

Emotions and emotional intelligence

For several decades, there has been general consensus that all humans share six basic emotions (sadness, happiness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust) and that combinations of these generate more 'complex' emotions (e.g., *hate* arises from a mixture of *fear*, *anger*, and *disgust*).

In recent years, however, some psychologists have questioned the validity of these models, for a variety of reasons. One relates to the findings of increasingly sophisticated neurobiological brain scans. These have revealed that our grey matter does not look markedly different as we experience different emotions; there are not separate neurons or zones for sadness, happiness, and so on.

How can we have different emotions even when the same areas of the brain are active? The brain appears to use a variety of cues – your heart rate, your muscle tension, who is near you, where you are located, memories from similar previous experiences – to interpret what is happening and how that should make you feel in any particular instance. To quote neurobiologist Lisa Feldman-Barrett (from her book *How Emotions Are Made*), 'From sensory input and past experience, your brain constructs meaning and prescribes action.' In other words, emotions are both context- and culturally dependent – and, further, 'You are not a passive receiver of sensory input but an active constructor of your emotions.' This is encouraging news for anyone who would like to feel less overwhelmed by their emotions.

Feldman-Barrett is one of several neurobiologists who advocate a 'theory of constructed emotion', which says that emotions are influenced by social, psychological, and neurological factors which can impact our perception of emotions over both the short- and long-term. One of the many implications of her work is that it is possible to improve your understanding of, and response to, your own emotions – in other words, your emotional intelligence. This involves being attentive and aware (or mindful) on a moment-by-moment basis, as well as taking a longer-term, retrospective approach through reflection.

During both activities, our ability to identify, describe, and react to emotions can be hindered by a restrictive emotional vocabulary. Feldman-Barrett recommends learning new languages in order to expand your ability to describe how you feel; she also suggests experimenting with making up your own personalized vocabulary (which might lead you to come up with a term like *cat-weary* to describe how grumpy you feel when your feline friend wakes you up at 4am...again).

If you aren't a wordsmith, you might be more interested in drawing inspiration from *The Box of Emotions*, which side-steps words altogether and explores how emotions can be captured instead in colours and patterns. It was created by Tiffany Watt Smith and Therese Vandling – the former of who also authored *The Book of Human Emotions: An Encyclopedia of Feeling From Anger to Wanderlust*.)

Regardless of what methods you use to do it, moving beyond the 'basic six' can be beneficial to both you and those around you: Greater emotional intelligence has been linked with traits such as confidence, empathy, equanimity, and general enjoyment of life.

Cartoon

The below was inspired by the books and card deck mentioned above; it was first published online on November 2021 as part of the daily webcomic series #doodlewax.

