

FEELINGS, EMOTIONS, and AFFECT

Part One: A plumber's version

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So many time I have found it useful to have learned about emotions. I was not taught any of this when I was kid, and I went through so many experiences in life completely confused when it came to understanding, managing, and living with feelings. I was also at a complete disadvantage when someone would flash their knowledge of feelings. Like so many, I learned to be respectful when someone shifted, saying, "I think you are being unfair. No, I feel you are being unfair."

When I entered graduate school in counseling, my advisor asked my what a "feeling" was. Whatever I said to him I do not recall, but he told me that I needed to get into the counseling program quick, to fix my woeful ignorance.

My Masters paper was written upon Anger: A Resource Paper for Teachers. I had come a long way in a year. That paper, like my early training in Counseling, was a major turning point in my life. It marked the path that lead to this chapter, which I think of as a plumber's version of emotions – i.e. a description of emotions that even an uncomplicated guy could learn from.

And so, if you are confused about the role of emotions in your life, here we go with all the answers.

Thoughts vs Emotions

Before I launch into the guts of the matter, let me settle an important point. Feelings are feelings and feelings are not thoughts. People use the word "feeling" when they are speaking of thoughts often. I think they learn this along the way, but also I think that many people are somewhat intimidated by the word "feeling" and thus people who use it are often treated as more believable. Whatever, let me set the record straight right up front.

As I move along, you may get the impression that feelings are a bit more real than thought. I believe that. Feelings are very real. They happen. They exist even when people say they are not there. People can misunderstand feeling, mis-label them, but the underlying feelings are still present. Feelings are very objective. Researchers know what babies are feeling in the womb. I can measure the contents of your blood stream and thus measure and describe some of your feelings.

I can not do that about your thoughts. Thoughts or thought processes seem to be much more vague. I can think one thing all morning and think the opposite all afternoon. I can

fully believe that which I fully disbelieve in 10 minutes. I think of thoughts a little the way I think of data in a computer. Words, words, words.

But feelings seem very solid. I believe it is silly to trust thoughts and be hesitant about feelings. Still that seems to be what our culture teaches.

Feel that.. vs Think that..

One thing I want to encourage you to do right now. Stop saying. "I feel that...." or "I feel like...." Those are some of the more misleading statements in the English language. Use the word "feel" for a feeling and use the word "think" for a thought.

"I feel that you are cheating me." Is a nice sentence, but critically defective. The feeling is left out of it. The sentence should read "I feel angry when I think you are cheating me." Now the "feeling" has been put back in. And notice that the feeling, that was left out, is pretty important.

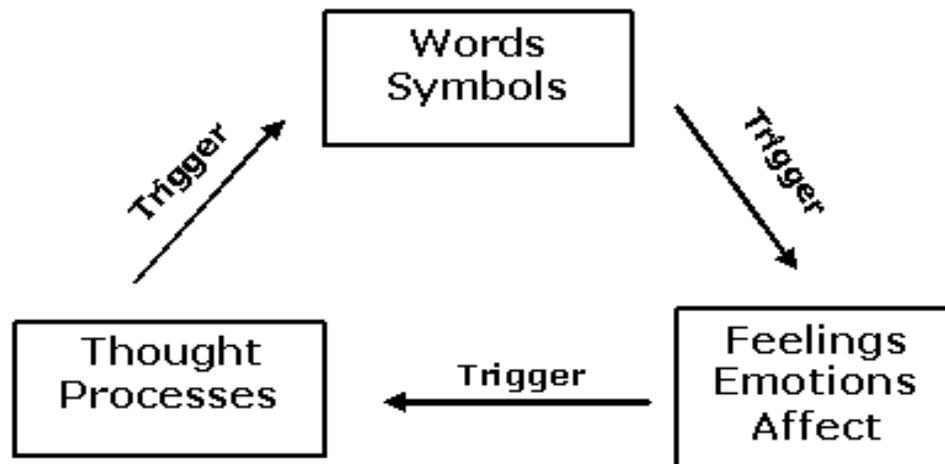
Learn to use "thought words" and separate them from "feeling words". I have found this to significantly clear up a great amount of confusion.

Thought words: think, believe, recall, imagine, guess, have a hunch. Most thought words are followed by "that". "I believe that you are...."

I think that if you hear the word "feel" followed by "that", we are not into talking about "feelings."

Words and Symbols

That counseling profession taught me that all psychology was based on this wheel. So here it is.



The sentence was taught me as, "Words and Symbols evoke Feelings, which evoke Thought Processes, which are full of Words and Symbols."

I think of words as symbols. They have spelling and use letters and when spoken, have sounds. Other symbols may not have letters, may have only sounds, or just gestures. Objects can be a symbol.

