

How Emotions Help Us

Many people struggle with emotions, particularly if they're experiencing high levels of depression, anxiety, anger, stress, and other difficult emotions. This is particularly hard when we live in a culture that highly values being rational or logical, and being "too emotional" is a negative thing. It's easy to end up thinking that it's better not to feel certain emotions (or at least not strongly), and emotions are something to be managed or coped with.

However, emotions fulfil a number of functions: to signal/warn that something's wrong (or right), to communicate to others, to connect with others, and to motivate/drive action. In this way, they can be seen to relate to our survival – we need safety, shelter, food, water, sexual fulfilment, etc. As a social species, we best achieve these things in groups and therefore also need connection and acceptance in the group for survival.

Emotions are only one part of the picture. Our emotions are based on our interpretation of things, which is based on past experience, what we've seen others do, and what we've been taught. We sometimes misinterpret things because what we're basing it on doesn't apply for some reason in the current situation. We need to combine our emotions with our understanding of the situation to come up with the best action. Emotions inform us of a need to respond, and we combine this with rational thinking to check our interpretation of the situation, and decide on what's the best thing to do.

On the next page is a list of some common emotions and what some of their functions may be. This provides us with a good starting point in understanding our reactions and what our needs could be in the given situation. Combining this with rational thinking helps us work out the best course of action to take.

Emotion	Prompts/facilitates/signals
Love	Connection with others
Fear/anxiety	Warning of threat – (<i>fight</i>)/flight/freeze
Anger	Defend/protect yourself – fight
Envy (wanting something that someone else has)	Strive to obtain more things, which could function to improve your living conditions (physical survival directly), or may also be particularly related to improving status
Jealousy (when something of yours is under threat/has been taken)	Protect your things/relationships
Happiness	Things are ok/on track and you can relax
Stress	Need to reduce load or get help to continue carrying, be better prepared/equipped
Sadness	Rest to allow time for healing/recovery and reduce chance of further harm when already injured
Boredom	Under-stimulated, lacking enjoyment, connection and/or meaning/achievement
Loneliness	Needing increased connection
Guilt	I've done/am doing something wrong (in particular where someone else will be upset/affected); change behaviour, make amends
Disgust	Get away from something repulsive, often that could make us sick
Embarrassment	I've done something socially wrong that causes others to think I'm stupid/silly, and it will affect my status/position
Shame	There's something wrong with me personally (as opposed to "I'm ok but I've done something wrong")