

# EMOTIONS as TOOLS

A Self Help Guide

to

Controlling Your Life

not

Your Feelings

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## INTRODUCTION

### A Few Questions:

1. Have you ever said or done something out of anger that you later regretted? (And, maybe, couldn't take back because the damage was already done?)
2. Have you ever wanted to say or do something but didn't because your anxiety level was too high?
3. Were you ever in a situation where you were sad and showed your feelings publicly and then apologized because you felt you did something wrong?
4. Have you hoped that your emotions would go away entirely because they affected you, or someone else close to you, in ways you did not understand or know how to manage?
5. Have you ever felt that your emotions controlled you?
6. Have your feelings ever gotten in the way of or prevented you from living the life you want or doing something that was important to you?

More likely than not, you answered yes to at least one of these questions.

Each of the above questions asked you to look at how you relate to or experience your emotions. For too many of us, we experience our feelings as controlling us and compelling us to take, or avoid, some action. We may view our feelings as unnecessary or intrusive, or, at best, as bothersome. If you answered "yes" to any of the above questions, you have a lot of company and this guide was written for you.

There are countless examples that can be given of people challenged by their feelings. There is the spouse who gets angry and makes mean hurtful statements which negatively impact the marriage. There is the employee who gets very ticked off at his (or her) boss, tells the boss what he really thinks and is then fired. This is anger. In the case of anger, the individual experiencing and expressing the feelings might tell you that they didn't want to do what they did but couldn't control themselves.

In the case of anxiety, the individual might say that there was nothing they could do to bring themselves to take the action they knew was in their best interest. Examples of anxiety preventing you from taking action include choosing not to ask for a raise, not starting a new business, or not asking someone out on a date. When you are anxious about taking a risk, you figure out all kinds of reasons not to take action.

Lastly, feelings of sadness or loss might lead us to cry. If crying is perceived as unmanly or contrary to how you were raised, you might feel very uncomfortable with the emotion. Many years ago, Edmund Musky's presidential bid was essentially ended because he became tearful during a campaign stop. He was branded as weak. In the case of sadness, people would say that they were overwhelmed by the feeling.

Most of the self-help literature talks about emotions as if they are not a natural part of us and need to be controlled just like we control our pet dog when it barks too often or relieves itself on our carpet. We control (or train) the pet to do what we want when we want it done. I am not suggesting that you control, or even manage, your feelings. If I told you that you needed to control the gas gauge on your

car or manage your new digital camera, you'd note that a gauge doesn't need to be controlled. And neither does a camera. The gauge is a source of information that tells you how much gas you have left and how far you may be able to travel before you have to fill up. The digital camera is a tool that takes some time to learn how to use for best results. Correct on both counts.

Let's carry this a bit farther. If you ignore your gas gauge, you will run out of gas. If you don't read the guide that comes with your camera, you could miss out on some great shots because you don't know how to take advantage of all the available features.

This is the guide to using and getting the most out of your emotions as tools.

### Emotions as Tools

*Note: In the pages that follow, the words "emotions" and "feelings" will be used interchangeably as they basically mean the same thing anyway.*

My approach to feelings is different from most other writers.

First of all, while many authors talk about controlling your emotions, I am suggesting that you begin to think of your feelings as tools. Some common "tools" that you interact with on a daily basis include the gas and temperature gauges in your car the digital recorder attached to your TV and the computers in your house. You can use these tools and the information they provide to make meaningful decisions in a variety of situations. Your gas gauge tells you how much gas you have left in your tank and allows you to decide whether to stop for gas now or take a chance and wait for the next exit on the freeway. Similarly, any number of examples could be given for how you use your computer as a tool in your personal or business life. Secondly, I suggest that you can learn to use your emotions as tools in the same way you learn to use your digital camera. You read the owner's guide. Lastly, learning to use your emotional tools will help you deal more effectively with your own and with others' feelings.

My goal is to give you the information you need to understand and get the most out of your feelings.

Let's look at a specific example of a person who didn't effectively use the information his feelings made available to him...

I teach a personal growth class at a local University. During an Assertion Training workshop, one of my students, John, told the class that he had "an anger problem" and that he assaulted his fiancé's best friend.

Here is what happened. John and his fiancée (Maria) went to a party put on by her family so they could meet him. Michael, a lifelong friend of Maria's, introduced himself to John and the two began to get to know each other. When Michael shared that he and Maria grew up together and that he wanted the best for her and John, the conversation seemed to be going well. When he thought he knew John a little better, Michael made the following comment, "You know, John, if you don't take care of Maria, you will have to answer to me."

While he didn't respond outwardly to Michael's comment, John's *body tensed up* and he was *acutely aware* of Michael's comments. What John heard (as opposed to what Michael said) was that Michael had both questioned his ability to "take care of Maria" and had directly challenged him ("you will have to answer to me"). Per his lifelong habit of protecting himself against any threat, John filed the

comment away and *decided to keep an eye on Michael*. John was *ready to react* to any future threat from Michael. Later on in the day, John got into a fight with Michael when he perceived Michael's (harmless) gestures as physically aggressive.

