

# **The Mechanics of Emotions**

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Published by DIP Publishing House 2013

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## Foreword

The aim of this work is to bring up a quite thought-provoking subject, namely the emotions of human beings. Although serious research has been conducted into this area of knowledge, people still don't know much about their own emotions. A layman has no idea what immense power lies within him, in the shape of emotions. If he knew that he can actually control his emotions and that his impulses, which often get the upper hand, can be redirected towards more noble purposes, he wouldn't have any reasons to complain about his inability to make the most out of his life. He would realize that he is in charge of his own destiny and that he can achieve remarkable things, just by controlling his own person.

My goal is to show you that your emotions and your way of conducting yourself are yours to control. You just have to press the right buttons and gain control of yourself. With enough motivation and the proper strategy, success will be yours.

## CHAPTER 1: General Observations about Emotions

Imagine you're walking carefree along the avenue, at a moderate pace, now and then laying eyes on some displays in the store window. You turn the corner and out of nowhere, a villain pops out in front of you, brandishing a knife and demanding you to hand over all your money. What is your reaction? You might freeze and remain motionless or, scared out of your wits, start screaming and dashing away. Or on the contrary, the thief could act as a red rag to a bull and growing furious, you might attack him and make him feel sorry for his foolish robbery attempt.

In each of the foregoing cases, it is our emotions that come forth and bolster us, so that we can deal properly with the situation at hand. Human life devoid of emotions cannot be conceived, since they have played a pivotal part in our survival throughout the ages. Whether we like it or not, they are a fundamental part of our lives, defining who we are and how we conduct ourselves in different situations. Unbelievable as it may seem, we experience emotions in each and every second of the day; even at night, when dreaming, we sometimes go through a host of emotion-provoking projections. In fact, the quality of our entire living issues from the way we handle our emotional arsenal we are endowed with.

Our store of emotions is a double-edged sword, since it can act both as a life-saver and a life-ruiner, depending on how level-headedly it is put into use. Let's take anger as an example. If you were to be attacked outright and thus have your integrity menaced, responding back with rage is highly likely to repel the threat. Under these circumstances, violence used as a defensive weapon is absolutely acceptable. Since in this case your own life is in danger, fury plays the role of a life-saver.

But consider another situation. You are immersed in your work at the office, nearly strangled by the red tape. It's been a while since you've last taken a break and you're now pretty irritable. Then your cell phone rings; it's your wife. Ignoring the reason for her disturbing call, you don't answer the phone, but carry on working. You're now totally focused on those papers, but within minutes, a second call: again, your wife. "I told her I'm up to my ears in my project!", you say furiously to yourself and once again obstinately refuse to respond. After a while, the same ring tone. Driven to the edge of desperation, you madly pick up the phone and without any introductory politeness, you thoughtlessly retort your spouse: "For goodness' sake! Can't you see I'm busy! I don't care if I'm late for dinner! Stop pestering me!" Closed conversation. Now, was your anger truly of any aid in this case? On returning home, the chances are you'll feel pangs of remorse for having remonstrated with your wife. Not only did you hurt her

feelings, but now you are also guilt-ridden. She was just worried about you being late and was inquiring about you. She meant no harm, unlike the above mentioned attacker.

As you can see, emotions can be our best friends and our worst enemies at the same time. In a later chapter, I will outline why this is happening and whether we can control our emotional reactions, to avoid such embarrassing situations.

### *Positive vs Negative*

You have certainly heard a lot of debate concerning the rejection of the so-called “negative emotions” and instead the attraction of the “positive” ones, since this is supposed to be the key to leading a thriving and joyful life. But how valid is this categorization of emotions into positive and negative? Which are which?

First and foremost, we need to be aware of what emotions we will consider for classification purposes.. **There are seven universal emotions: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, surprise and contempt.** All sorts of mixtures can originate from them. They are named *universal* because, as the reputed psychologist Paul Ekman discovered, they are present in all cultures all over the world and, furthermore, have similar

functionality and display manner (more about universality and peculiarities among different cultures later on).

Now that we know what emotions we are equipped with, let us take a closer look at them. Usually, the term “negative” is conducive to dim thoughts, being primarily linked to anything that’s bad, outrageous, unacceptable, harmful and so on (except for the medical analysis results, where “negative” actually means good news). Which one of these seven emotions seems to fit with this description, so that we can mark it irretrievably as “negative”? Presumably all but the emotions of happiness and , at least partly, surprise, right?

People usually regard happiness in general terms as the most pleasurable experience. This outlook is perfectly understandable at first glance. I mean, is there anybody who dislikes feeling happy, fulfilled, satisfied, enchanted, name it whatever you like? I don’t think so. When it comes to surprise, there is, however, a bit of a debate, since whenever you ask somebody what their attitude towards surprises is, they would commonly respond that it depends on the nature of that surprise. Hence the wide spread belief that a surprise can be either positive or negative.

