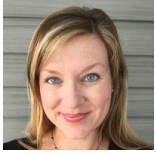


The Purpose of Our Emotions

How Our Feelings Help Us Survive and Thrive



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Emotions can play an important role in how we think and behave. The emotions we feel each day can compel us to take action and influence the decisions we make about our lives, both large and small. In order to truly understand emotions, it is important to understand the three critical components of an emotion.

There are three parts to an emotion:

1. A subjective component (how you experience the emotion)
2. A physiological component (how your bodies react to the emotion)
3. An expressive component (how you behave in response to the emotion).

These different elements can play a role in the function and purpose of your emotional responses.

Emotions can be short-lived, such as a flash of annoyance at a co-worker, or long-lasting, such as enduring sadness over the loss of a relationship. But why exactly do we experience emotions? What role do they serve?

Emotions Can Motivate Us to Take Action

When faced with a nerve-wracking exam, you might feel a lot of anxiety about whether you will perform well and how the test will impact your final grade. Because of these emotional responses, you might be more likely to study. Since you experienced a particular emotion, you had the motivation to take action and do something positive to improve your chances of getting a good grade.

We also tend to take certain actions in order to experience positive emotions and minimize the probability of feeling negative emotions. For example, you might seek out social activities or hobbies that provide you with a sense of happiness, contentment, and excitement. On the other hand, you would probably avoid situations that might potentially lead to boredom, sadness, or anxiety.

Emotions Help Us Survive, Thrive, and Avoid Danger

Naturalist Charles Darwin believed that emotions are adaptations that allow both humans and animals to survive and reproduce. When we are angry, we are likely to confront the source of our irritation. When we experience fear, we are more likely to flee the threat. When we feel love, we might seek out a mate and reproduce.

Emotions serve an adaptive role in our lives by motivating us to act quickly and take actions that will maximize our chances of survival and success.

Emotions Can Help Us Make Decisions

Our emotions have a major influence on the decisions we make, from what we decide to have for breakfast to which candidates we choose to vote for in political elections. Researchers have also found that people with certain types of brain damage affecting their ability to experience emotions also have a decreased ability to make good decisions.

Even in situations where we believe our decisions are guided purely by logic and rationality, emotions play a key role. Emotional intelligence, or our ability to understand and manage emotions, has been shown to play an important role in decision-making.

Emotions Allow Other People to Understand Us

When we interact with other people, it is important to give clues to help them understand how we are feeling. These cues might involve emotional expression through body language, such as various facial expressions connected with the particular emotions we are experiencing.

In other cases, it might involve directly stating how we feel. When we tell friends or family members that we are feeling happy, sad, excited, or frightened, we are giving them important information that they can then use to take action.

Emotions Allow Us to Understand Others

Just as our own emotions provide valuable information to others, the emotional expressions of those around us give us a wealth of social information. Social communication is an important part of our daily lives and relationships and being able to interpret and react to the emotions of others is essential.

It allows us to respond appropriately and build deeper, more meaningful relationships with our friends, family, and loved ones. It also allows us to communicate effectively in a variety of social situations, from dealing with an irate customer to managing a hot-headed employee.

Charles Darwin was one of the earliest researchers to scientifically study emotions. He suggested that emotional displays could also play an important role in safety and survival. If you encountered a hissing or spitting animal, it would clearly indicate that the creature was angry and defensive, leading to you back off and avoid possible danger.

Understanding the emotional displays of others gives us clear information about how we might need to respond in a particular situation.