As it was later determined, once the dust settled, Michael was attempting to express his "brotherly love" for Maria. He was not making a negative assessment of John, who he had just met.

The Emotions as Tools Model would have taught John to pay attention to the information his body was communicating to him. Specifically, he would have focused on the physical changes in his body (tensed muscles) and his increased concentration on Michael's "challenging" statements.

Based on this information, John would have concluded that his anger was increasing. His anger would have informed him that he perceived a threat from Michael. John's next step would be to "push his internal pause button" and take a moment to reassess the situation and the context in which the comments were made. This context included Michael's long time friendship with Maria. This is the BETTR-V process of the Emotions as Tools model. We'll discuss BETTR-V in detail later.

Based on his reassessment, John would have realized 1) that he had misinterpreted Michael's comment as threatening and 2) that there was no need to "keep an eye on Michael". The change in John's perception would produce a new emotion and a different response. Instead, based on his own hurtful past, John prepared himself for action so that he would be ready to forcefully *react* to any escalation in the level of threat.

Three points are critical here:

- 1) John had prepared himself for possible battle. He was ready to engage.
- 2) John did not question his initial emotion but assumed that what he was feeling accurately reflected the environment.
- 3) No one else, other than John, saw Michael's actions as threatening in any way to anybody, especially John.

John's emotional vulnerability occurred because, unknowingly, he was acting more on the basis of his physiology which set him up to protect himself against a perceived threat and less on the basis of his psychology which would have given him some perspective and enabled him to avoid punching his future wife's long time friend. We will discuss both the physiology and the psychology in more detail below.

The above story about John points out that having information doesn't mean we use it when we need it. How many times have you done something, gotten an unwanted result, and told yourself, "I knew I shouldn't have done that!?" Hindsight is always 20/20. The goal is to use the information we have to help us avoid the interpersonal mishap before it occurs.

### Myths about Emotions

While many books have been written to teach people how to understand, control or manage their emotions, myths about feelings continue to exist.

The major myths are:

1. Other people cause my feelings.  
(*If you hadn't forgotten my birthday, I wouldn't be angry!*).
2. It is best if I deny my feelings. (**NO!** *I'm not angry!!!*)
3. I should self-medicate to minimize what I feel. (*I need a drink.*)
4. My feelings just happen to me and are not a natural part of me.  
(*I don't know why I feel angry. My anger just happens to me and I can't change it.*)
5. There are "good" feelings and there are "bad" feelings.  
(Happiness is a good feeling. Anger and sadness are bad feelings.)

Acceptance of these myths leads people like John to believe that they are trapped, burdened, or overpowered by their emotions. While I totally understand how these myths persist because I believed them growing up, the truth about emotions is very different and quite empowering when it is understood.

### My Brief Story

Let me tell you a little about me. It is ironic that I am writing a book on emotions given how I was until graduate school. Prior to an experience I had during my internship year, I tended to avoid feelings whenever I could or deal with them intellectually when I had no other choice. I didn't have many good emotional role models growing up. My father was not an emotionally expressive man. In fact, when my mother died, dad was crying (appropriately, I thought) and apologized to me for his emotional display. Mom was emotionally strong and very loving but not very emotionally demonstrative.

I discovered early on that it was easier to distance myself from feelings that hurt because they were messy and, more often than not, left me "feeling" inadequate, embarrassed, or uncomfortable. Rationalizing and intellectualizing emotions was much cleaner and allowed me to "feel" or, more accurately, to convince myself that I was in control. Does this sound familiar to you?

During my year as a psychology intern, I wanted some experience treating substance abusers so I asked a friend of my parent's who was the director of treatment at Henry Ohlhoff House in San Francisco (a residential substance abuse treatment center) if I could sit in on some of his groups. He told me that, while I could not sit in on a group as I had requested, I could join the group as a participant-observer. I agreed only because 1) I believed that, as a psychology intern, I could handle anything the group could throw at me, 2) I believed my intellectual defenses were strong enough to protect me, and 3) I knew I didn't have a substance abuse problem as I rarely consumed alcohol and didn't use drugs.

This group changed my life.

It took the group members six months to get me to realize that I held in a lot of anger and hurt and that I avoided my feelings by losing myself in my books. It is interesting that they told me that I should never start drinking as they recognized that, while they used alcohol to escape their feelings, I did the

same with my intellectual activities. They called me a non-drinking alcoholic and said I belonged in the group. This was my first real experience with feelings.

During my career as a clinical psychologist, professional trainer and professor, I have worked with a variety of different populations and I have found that difficulty dealing with emotions occurs in many different settings and in people with diverse backgrounds. In every setting, I had to learn how to help others to 1) first understand their emotions, 2) get beyond the myths of emotions and 3) become effective in using their emotions as tools in their interactions with others.