Studying General Semantics years ago, I learned that "words" do not have meaning. People have meaning and people use words to try to communicate the meaning they have. A

dictionary, I recall, was a history book of the meanings that people have used a word for. I learned to never argue about the meaning of a word, but to ask the user what they meant by it. Who knows if they have the same meaning I have for a certain word?

The same is true of all symbols. They mean different things to different people. There is no right meaning for a word or a symbol. I suggest you get used to this idea.

Still all these words or symbols evoke feelings. Yes, the feelings come first. I guess this is pretty basic to the way our brains work – fast. If I show you a symbol of danger, your body starts to respond to that danger before the good old cortex decides what to do. (See my Chapter on Safety, The Lizard.) Apparently your body does not wait to think. It moves.

My favorite word for this “evoking” is the word TRIGGER. I use it a lot. For me it means a little thing that kicks off something that may be a lot bigger. Also it suggests a connection but not a causal connection. I like that. A symbol may trigger an emotion one time and may not the next time.

Emotions, Feelings, Affect

While I will define these words more fully later, here is my short description. A feeling is an **event in a person’s body** that can be strong or weak or in-between.

I use the word Feeling and Emotion in the same way. I think we have enough trouble getting the idea without splitting hairs over the difference between them.

Affect is a word often used in the medical world to refer to the feelings a person is experiencing. A nurse might make a note that a patient’s affect was agitated, which seems to be the same as “the patient felt agitated.” Most people won’t run into the word “affect.”

Now, these events in the body have an effect on the brain. Often the event is chemical and the chemicals (hormones, etc.) cause all sorts of shifts in the brain. Still the important idea is that the events, the feelings, trigger thought processes – chains of thoughts.

Differing events trigger differing thought processes. When a person is angry, some parts of the cortex are shut down and others are awakened. When a person is scared, other parts are affected. I think it is fascinating to watch people when their emotions are strong and to witness how different are the memories available to them in one state of emotions from another.

Thought Processes

I think of thought processes as strings of symbols like sentences. They start, have a middle and come to an end. Paragraphs are to me a little like a single thought process. If I am trying to make a point, I will start, say some more and then finally reach an end.

I don’t think of thought processes as having any sort of reality to them per se. I can think of a green elephant, but that doesn’t make a green elephant appear. I can think that you are a crook, but that doesn’t make you a crook.

However, thought processes are full of symbols and words. That’s the way our cortexes work and store things. And those wonderful words and symbols may trigger new emotions.

And round we go, day in day out, all through our lives. Fascinating and simple.

Therapy

My profession told me that all kinds of therapy work on one or more parts of this wheel. Giving people medicine attempts to interfere with the emotions that are triggered by the words and symbols.

Psycho Education or teaching, and that is what I am doing here, tries to change the thought processes that are kicked off by the emotions. It also attempts to change the words and symbols those thought processes contain.

Behavior Modification often seeks to change the link between a word or a symbol and the emotions that are evoked.

Again, pretty simple, but fascinating.

Simplest of all emotions: Attraction

This paper will lead you to some interesting places and so let me start with something fun. The simplest of all emotions is the emotion of attraction. There are lots of words for this emotion but what I want you to do is experience it, now.

Think of the foods in your refrigerator and think of whether they "attract" you or "repel" you. Just observe yourself and this one dimension of attraction. Now think of attraction as a measurable scale.



Plus 10 to minus 10

Absolute, powerful attraction, is a plus 10. "Who cares", or a neutral feeling is a zero. Absolute and powerful feelings of getting away from it are minus 10.

Try this on a menu in a restaurant. I bet you can "score" everything.

Now look around and everything and everyone in your life. See the scores! We often gather a lot of high plus score objects to us and put a lot of high negative things in the garbage. This is a feeling. Ask yourself, "Do feelings stay the same?" Nope. Is there any "right" or "wrong" about these scores? Nope. Does anyone have the same scores you have? Nope. Welcome to the world of feelings! They are part of you, unique to you, and cannot be wrong! They just are.

Definition

And so here I go with the best definition for feelings or emotions that I can come up with. After I give you this definition I will give three examples that illustrate all parts of the definition. Then I will describe the four prime emotions.

Remember that these are my definitions, not the "official" definitions.

An emotion has five distinct qualities: facticity, amount, consciousness, label and value.

An event in the body

An emotion is an event in your body. It actually happens. It is measurable. A person does not even need to be conscious to have emotions. An emotion is not a figment of the imagination.

Since it is an event, an emotion exists in time. They start, and the end.