Concentrating now on the other five emotions, which are almost always labeled as negative and undesirable, we should clarify from the outset the



grounds for this (I consider it) preconception. The first thing that springs to mind when the word *sadness* is mentioned might be the image of someone crying or you might recollect a distressing event from your past. You don't like that feeling, do you? If I mention *anger*, you might visualize an enraged person, possibly an acquaintance of yours who hurt you in some way or another because of his uncontrolled fury. Even more precisely, you could remember a time when you acted under the impetus of anger yourself and now regret that moment. You would choose to never act like that again, wouldn't you? Feeling scared might put you off as well; since we all have our immanent fears, we struggle as much as possible to give them a wide berth, so that we can avoid being seized with horror. "Disgusting" is obviously ascribed to objects with obnoxious traits, such as sliminess, stench or a taste so bad, that you want to spit it out. Certainly on the black list of emotions, right? Finally, contempt might be a bit of an elusive term. Briefly, contempt is related to disgust, just that it is directed at people and their actions, not objects. You can envisage it as the little sister of hatred, since it is a sign of our disapproval and rejection of somebody. Contempt seems to shatter the balance of emotional peace and harmony as well, doesn't it?

Therefore, taking the foregoing points into consideration, can we conclude that it is solely happiness that we should be pursuing throughout our lives, while trying to get rid of all the other emotions?

That would be totally wrong! As mentioned earlier, it is our preconceptions and lack of objectiveness that drive us into dividing our own emotions into “good” and “bad”. Our major mistake here is the failure to take a holistic approach to our feelings, in order to grasp their whole functionality and purpose, not just the immediate effects. Only by doing so will we discover that all our emotions are essential for our lives. It is the way we manage them that and whether we channel them into good or bad purposes that reveal their qualities or faults.

In this respect, let’s go over our emotions once again. Happiness, ostensibly the most desirable feeling, can actually create no end of harm. We tend to focus exclusively on ourselves, on our inner sensations when experiencing enjoyment. Thus, we become oblivious to the way others perceive our happiness. To reverse the old adage, “Somebody’s gold can be someone else’s poison”. For instance, a psychopath is keen on seeing his victims suffering. It’s his way of experiencing happiness, through inflicting pain into others. Could you possibly consider this sort of happiness a positive emotion, since it stands at the root of the victims’ torment?

Once again, it depends on which side you’re standing. For the psycho’s victims, this happiness is by no means a positive thing. On the other hand, for the slayer, it is in fact a positive one, given his fulfillment. I admit, this is a truly cruel example, but it illustrates the

need to judge emotions not just through your own eyes, but also from the standpoint of other persons involved in your actions, who might be “at the receiving end”.

A gentler case of “negative happiness” is the creation of envy. A boastful person who has just won a newsworthy prize and then goes about exposing his/her tremendous achievement can easily spark off antagonistic sentiments in those coerced to witness this showing-off. Good for you, bad for them. Positive and negative at the same time.

Sadness-provoking events are unquestionably not desirable, since the deeper the sorrow, the lower your ability to shrug it off and go on. Yet, sadness also has a bright side. If you didn’t show grief for the loss of your best friend, for instance, people wouldn’t know how much you cared for him. Sadness is actually a token of love for a lost person and, furthermore, it shows others that we need support in those difficult moments. Reckless persons in this kind of situations don’t ever get compassion from their relatives, since they come across as thoughtless and cold-blooded.

Likewise, fear reveals that everybody has weaknesses. But for fear, we wouldn’t be able to muster our energy to get out of danger’s way. Although it is sometimes perceived as shameful to flinch from danger, it certainly protects us from harm. Also when dealing with danger, anger can save not only our life, but that of

others' as well. It is this rage that gathers all our strengths, so that we can pit them against our "enemies". Disgust keeps us away from poisonous and toxic substances, so feeling disgusted helps you shun them. Lastly, contempt reveals our being at odds with somebody, which is perfectly normal in democracy. Supposing our "opponent" (whether during an argument or while working as a team) spots our contempt, he might figure out that his idea is not universally approved of and might consider revising it.

All in all, you now understand why there are no completely positive or negative emotions. Next time you feel the incentive to say otherwise, try to think first of the effect your emotional reactions have not only on you, but also on the people around you.

### *Triggers and Responses*

One universal law that governs life is that of cause and effect. According to this law, all events are the result of an anterior action and will be in their turn at the origin of another one. Emotions are no exception to this rule, so their study imply identifying their causes and outcomes (Paul Ekman names them *triggers* and *responses*, terms which I will also use henceforth).

From the outset, you need to understand that every human behavior is primarily shaped by a genetic

inheritance (naturally established, so to say). Afterwards, it is our relation to the surrounding environment that takes over the fine-tuning of our nature. Scientists usually approach this matter as the opposition between the inborn and the learnt side of our personality characteristics.

