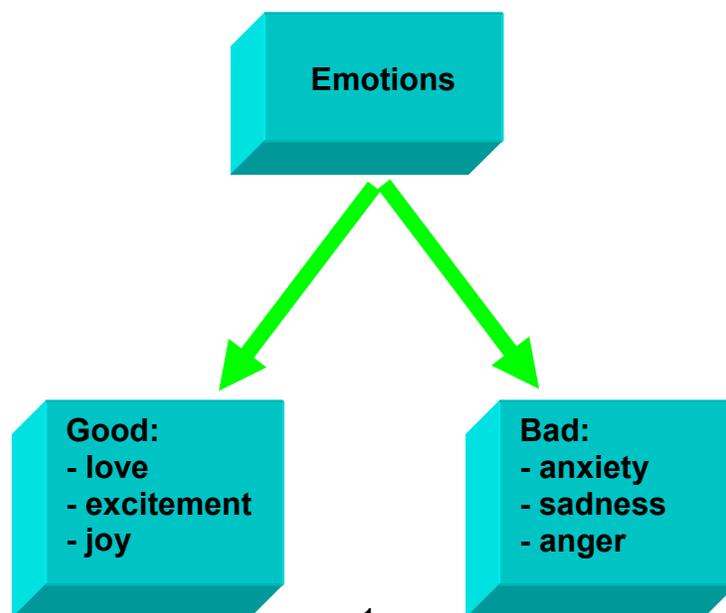
WHY DO WE HAVE EMOTIONS?



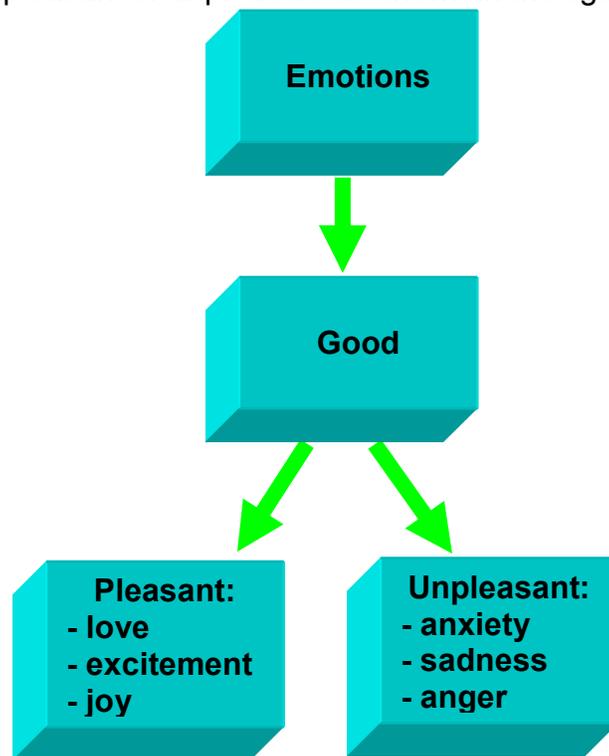
Why do we have emotions? This is an excellent question! Did you think: “Emotions make us human” or “They help us feel?” These are partly correct. Emotions do define us as humans and we do ‘feel’ when we have emotions. But more precisely, emotions are subjective internal experiences that involve both a ‘mental state’, as well as a ‘physiological state’. By ‘mental state’ we mean the internal cognitive label we use. For example love, excitement, anxiety and anger. By ‘physiological state’ we mean the associated physical sensations or feelings in our body. For example, a racing heart and butterflies in the stomach when we feel anxious or the feeling of heat and pressure building up inside us when we are angry. For an emotion to be experienced, both these ‘states’ need to be present. Thus, we experience anxiety if we have a fear of heights only if there is an accompanying ‘physiological state’, such as a racing heart and shortness of breath. However, if we are exercising and have a racing heart and shortness of breath, we will not label this as anxiety because our ‘mental state’ does not perceive any danger, but rather knows these physiological changes are a direct result of the exercise.

DESCRIBING EMOTIONS AS BEING PLEASANT OR UNPLEASANT VERSUS GOOD OR BAD

Most people tend to describe emotions as being good or bad as illustrated in the figure below.



Thus, love, excitement and joy are 'good' emotions, whereas anxiety, sadness and anger are 'bad' emotions. However, if you are describing some emotions as being 'bad', you are likely setting yourself up for even more negative emotions. For example, it is fairly common for some people to feel depressed as well as guilty because they tell themselves, "Why should I feel depressed when I have my health, a good job, I am secure financially and my kids are doing well?" By judging depression as being 'bad' (i.e. I should not feel depressed, what is wrong with me?), feelings of guilt are the result. In this example, the individual now feels both depressed and guilty! Well depression is already unpleasant enough and takes effort to overcome, so why judge your feelings and add an additional unpleasant emotion? In order to regain control over your feelings, never judge your emotions! In fact, psychologist would ask you to see all emotions as being good, but either pleasant or unpleasant as shown in the figure below.



A helpful example: If you are not convinced that emotions are pleasant or unpleasant rather than good or bad, here is a useful analogy using physical pain that might persuade you. If you accidentally touched the element on a hot stove, what you feel? Likely, you said a burning sensation or pain. Now what would you do after you felt the pain? Hopefully you said you would remove your hand to stop the burning and any further serious injury. Now here is the key! Is it good you felt the pain? Yes it is, because it motivated you to remove your hand but the pain is definitely unpleasant. Our emotions should be perceived the same way. Some emotions are unpleasant but they should motivate us to act. For example, if I am anxious that I may fail a test, I would be motivated to study to learn the material and pass the test, hopefully with an excellent grade!