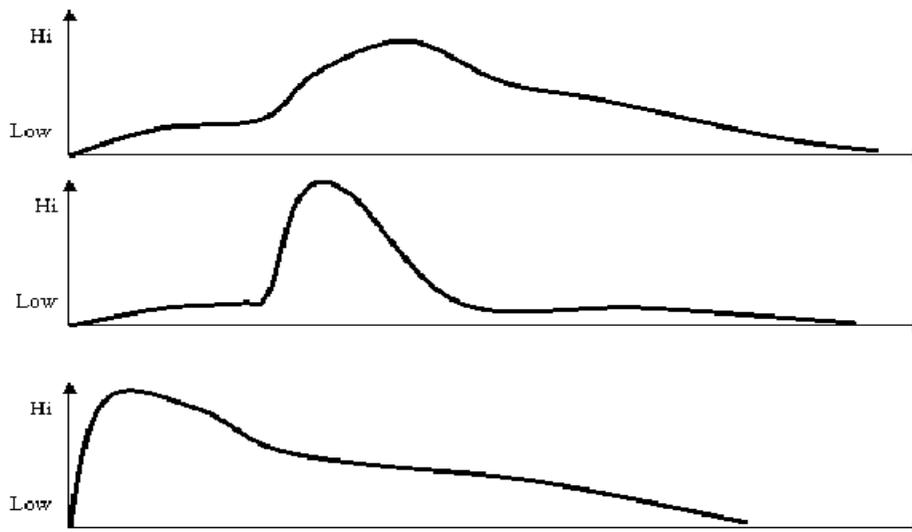
It is possible to identify what babies feel even before they are born. (The primary emotion they feel is pleasure, by the way.)

Chemical in nature: Intensity

Most emotions are chemicals. All emotions act as if they were chemical. The point here is that emotions do not click on and off. And emotion starts, grows bigger and bigger and then may decrease until finally it ends.

Emotions always have an "amount" or intensity to them. The question is never are you angry or not angry – yes or no. The question is how angry are you. How angry are you now? And now?

As I mentioned in the simple emotion of attraction, I find it useful to put a number on the level of an emotion. Zero means none. I think of five as maximum. And so to accurately speak of emotions one can say, "I was scared at a 5 level for a bit, but it decreased a while ago to about 3. Now I am just a bit nervous, perhaps a 1."



A decrease in intensity is often called a release or is spoke of as relief. Remember this for later.

Awareness

There is a component of awareness that comes with emotions. One can be completely unaware of an emotion ripping through the body. Or one can be unaware until an emotion reaches a certain level of intensity. Or some even can bring an emotion to your awareness. Some people are almost completely unaware of their own emotions. Some are exquisitely sensitive.

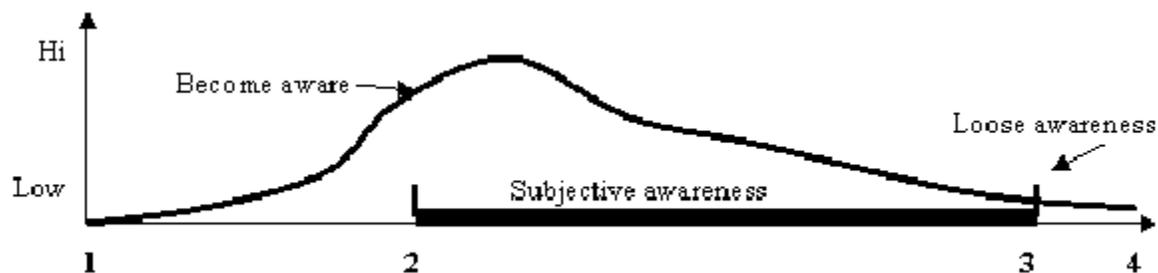
One confusion about emotions is the difference between the emotion as an event, and the emotion as an experience. It is possible for an emotion to begin at one time and to start

affecting your behavior while you are still not aware of it. At some point you become aware of the emotion and at that point your subjective awareness begins. That awareness may continue until the level of that emotion is quite a bit lower. Then the event may continue for a bit after you are no longer aware. If I ask you about your experience and I measure your emotional experience, reports may be quite different.

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Another very difficult problem is that I can be having an emotion, I can be displaying signs of that emotion, others can observe these signs, and I can be completely unaware. Others may be much more aware of my feelings than I am. In many ways I am an open book about some of my emotions. I can try to keep them hidden, but feelings can be hard to hide.

Reports

When we speak about emotions, really we are reporting on them. We are labeling what we are feeling. And we can mislabel feelings quite easily. When my professor asked me to describe an emotion and when I could not, he handed me a large list of words people have used for emotions. I found this quite useful and include this list at the end of this chapter.

Social Value

Finally, emotions have value in our culture. Some emotions are desirable at certain times and undesirable at others. Some emotions are considered "bad" emotions.

For instance, I was taught that all emotions just "get in the way." In contrast I have learned that life is greatly more enjoyable when I treasure the emotions that move in me and others.