Take your temperament as an example. There are four main temperamental patterns: choleric (domineering, obstinate, ambitious, leader), melancholic (pessimistic, easily distraught, perfectionist, organized), sanguine (easily distracted, craving audience, optimistic, sprightly) and phlegmatic (lazy, untroubled, calm, sober). You did not decide which combination you wanted to be. You inherited your temperament from your parents. Yet, through education and later through self-monitoring, you can try to adjust your temperamental profile. For instance, melancholic-choleric persons will find it easier to keep in check their proneness to rage-driven actions, typical for choleric, especially since the melancholic traits give them a hand in inner-focus. What I'm saying is that we all have faults of temperament, but, at the same time, we are also endowed with the necessary tools to correct them. More about the link between temperaments and emotions later in this chapter.

Back to emotions. As mentioned earlier, all emotions are *triggered* by a specific impetus, and we *respond* in a certain way. What you should bear in mind

is that all men around the world react to the same triggers for all the seven main emotions; hence the name *universal triggers*. In the upcoming chapters I will expand upon this aspect, for each emotion in turn. Likewise, universal triggers are ascribed to *universal responses*, that is, we all respond the same way to the same trigger. For instance, everybody is overwhelmed with grief when their parents pass away. Their demise represents the universal trigger for sadness, while crying, feeling down in the dumps, withdrawing from the others for some time and staying by yourself, along with your sorrow, and the display of a sad face are part of the universal response to upsetting situations.

In connection to this, you need now to understand that the universality of emotional triggers and responses is modified, up to an extent, by some peculiarities in each individual. This means that while we are all subject to the same universal triggers and respond, generally speaking, the same way, we do have some uniquely personal ways of displaying our emotions. This uniqueness issues from how each of us interprets the content of the universal trigger and how we interpret the universal response patterns.

Let's think about fear. In large part, fear is triggered by something menacing your physical integrity, something that seems dangerous and on the verge of inflicting harm. Everyone gets scared by anything that fits this description, but it depends on each

individual what constitutes a menace for him. I, for example, am afraid of big dogs. Especially when they bark at me, they scare the wits out of me. On the other hand, I have no fear of heights. Conversely, my mother loves dogs (whatever their size), but is afraid of high buildings. This is just a minor example of how our understanding of fear differs, so that we have distinct and unique *particular triggers* for fear, even though the triggered emotion – fear – is the same. In both cases, we experience fear towards a supposedly life-threatening situation/object (universal trigger), just that for me, it is dogs that pose this threat, in contrast to heights, for mom (particular/individual triggers).

Obviously, if universal triggers have particular ones subordinated to them, universal responses are also comprised of individual reactions to these triggers. Consider again fear. On the whole, there is a domineering commonality concerning everybody's reply to frightening situations: our bodies release more dopamine and we become aware of the danger and ready for flight, while our emotion becomes visible on our faces (more on facial expressions in the sections describing comprehensively each emotion). Within this universal response for fear, each of us has his own way of dealing with the situation at hand (particular/individual response). Let's take the fear of spiders (pretty endemic, actually) as an example. Coming across a spider, one might express fear by taking a few steps back or even run away flustered.

Another might scream and jump back. A third one could channel his fear against the eight-legged creature and try to squeeze it. At its worst, fear can paralyze us, keep us motionless or even make us faint. Different people, different reactions.

The uniqueness of what makes us react emotionally and the types of these reactions is chiefly embedded into our life experiences that continually shape our personality and define who we are.

### *Display Rules*

Having brought into the limelight the particularities of our individual emotional output, we are now going to take a closer look at what sets entire cultures apart in this respect.

While studying emotions, Paul Ekman analyzed the differences between cultures worldwide in terms of emotional expression management. He identified what he calls “display rules”, which each person within a larger or smaller community internalizes and learns to follow on any occasion of social interaction. Usually, it is our family that drum these rules into us, by repeatedly telling us how to and how not to behave in public. We thus end up learning to *modulate* our feelings, by adjusting their intensity or *falsify* them, by simulating, neutralizing or masking them.



One illustrative comparison drawn by Ekman is between Americans and Japanese:

„ [...] I tested this formulation in a series of studies that showed that when *alone* Japanese and Americans displayed the same facial expressions in response to seeing films of surgery and accidents, but when a scientist sat with them as they watched the films, the Japanese more than the Americans masked negative expressions with a smile. In private, innate expressions; in public, managed expressions. [...]”<sup>1</sup>

People learn to keep their emotions in check first within the framework of their families. More often than not, children are taught, for example, to smile whenever a relative comes into their house. This is how the so-called “social smile” enters into our subconscious and we display it whenever the circumstances call for it, although we might not genuinely feel the need for it.

Another conclusive example is how the contestants that have reached the final stage of a beauty contest keep their emotions at bay. After the winner is announced, the loser restrains from immediately wiping away the smile she was displaying while waiting for the final decision and forces herself to hold it a little longer. This is what is called a *simulated smile*, since by no means does she really feel happy in those moments, but she needs to send the viewers the message that she can

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