COMMON MYTHS PEOPLE HAVE ABOUT EMOTIONS

Given that it is common for us to judge our emotions, many people develop false beliefs or 'myths' about emotions. Here are the most common ones, as well as why they are false. If you have not read the toolkit on Change Your Negative Thinking, make sure to take a second look at these myths once you have. It may become even clearer why they are all myths.

Myth #1: There is a right way to feel in every situation.

False. Feelings are not right or wrong. They provide information about how we see a specific situation. Different people will feel different emotions depending on the situation because we all have different beliefs about ourselves, others and how the world operates. Even if two people feel the same emotion, it is possible that the intensity will vary. For example, during a funeral most people will feel sad, but the intensity of sadness will vary depending on how close each person was to the deceased person.

Myth #2: When I let others know I am feeling bad it shows I am weak or flawed.

False again. Feelings are not a weakness. Everyone experiences negative emotions and we cannot all be weak or flawed. So expressing a negative emotion simply means that something is bothering us.

Myth #3: All negative emotions will keep on increasing in intensity if I do not act now.

This is untrue. Emotions do not increase forever in intensity. They reach a peak and then they will subside.

Myth #4: Negative emotions are bad and destructive.

This is another false myth. It is not the emotion that is bad or destructive but the behaviour that results. For example, alcohol abuse, compulsive shopping, risk-taking behaviours and self-mutilation.

Myth #5: All emotions happen spontaneously for no reason.

False. All emotions happen for a reason and are the result of our perception of an event.

Myth #6: I cannot tolerate any painful emotion.

This is not true. People can learn to tolerate unpleasant emotions with practice. If we do not learn to tolerate emotions, impulsive behaviours such as drugs, regrettable sexual encounters and self-harm with lead to further problems and additional painful emotions.

Myth #7: Some emotions are completely stupid and useless.

Untrue. All emotions provide information to us so they are very useful. They help identify what we like or do not like (for example, what sports we like, how we want to be treated), they help us communicate with others (for example, facial expressions to convey anger or interest) and they help prepare us for action (for example, feeling anxious about a test motivates us to study until we feel prepared and the anxiety decreases).

Myth #8: If others do not agree with how I feel then I must be wrong.

Another false myth. There is no right or wrong emotion so emotions cannot be judged. If you feel a certain way, then it is what you are feeling regardless of what others say. Also remember that each person can experience a different emotion after the same event.

Myth # 9: Other people are the best at knowing how I am feeling.

Not true. People can only see behaviours or what you do, but not what you are feeling. Thus, each person is the best judge of how they feel.

Myth #10: All painful emotions should be ignored because they are unimportant.

False. Painful emotions are especially important because they leave significant emotional scars that need to be healed. Ignoring them will not make them go away.

Myth #11: Feeling negative or painful emotions means I am bad.

A final false myth. Feelings are not like a personality trait or a behaviour, so negative emotions do not describe us as people. In addition, everyone feels negative emotions, like anxiety or depression on occasion, and everyone cannot be 'bad'.

WHY DO WE HAVE EMOTIONS?

This is an excellent question! We must have emotions for a reason, otherwise they would not exist. There are three major reasons why we experience emotions.



Emotions help to motivate us for action: Emotions help to organize our behaviour and set us in motion to accomplish a goal. For example, if you are crossing the street and you see a car run a red light in your direction, you will likely perceive danger, get anxious, and run to get out of the way. If you see a member of the opposite as a potential romantic partner, it may motivate you to go talk to the person.



Emotions help us communicate with people: Emotions help us communicate with other people using our verbal and non-verbal behaviour. If you are mad at someone, you will likely raise your voice in a firm tone, stand up straight and look directly in the other person's eye. In turn, emotions also help us recognize what others are feeling. For example, if the other person is looking at you, smiling and nodding their head during a conversation, you will likely perceive that they are listening to you and interested in what you are saying.



Emotions communicate to us what we like and do not like: These include a variety of information such hobbies, people, work, interests, food, how we prefer to be treated, our values, sports, etc.

THE MEANING BEHIND EMOTIONS

Now that you know why we have emotions, the next step is to understand what information each emotion is communicating to us. We are quite good at knowing why we have pleasant emotions, so this last section will focus on what unpleasant emotions mean. If someone were to ask you why we experience anxiety, what would you answer? Did you reply, "It means I feel scared" or "It means being afraid?" Scared and afraid are words that describe the intensity of anxiety. For example, tense or nervous are synonyms for a low level of anxiety, whereas panic and terrified would describe an extremely intense level of anxiety. Anxiety means that we perceive a threat or a danger. For example, I become terrified if I see a bear because I am afraid of getting mauled (i.e. danger) or I feel nervous about public speaking because I am afraid of getting judged (i.e. an emotional threat). So each emotion has a series of words that describe the intensity of the emotion, it communicates specific information to us which are thoughts, perceptions or beliefs about an event. In order to help you out with each emotion, use the following Emotions Handout as a guide.

Now that you have become an expert on emotions, your next step is to read the toolkit on Change Your Negative Thinking in order to identify why you feel emotions and to help you change how you feel after an unpleasant event.