Let me give you some examples: (*different populations, different problems, same process*)

#### a) California Department of Corrections-Juvenile Division

The incarcerated young women I worked with in the California Department of Corrections-Juvenile Division (formerly the California Youth Authority), tended to be either overemotional and express too much feeling (often inappropriately) or underemotional (feelings were overcontrolled to avoid overwhelming hurt or pain). My overemotional clients tended to act-out in antisocial or self-destructive ways the feelings they had stemming from their abusive histories. The underemotional individuals tended to either run from their hurtful feelings (often stemming from their abusive histories), to deny their feelings, or to self-medicate with drugs.

I had two major tasks. On the one hand, I needed to help my clients make sense of and effectively deal with their feelings and the abusive histories which gave rise to those feelings. Secondly, I had to help my clients learn to overcome the unwanted consequences of emotions gone awry such as ruined relationships, arrests, and incarceration. Many, but not all, of my clients were controlled by their emotions and engaged in some form of maladaptive behavior.

#### b) Law Enforcement Personnel

Many of the law enforcement personnel I encountered in my seminars had difficulty expressing a range of emotions appropriately because they tended to associate feelings with weakness or they felt that they had to control their feelings in order to maintain a command presence while dealing with, and avoid overreacting to, the experiences they encountered in their work. In order to cope with the emotionally charged “stuff” law enforcement personnel deal with on a daily basis, I pointed out that officers put on their emotional armor along with their body armor before each shift. Problems would arise when they went home after work and took off the body armor but forgot that they still had on their emotional armor. Spouses and kids would face an emotionally distant or emotionally on edge individual who was difficult to communicate with. Generally speaking, law enforcement personnel, as a group, aren't very good at using their feelings as a source of information and suffer an increased risk for broken marriages and other psychologically based problems such as alcohol abuse.

Let me emphasize that these are admittedly general statements and are not meant to indict the majority of law enforcement professionals who operate successfully in a dangerous profession and who raise families and function successfully in our communities. Rather, there is a subset of individuals in law enforcement, social services and other professions who suffer unnecessarily because they never learned to read their feelings and make decisions based on the information available to them.

### c) College Students

Lastly, many of the college students in my Personal Growth classes appeared to lack a coherent understanding of their emotions. During assertion workshops, their “issues” suggested weaknesses in their ability to productively use their feelings as a viable source of information about how they perceived and interacted with their environment. My students had feelings and acknowledged their feelings but it was as if the feelings just sort of happened to them. John was one of my students.

#### This Guide

A great deal has been written recently on the subject of emotions. While there are numerous theories that have been proposed to explain why we have emotions, what causes our emotions, and what factors impact our emotions, there still is disagreement in the field and no single theory is viewed as definitive. Much work remains to be done.

I have chosen to base my clinical practice and this guide primarily on the work of Albert Ellis and Donald Meichenbaum (Cognitive Behaviorism) and on the work of Richard Lazarus (Appraisal Theory). Research on Appraisal theory is substantial. The theoretical approach is practical, can be explained in understandable terms, and can be utilized by the end user to produce changes in his or her life.

To gain more information, one need only to do a Google search on “emotions”, “positive emotions”, “negative emotions”, “rational emotive therapy”, or “appraisal theory” and you will get numerous hits.

This guide is not meant to be a scientific dissertation on emotions. Rather, my goal is to write a basic guide that will help you navigate through the arena of your feelings. I will present a practical approach to emotions with just enough theory to help you make sense of what I am suggesting and why I am suggesting it. To use an analogy, it is not necessary to know the theory behind your video camera, your computer or the gauges in your car in order for you to be able to successfully use these tools. But if you wish to go beyond the basics, it would be in your best interest to read a manual or a guide and become familiar with what these devices were designed to do and how they can add to the quality of your life.

For your emotions, this is the guide.

In the pages that follow, I will help you learn to see your emotions as a source of information that you can use to understand, guide, and change your behavior. In other words, you will be able to separate the experience of your feelings from your response to those feelings. You will learn that your feelings have a long evolutionary history and that they helped humans survive as a species.

Survival is the physiology of emotions.

The psychology of emotions is that feelings are a source of information about how we perceive our environment. Consequently, it is never your feelings that are the problem. The information available to you through your emotions is either accurate because the appraisals which elicit the emotion are accurate or the information is inaccurate and based on faulty appraisals.

Accurate appraisals elicit adaptive emotions and adaptive behavior. Faulty appraisals lead to maladaptive feelings and behavior. This is what happened with John.

As important as our emotions are to us as “survival mechanisms”, we get more information about how to drive our cars or program the VCR than we do about how to utilize our feelings. This unfortunate reality is about to change. You have in your hands the guide for helping you understand what feelings are, where they come from, and how you can use the information they communicate to you.