Examples

Before I go to work sharing my thoughts about the "big" emotions, I would like to give you

some examples that I hope will illustrate all the parts of the definition.

Hunger

Many would not think of hunger as an emotion, but I think it is an excellent starting place. Hunger is an event in your body. It comes and goes. It gets stronger and weaker. Its chemistry relates to blood sugar levels in your body.

Note how awareness is involved. Aren't there times when you have worked for a while and then suddenly become aware of how hungry you are? Truly, you've been hungry for some time, but just haven't noticed. "Wow! Am I famished! I could eat a horse." This is the exclamation of a person who has been distracted from the slow growing feeling of hunger. Heck, I can remain hungry for some time during dinner. And I may still be eating while my hunger goes away.

Most people do not have any trouble reporting on their hunger.

But look at the issue of social value. Ask yourself, what is the value of being hungry one hour before dinner time? I've found it is a good time to not snack even though my stomach is growling. Then "dinner is served" and hunger is suddenly of high value. "Aren't you hungry, dear? What's the matter?"

Thirst

This is a similar emotion in that it happens, grows larger and grows smaller (chemical). The question is not "Are you thirsty?" but "How thirsty are you?" I think thirst has something to do with inter-cellular water levels (event).

Again, a person can get thirsty without noticing it. Think of how taverns take advantage of awareness. They show customers pictures of water running, of salty products and even put popcorn on the tables, all to bring you awareness of your levels of thirst. If you were only slightly thirsty when you arrived, the scene will raise the level of your thirst, but your awareness of it.

Most people are clear about their reporting of thirst, and speak clearly.

And again the social value of being thirsty is pretty simple. In most situations I think being thirsty is socially acceptable.

But do take notice that a person may say they are "thirsty for a cold beer," when that is not exactly the emotion of thirst, but a matter of a desire for a particular taste or temperature. The label "thirsty" is being used differently.

Alertness

Now let's get into some fun. Alertness I think of as the feeling of being awake or sleepy. The more alert you are, the wider your eyes are and the more you tend to want to move. The less alert you are, the more you yawn, look sleepy and tend to move less.

Alertness has to do with the reticular activating system in our brain. It happens. (Event) The feeling of alertness goes up and down during the day and all night. It becomes more or less intense (chemical). Most adults have about a 90 minute cycle: alert at some point and then much slower about 45 minutes later. Dreams take place in the alert part of our sleep periods.

A person can be sleepy and yawning while they think they are wide awake. Here is an emotion that is quite visible to others, and yet may be out of our awareness.

Here is a story I tell my clients. Imagine an 8-year old boy. It is about 7:30 in the evening. He is yawning. A parent says to him, "Are you sleepy?" The boy jerks, widens his eyes and says, "Nope, definitely not!" Here is a report about an emotion that is obviously out of sync with the "actual" emotion. He is sleepy, but says he is not. People can lie about their emotions quite easily. What is going on here? Well, the boy is actually answering a different question than the one being asked. He is answering the question, "Do you want to be sent to bed?" His answer is now obviously valid, where before it was confusing.

My point is that reports of emotions can be and are normally widely different from the emotion being felt or being observed.

And what of the social value of alertness? During a school class or at church yawning is frowned on. On Christmas Eve being wide awake is a handicap.

Need to pee

Not often thought of as an emotion, still it has all the characteristics. The need does happen in your body (event). It involves chemical changes in the tissues of and surrounding your bladder. It grows more and more intense over time.

One can need to pee for quite some time before one becomes aware of it. As an older man, I am quite aware of this phenomenon in the early morning. Sometimes awareness can seem to increase the intensity.

But now I want to introduce another point about reporting. Let's say a friend is picking me up for a drive. He asks if I need to use the bathroom. I say, "No." He says that there will be no place to stop for about 2 hours, and now I change my report. I say, "Yes." The report of an emotion can change based on a change in the situation while there is no change in the subjective feeling.

The social value of this "emotion" is also fascinating. I think of how one person saying, "I need to visit the facilities," can trigger many people getting up and going there together. And, I recall once in military boot camp a sailor who was not allowed to go to the "head" as a kind of training incident – he was shamed.

Summary of Emotions: Part 1

Let us see where we have gotten so far.

- Emotions are not thoughts, beliefs or ideas
- Emotions are triggered within a person, never caused by the external world.
- Different emotions lead to different thoughts
- Emotions happen and have intensity that varies.
- Emotions and the reports of them can be quite different.
- Emotions occur whether we are aware of them or not.
- Other people can sometimes see our emotions, which we are unaware of.
- Society has all sorts of rules around emotions.
- My boundary rules: All emotions are valid. and No one can make you feel anything.