While many beneficial books have been written to help people with their emotions, most of these books tend to focus on a specific feeling such as anger. While I will choose several specific feelings as illustrations, the model I am suggesting can be used for all feelings. You will learn that your emotions provide you with useful information about you and your environment much like the gas gauge on your vehicle gives you information about the need to fill up now or risk getting stuck. You can heed the information or ignore it. You have the same choices with the information available through your emotions.

This model uses a skill based approach that is learnable. It can, however, only be used by you with practice. Learning to utilize your emotions as tools or gauges is like learning any other skill such as riding a bike, learning to cook or sew, or learning how to use a computer. There are many reasons why your emotions may be managing you at this point including not knowing how to take back your emotional life. This guide will provide the knowledge you need to harness the power of your emotions.

When you effectively listen to your emotions and apply the data they make available to you, it becomes possible to improve the quality of your life and your relationships with others by adjusting how you respond to your environment and by making better decisions in both your personal and business interactions.

In the original Star Trek series, the crew would always consult the ship’s scanners when they encountered a new world or another ship or because they just wanted to know what was ahead. The scanner gave them the information they needed to decide their next course of action. If another ship powered up its weapons, for example, a decision had to be made to take a neutral position and do nothing, to take a defensive position and put up their own shields or take an offensive position and power up the ship’s weapons. You get the idea.

Your eyes, ears, and nose, are constantly scanning your environment just like the Enterprises’ scanners. Your brain attempts to make sense of all this data based on your survival needs first and your values, beliefs, and coping skills second. The emotions you feel are the result of your brain’s analysis of the data it receives. Consequently, when you look at your emotions as useful tools such as the Enterprises’ scanners, you can begin to understand how the information made available to you about your environment can help you to be better in control of you, be more spontaneous, enjoy your experiences to a greater degree and become less burdened or controlled by your feelings.

Finally, emotions are gifts and my hope for you is that this book will help you get the most out of the gifts you already possess.

### An Overview

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 give you background information about emotions so you are able to understand what emotions are, their origin, the functions they serve, and the information they provide. These chapters emphasize that emotions are tools that help you survive when that is an issue or help you adapt to whatever your daily living brings your way. The emphasis is on regulating your emotional

tools to give you greater choices in your personal relationships and business dealings and in facing your daily challenges.

Chapter 4 focuses on the physical and mental component of feelings.

Chapter 5 focuses on the mental component of feelings.

Chapter 6 covers Anger.

Chapter 7 discusses Sadness.

Chapter 8 discusses the emotion of Anxiety.

Chapter 9 focuses on Fear.

Chapter 10 covers the feelings of Guilt and Shame.

Chapter 11 ties all the information together.

You do not have to read every chapter although I suggest you read chapters 1, 2 and 3 first. At the end of each chapter is a “putting it all together” section which summarizes the information in the chapter. If you prefer, you can read the summaries and then decide which chapter you want to go back to and read in its entirety.

### Putting it all together

This book is designed to serve as a guide for the person who wants to know more about their feelings. I have two major goals in writing this book. My first goal is to give you the information you need to understand your feelings including what they are and why you have them.

My second goal is to empower you, the reader, to use the messages your emotions give you. When you have finished this book, you will know how to either stay with the feelings you have because the message is accurate or change the feeling because it is not in your best interest to continue down that emotional path. This will eliminate the idea that you are a victim of your emotions and give you back control over your life.

Consistent with these goals, I introduced you to the central themes you will encounter throughout the book.

Specifically:

1. The word feeling and the word emotion are functionally equivalent and can be used interchangeably.
2. People lack information about the nature of emotions and, therefore, believe that their emotions happen to them, cause them to engage in certain actions, or bring about unwanted consequences.
3. There are myths about emotions which persist because of this lack of information.

4. Our emotions have helped us survive as a species and continue to serve this function. I noted that your senses constantly scan your environment. I also noted that your emotions and your body reflect the brain's processing of this information. This is the physiology of emotions.

5. The psychology of emotions involves seeing your emotions as tools which provide you with very useful information just like other tools you use such as the gas gauge in your car.

Finally, you have to practice using the suggestions and information in this guide. Remember John in the story above? As it turns out, John had been through anger management classes and, while much of what he had been taught could have helped him if he taken the time to *practice it and use it*, nothing he had been taught in those sessions came to his aid to prevent the near catastrophe that took place. Indeed, John did not take the time to take to heart what he had learned.

### The Disclaimer

We are all familiar with disclaimers. You know, the small print. Well, I don't believe in small print so here's my disclaimer.

THIS BOOK IS DESIGNED TO HELP YOU LEARN ABOUT AND BECOME MORE EFFECTIVE IN UTILIZING YOUR EMOTIONS. IT IS NOT DESIGNED TO SUBSTITUTE FOR PROFESSIONAL HELP.

WHENEVER YOU EXPERIENCE PSYCHOLOGICAL PAIN THAT WON'T GO AWAY OR YOU KEEP GETTING RESULTS IN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS, OR YOURSELF, THAT STOP YOU FROM LIVING THE LIFE YOU WANT TO LIVE, SEEK HELP FROM A MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL.

PSYCHOTHERAPY WORKS AND IT DOESN'T MEAN YOU ARE CRAZY, SICK, OR WEAK. WHEN YOUR CAR BREAKS DOWN, YOU GO TO A PROFESSIONAL (YOUR MECHANIC). IF YOUR LIFE ISN'T WORKING, SEEK OUT A PROFESSIONAL, GET THE HELP YOU NEED TO GET BACK ON TRACK, AND GET ON WITH THE PROCESS OF LIVING!

“Change your thoughts and you change your world.” Norman Vincent Peale

## **CHAPTER 1: EMOTIONS**

Webster defines *emotion* as:

(a) “strong, generalized feeling: excitement or agitation.” The word “emotion” comes from the Latin word *emovere* meaning to move out, stir up, agitate.

In other words, our emotions motivate us toward action.

If you ask someone what an emotion is, their answer will usually include one of the following experiences:

First, our emotions seem to come and go on their own and we do not seem to have any control over them.

Secondly, we are able to group feelings into those that feel good such as happiness, anticipation, and excitement and those that feel bad such as sadness and guilt. An emotion like anger may feel good because we feel powerful, energized and ready for action but we may not want it around because of the negative things we, or others, seem to do when we “get angry”.

Lastly, we know that our feelings change with the situations in which we find ourselves so it appears that the situation, other people, or the environment cause the feelings that we experience.

### *Myths about emotions*

These experiences result in the following ideas about emotions which, while widely believed, are actually myths and are not true:

- 1) Our feelings control us.
- 2) There are good and bad feelings.
- 3) Events or situations cause our feelings.
- 4) Our feelings are not a natural part of us so we need to deny them or self-medicate to avoid them.

These myths can lead us to...

- a) Feel powerless,
- b) Miss opportunities to use our emotions more adaptively to manage our environment.

or

- c) Take actions we later regret.

We'll talk about and dispel these myths in the pages that follow.

### So, what are emotions and what do they do?

Emotions are the physical component of our psychological encounters with the “environment”. This environment can be people or situations with whom we interact or our own inner environment in which we may dream about or dread situations that only "exist" in our heads.

### *Basic Emotions*

Paul Ekman<sup>1</sup> has studied facial expressions suggestive of emotional responses in modern and primitive societies as well as in primates and human infants. He found that there are basic emotions that exist across all the populations he studied. The five basic emotions are mad, sad, glad, fear and disgust.

## *Action Readiness and Evolution*

William James<sup>2</sup>, the founder of modern psychology, said that emotions were adaptive, behavioral, and physiological response tendencies that were called forth by evolutionarily significant events. In other words, the main function of these innate primary emotions was to insure our survival as an individual and as a species. Our emotions allow us to quickly assess the environment for any possible threat.

Based on that assessment, our brains, whose job is to insure our survival, prepare our bodies to take appropriate action to deal with the perceived danger. Just like the early warning radar that surrounds the United States and alerts us to any violation of our airspace that might constitute a threat to our safety, we constantly scan our surroundings for any dangerous situation so we can, if necessary, take corrective action before the danger “kills” us. Our emotions alert us when we appraise a threat and prepare us to take action against that threat.

## *Emotional Programs*

Using the analogy of a modern computer in which programs and subprograms (programs within programs) carry out specific actions when we push the right key or hit a specific icon, our primary emotions and the response tendencies associated with them can be viewed as emotional programs.

In order for our emotional programs to be effective and give our ancestors an edge in surviving as a species, they had to be flexible and provide Mr. Caveman the ability to react to a wide variety of circumstances. In other words, these programs, emotions, had to operate both *automatically* without much conscious thought in order to facilitate a life-saving *reaction* when needed and *manually*, to use a car analogy, so that each individual could decide how to *respond* to circumstances based on specific needs, motivations, and abilities when that was called for.

According to the work of Leda Cosmides and John Tooby in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *the Handbook of Emotions*, emotional programs evolved to detect reliable cues (that existed for our early ancestors but may not exist now) and to trigger a specific set of subprograms which were chosen by natural selection as beneficial in solving the problems that existed back then. Some of these subprograms caused Mr. Caveman to focus his attention and vision on the threat he faced. Other subprograms involved the release of chemicals that effect respiration, heart rate, muscle tension and other systems within our bodies. The physical changes in muscle tension, respiration, and heart rate comprise the physical component of emotion and are the first clue that we are interacting emotionally with our environment. Chapter 4 discusses the physical component of emotions in more detail.

Let's look at an example which illustrates how these emotional programs worked in our cave dwelling ancestors. One day Mr. Caveman is walking in the woods. Because he lives in an inherently dangerous environment, he is always alert to and his sense organs are constantly scanning his environment for the presence of any possible danger. He has just eaten a meal and now he faces a very large feline predator. As soon as he sees, hears, or smells the tiger, information from his sense organs travels very rapidly to the amygdala in his brain and, by a slower pathway, to his frontal cortex. The amygdala is the emotional center of the brain. The frontal cortex is the thinking part of the brain.

When the amygdala reads a threat, a signal is sent throughout the body which automatically reroutes the blood supply away from his digestive system to the large muscles in his legs. His own lunch doesn't matter if he is about to become lunch so his brain prepares his body, if needed, to run away. The blood supply is also rerouted away from his hands and arms and his body begins to pump

numerous chemicals into his bloodstream including adrenalin and blood clotting agents. The movement of blood away from his extremities (fingers, etc) and the blood clotting chemicals will be useful if he decides to stay and fight the tiger and is wounded. The presence of adrenalin in his bloodstream will give him the extra strength that he may need to deal with the threat, dull the pain, and so forth. This whole process is called the Fight or Flight response. We still go into Fight or Flight today whenever we perceive threat. It happens automatically without any thought as we would want it to when we are faced with a threat.

We can see from this example that Mr. Caveman's sensors assessed a threat and his programming "automatically" prepared him to REACT to the threat. His frontal cortex was also alerted and began to direct him to RESPOND to the threat based on his abilities, his resources, and his goals (survival, saving his family). He was able to choose whether to confront the threat or escape from it. Would his actions have been different if there were several cavemen with him then if he were alone? Probably, because the threat would have been assessed differently and his ability (enhanced by the group) to respond would have been increased.

The same process occurs if you are walking in the woods and see an object you believe is a dangerous snake. Fight or Flight goes into action and your senses become more focused. While you initially may freeze, you decide to cautiously move forward and when you get closer to the "snake", you realize that it is just a fallen branch from a tree. At this point, you no longer feel afraid, although you might feel somewhat foolish, and your body begins to "calm down". Had it been a snake, you would have been prepared.

One of the reasons that feelings worked as effective programs to facilitate Mr. Caveman's survival was that there was very little *ambiguity* in his environment. Our ancestors did not have to deal with as much subtlety or uncertainty as we do today. Events were pretty much as they appeared to be. Strangers and large predators were always a survival threat and triggered emotions of anger or perhaps fear.

These two primary emotions elicited three basic options:

1. A threat to one's existence had to be confronted and dealt with (anger).
2. A threat might require one to be very still until it passed (fear).
3. A threat might dictate that one run away as fast as possible (fear).

Mr. Caveman's reaction to the threats would have served him well because the nature of the threat was very clear.

Contrast these three clear options which were consistent with the situational danger with our angry response to a perceived insult from another person or to a traffic jam. We can infer from our feeling angry that we perceive a threat but would be hard pressed to tell you what the life threatening event is. The situations we face today, because of the presence of psychological factors, are not always what they appear to be. Consequently, our perceptions of these situations and the feelings that follow from those perceptions may not be accurate.

Today, our attitude, our self-perceptions, and the expectations that we have when we encounter an event act as filters through which we appraise the personal significance of the event. Our appraisal, or

perception, generates the feelings we have and sets up the response we make. If our appraisals were always accurate, we wouldn't have so many situations in which we act on our feelings and regret what we did once the feelings subside and we "calm down". In other words, in today's world, while we want to react when we must, we want to rely more on our ability to respond, rather than react, to situations we face. Responding involves making a choice about what we want to do. We'll discuss this in more detail below.

### The Process of Emotions

Richard S. Lazarus<sup>3</sup> in his discussion of Appraisal theory talks about the "person-environment relationship" to describe the emotional process that involves the individual's appraisal of the personal meaning of a given event. The feeling we physically experience is a direct result of the personal meaning we give to, or in other words, our relationship with, the event we are assessing.

Another word for appraisal is opinion. Our thoughts about a person or situation make up our opinion. Thus, it is our thoughts about an event that determine what we feel about that event. While the fasttrack pathway to the amygdala does not involve any thinking and prepares us to either fight off a threat or flee from it, the input from the cortex, or what we think, is far more important to you and me in learning to utilize our emotions and the information they make available to us. Indeed, other than in purely survival based situations, we can say that all of our emotions are based on how we perceive our environment.

Sally Planalp in her book *Communicating Emotions*<sup>4</sup> delineates the five components which are involved in generating and modulating our emotions. These components are:

1. Objects, causes, or precipitating events,
2. Appraisal,
3. Physiological changes,
4. Action tendencies/expression
5. Regulation.

#### *1. Objects, causes, or precipitating event*

A client of mine told me that she got angry every time a male "looks at me that way". She had been sexually abused by her father who told her that it was her attractiveness that caused him to molest her. Whenever a male showed interest in her, memories of her molests would be triggered. This is an example of an "event" that, for her, triggered an emotion. She maintained that it was the look that caused the emotion and stated, "If he hadn't looked at me that way, I wouldn't have gotten angry." While her statement is true, the implication that the action of another person could force my client to have an emotion is not true. While the event may start the emotional process going, it is not the causative factor.

Element #2, appraisal, is the real cause.

#### *2. Appraisal*

The personal significance, or meaning, that we give to the event determines the feeling we have about our situation. This is the mental component of the emotional process and involves our perception, or appraisal, of what we are experiencing. Chapter 5 discusses the mental component of emotion.

Our appraisal is based on several considerations. To appraise, according to Webster's dictionary, is to "*judge* (italics added) the quality or worth of". In other words, we look at the event and we judge its importance to us in terms of our goals (physical and psychological), our ability to deal with what is going on (our resources, our physical abilities, and our situation), the anticipated impact of the event on us, and, if another individual is involved, whether his action was intentional or unintentional. Our appraisal may be based on what is happening in the moment or be impacted by memories from our past. We may or may not be aware that it is our past that is driving our current perception.

Our appraisal of the situation leads to component #3 which alerts us to the presence of the emotion. Component #3 is the physiological changes that are elicited by, and are reflective of, our appraisals.

### *3. Physiological changes*

We become aware of an ongoing emotional process when we experience it physically in our bodies. Chapter 4 discusses the physical component of emotions in more detail. The Fight or Flight response prepares the body by redirecting blood flow to the large muscles, increasing heart rate and breathing, and causing other physiological changes.

The physiological changes that most people report involve tightening of specific muscle groups such as the back or neck, changes in breathing, or temperature changes (feeling hot or cold). Some people report being aware of changes in their thinking (slower or faster).

The physical component of emotions both alerts us to the emotion and provides us with an opportunity to review and reset the emotion which is component #5.

In addition to the physical changes in our bodies which alert us to the presence of an emotion, feelings also move us to take action. This urge to act, or action tendency, is another indication that we are going through an emotional process.

Component #4 is action tendencies.

### *4. Action tendencies/expression*

Part of the appraisal process is to select a response that is consistent with the situation (the threat, presence of others) and individual factors (personal goals, resources, physical abilities).

Based on your appraisal of the event, you are driven to engage in an action that will address the issue you are facing and that the emotion is signaling.

Generally speaking, action tendencies involve approach behavior (moving toward the focus of your attention) and avoidance behavior (moving away from the focus of your attention), or doing nothing. More specifically, the action tendency of anger is to attack (approach). For fear, the action tendency is to freeze (do nothing) or to run (avoidance). The action tendency you experience will help you to become more aware of your emotions and will give you the opportunity to reevaluate your appraisal before you take any action at all.

Reevaluating is part of component #5 which is regulation.

## 5. Regulation.

Regulation is an integral part of the entire emotional process and is built into all of the other four components. You can deal with the event (component #1), you can change your appraisal (component #2), you can adjust your breathing or engage in relaxation exercises (component #3) and you can choose what action you will take (component #4).

The ability to regulate the emotional process:

1. Frees you from being tyrannized or controlled by your emotions.
2. Gives you a choice regarding how you will interact with your environment.
3. Allows you to utilize the information your emotions provide you to make better, more adaptive, decisions.
4. Allows you to be more effective in your interpersonal interactions.
5. Allows you to live a more productive life

The component of regulation is like pushing the pause button on your digital recorder. The pause button stops the action.

Similarly, the process of regulation involves “stopping the action” and reviewing the information available to you from the emotional process. During this pause, you can validate the emotion and decide whether the action tendency you are about to take is adaptive (works to your advantage) in your immediate situation. If it is, then you should take immediate action.

For example, if you are angry and your appraisal of an immediate threat is accurate or valid, then you should fight off the threat with whatever means you have available. If, however, you determine that the “threat” is not as significant as it first appeared to be, then regulation suggests that you reappraise your situation. When you change your appraisal, you reset your emotion and any response you might choose to make also changes. You can also choose not to respond at all.

It is important to note that while you do not always choose your emotion and you can change what you feel by adjusting your appraisal, you always have a choice as to the action you take. Thus, while some people may REACT to their feelings, hurt others, and blame what they do on what they were feeling, our response and any consequences that happen as a result of what we do are always our responsibility.

### Emotions as Tools

The gas gauge on your car is a tool that you use to tell you how much fuel you have left in your tank. It is a source of information that you can use to make decisions. If the gas gauge tells you that you are low on fuel, you may not like this piece of information but you do not destroy the gas gauge. I am suggesting that your feelings are tools which, like the gas gauge in your car, give you information that you can use to make decisions. The gas gauge is neutral and is neither good nor bad. So it is with feelings. Emotions also are neutral. Both feelings and your gas gauge can be seen as sources of information.

## *The Message of Emotion*

From a cognitive/appraisal perspective, many (not necessarily all) emotions can be viewed as communicating a specific message.

Specifically:

**Guilt**, communicates the message “I did something wrong (or didn't do something that I should have done).”

**Shame** communicates the message “There is something about me that is wrong.”

**Depression** communicates the message that “I see myself as hopeless, helpless, or worthless.”

**Anger** communicates the message “There is a threat in my environment that I can do something about.” Anger may also communicate the message that you have determined who caused the threat and blame that person or entity for any undesirable consequences that have occurred.

**Fear** says “There is a threat in my environment that I can't do anything about and that will seriously hurt me”.

**Anxiety** says “There MAY be a threat in my environment that MIGHT possibly be able to hurt me.”

**Happiness** is “I've accomplished my goal. I'm pleased with what is happening. I want this to continue.”

**Sadness** communicates “I've lost something, an opportunity, or someone that is important to me.”

The Emotions as Tools model suggests that our emotions are tools that help us interact more effectively with our environment. Emotions like anger, fear, and anxiety alert us to the possible presence of a personal “threat” that may require immediate action from us to avoid being harmed. The harm might be physical, psychological, or financial. If we have misinterpreted the environment, the threat might be non-existent. Other emotions communicate a different message. As we've discussed, the emotion is elicited by our appraisal of the environment in which we find ourselves and the event which challenges us. These appraisals are the results of our constantly scanning and making judgments about the environment and the significance for us of what is happening around us.

## BETTR-V

In order to effectively utilize the information our emotions can provide, we need to know how to become aware of, how to read, and how to evaluate our emotions. The end result of this process is that you can regulate what you feel and the actions you take. An easy way to remember this process is the acronym BETTR-V:

B - BODY  
E - EMOTION  
T - THREAT  
T - THOUGHT  
R - RESPONSE  
-  
V - VALIDITY

We first become aware of our emotions by the physical sensations we experience in our bodies. This is the physical component discussed in chapter 4.

Next, we label the feeling, or the EMOTION.

Our emotion enables us to determine how we appraise our environment and the threat our initial evaluation tells us exists.

Another word for appraisal is THOUGHT. The THREAT we perceive comes from our thoughts about our situation.

The RESPONSE, or action tendency, is the behavior we are about to engage in which follows directly from our thoughts. This response tendency is driven by the specific emotion and is directed toward the “threat” our emotion suggests exists.

Before we activate the response, we need to VALIDATE the feeling in the context of the environment. Does the threat actually exist or is it based on a hastily made interpretation of another person’s actions, our own past hurts, or an overly self-protective ego? If the emotion is not valid in that it does not match our reevaluation of the environment, then we need to change our appraisal and create a new, more valid, emotion.

BETTR-V tells us where to look to focus in on our emotions.

How you become aware of and give a label to the emotion is not critical as long as you give it a label. For example, you might become aware that you want to hit your boss or you might become aware that your jaw is clenched or your neck muscles have tightened before you identify anger as the emotion you are feeling. The label enables you to identify the thoughts/appraisals and action tendency (response) which are consistent with the emotion.

The critical point is that you validate your feelings before you act on them.

The validation step will save you much embarrassment and might save your job, your marriage, or your freedom. The validation stage also allows you to make a decision to continue with the emotion and act on it with all the energy you can muster. It is your choice.

### Putting It All Together

Chapter 1 discussed emotions in detail. We learned that emotions have a long evolutionary history and that they functioned as semiautomatic programs to insure that our cave ancestors survived. Our ancestors constantly scanned their surroundings for any threat/danger and when a threat was perceived, the emotion that followed prepared the body for fight or flight. Emotions served our ancestors very

well because there was little ambiguity, or uncertainty, in that early environment. If it looked like a threat, it was a threat.

Today, we have the same programs but the likelihood that they may prepare us for a threat that doesn't exist is quite high. Because the environment is ambiguous, what may appear to be a threat may only be a misunderstanding. This uncertainty can impact our appraisal of our current situation.

Our psychological make-up adds uncertainty in that we may misinterpret a situation based on past experiences, our individual needs, or personality issues. When we misinterpret the environment, the emotion that follows from our misinterpretation will not be valid and will lead to inappropriate actions.

We defined emotions as tools that help us interact more adaptively with our environment and we looked at the process of emotions, components of emotions, and the message each emotion gives us about how we perceive our environment. We learned that it is never the event that causes an emotion or a response. It is always how you think about a situation that causes what you feel. Your response in that situation follows from your feeling and you always have a choice to regulate your emotion by changing your thoughts and taking a different course of action.

Lastly, we learned about BETTR-V as the key to the emotions as tools model. BETTR-V reminds us where to look for the information about what we are feeling and the underlying perceptions that elicited the emotion so that we can validate the feeling before we engage the response tendency the feeling has prepared us to take.