

## CHAPTER 4

# Experiencing and Expressing Emotions



Photo by G.N. Miller/MaMa Foundation Gospel for Teens

Emotion fills our lives with meaning.

## chapter outline

[The Nature of Emotion](#)

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**When radio personality** and producer Vy Higginsen created the nonprofit Gospel for Teens program, her mission was to teach teens gospel music.<sup>1</sup> Higginsen and a group of volunteer instructors met weekly with kids ages 13 to 19, honing their vocal skills and sharing with them the history of gospel. As Higginsen notes, “The lyrics of gospel songs provide courage, inner strength, and hope for a better life in the future.” But she quickly found that her program wouldn’t only be about introducing gospel to a generation more versed in rap and hip-hop. Instead, Gospel for Teens would become a powerful vehicle for helping teens manage intense and challenging emotions.

Higginsen originally instituted a simple rule governing emotions and program participation: *leave the baggage at the door*. As she describes, “The teen years are a vulnerable time in kids’ lives, and they are dealing with shyness, anxiety, trauma, and family dysfunction. Many students are uncomfortable about their physical appearance and self-esteem based on the peers around them. Some are overcome with anxiety from their home life, school, and thoughts of their futures.” To keep difficult emotions from hindering performances, Higginsen began each singing session by having participants stand up and shake their hands, arms, legs, and feet, physically purging themselves of emotional constraints. As she instructed, “Any worry, any pain, any problem with your mother, your father, your sister, your brother, the boyfriend, the girlfriend, I want that out now of your consciousness. That’s your baggage; leave the bags outside because *this* time is for you!”

But Higginsen’s “no baggage” policy was abandoned when the cousin of one of her most talented students was shot and killed. Higginsen realized that many program participants

had suffered similar tragedies, and that her class could provide a forum within which students could safely share their stories, their pain, and their grief with one another—working together to begin healing. As she describes, “Our teens are living a very adult life—their friends and family are getting murdered, dying from diseases and drugs—and it’s leaving emotional scars on them. They need something uplifting in their lives. So I decided to allow the students to bring their baggage in. I invited the students to share what was happening in their worlds. I wasn’t trying to fix their situations, because I couldn’t, but their being heard was a profound step in their being healed. It made our choir realize we are not alone in our experience. We made a connection—emotionally, personally, and interpersonally.”

Whereas Higginson once encouraged students to leave their emotions at the door, she now realizes that the experience of singing and sharing the experience of singing with others provides students with a powerful vehicle for managing negative emotions in positive ways. “I would like the teens to take away the idea that we have emotions yet we are not our emotions. We can recover and thrive by changing our mind and rechanneling our energy through music, art, service, acceptance, meditation, and practice. In simple terms, we can rechannel the negative to the positive and use this as an opportunity for excellence. Gospel music has the power to empower and transform. More than anything, I want my students to know that joy, hope, faith, and goodness are possible.”

**Emotion fills our lives** with meaning ([Berscheid & Peplau, 2002](#)). To experience emotion is to feel alive, and to lack emotion is to view life itself as colorless and meaningless ([Frijda, 2005](#)). Because emotion is so important, we feel compelled to express our emotional experiences to others through communication. And when we share our emotions with others, they transition from private and personal to profoundly interpersonal. It’s at this point that choice becomes relevant. We may not be able to select our emotions before they arise, but we can choose how to handle and convey them after they occur. These choices impact our relational outcomes. When we intelligently manage and competently communicate emotional experiences, our relationship satisfaction and overall life happiness increase. Conversely, when we don’t, our relationships suffer, and these lapses are reflected in relationships and lives torn by anger and sadness.

In this chapter, we examine the most personal and interpersonal of human experiences—emotion. You'll learn:

- The important differences between emotions, feelings, and moods, as well as the best approaches to managing negative moods
- Ways in which gender and personality influence emotion
- Why improving your emotional intelligence can help you more competently manage your experience and expression of emotion
- How to deal with emotional challenges, such as managing anger and grief, communicating empathy online, and handling fading romantic passion

We begin by discussing the nature of emotion and distinguishing it from feelings and moods.

# The Nature of Emotion

Distinguishing between emotions, feelings, and moods

Take a moment and recall the most recent emotion you felt. What comes to mind? For most people, it's a hot emotion—that is, a physically and mentally intense experience, like joy, anger, or grief, during which your palms sweated, your mouth felt dry, and your heart pounded ([Berscheid & Regan, 2005](#)). When we are asked to translate these emotions into words, we use vivid physical metaphors. Joy makes “our hearts leap,” while anger makes “our blood boil.” Grief is “a living hell” ([Frijda, 2005](#)). Understanding what emotions are and how they differ from feelings and moods is the first step in better managing our emotions.

## DEFINING EMOTION



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Emotions are not just internally felt but also expressed through body language, gestures, facial expressions, and other physical behaviors.

Scholarly definitions of emotion mirror our everyday experiences. **Emotion** is an intense reaction to an event that involves interpreting event meaning, becoming physiologically aroused, labeling the experience as emotional, managing reactions, and communicating through emotional displays and disclosures ([Gross et al., 2006](#)). This definition highlights the five key features of emotion. First, *emotion is reactive*, triggered by our perception of outside events ([Cacioppo et al., 1993](#)). A friend telling you that her cancer is in remission leads you to experience joy. Receiving a scolding text message from a parent may trigger both your surprise and your anger. When an emotion-inducing event occurs, we engage in the same perceptual process as we do with other types of interpersonal events—selecting, organizing, and interpreting information related to that event. As we interpret the event’s meaning, we decide whether the incident is positive, neutral, negative, or somewhere in between, triggering corresponding emotions ([Smith & Kirby, 2004](#)).

## self-reflection

Recall an emotional event in a close relationship. What specific action triggered your emotion? How did you interpret the triggering event? What physical sensations resulted? What does this tell you about the link between events, mind, and body that is the basis of emotional experience?

A second feature of emotion is that it *involves physiological arousal* in the form of increased heart rate, blood pressure, and adrenaline release. Many researchers consider arousal *the defining feature of emotion*, a belief mirrored in most people's descriptions of emotion as "intense" and "hot" ([Berscheid, 2002](#)).

Third, to experience emotion, you must become aware of your interpretation and arousal as "an emotion"—that is, you must *consciously label* them as such ([Berscheid, 2002](#)). For example, imagine that a friend posts an embarrassing photo of you on Instagram. Upon discovering it, your face grows hot, your breath quickens, and you become consciously aware of these physical sensations. This awareness, combined with your assessment of the situation, causes you to label your experience as the emotion "anger."

Fourth, our emotional experiences and expressions are *constrained by historical, cultural, relational, and situational norms* regarding appropriate behavior ([Metts & Planalp, 2002](#)). As a consequence, once we become aware that we're experiencing an emotion, we try to manage that experience and express that emotion in ways we consider acceptable. We may allow our emotion to dominate our thoughts and communication, try to channel it in constructive ways, or suppress our emotion completely. For instance, say that you're at a funeral, and a speaker says something that strikes you as funny regarding your loved one who has passed away. You may momentarily feel joy, and be compelled to laugh out loud. But given the situational constraints for appropriate behavior at a funeral, you'd likely repress the laughter rather than risk being seen by others as heartless. Similarly, if you're sad because your best friend is marrying someone you dislike, you'll likely smile through the ceremony, rather than scowl, because wedding norms suggest that everyone should

be joyful. Instances such as these result from the recognition that the unrestrained experience and expression of emotion may lead to negative consequences.

Finally, you *communicate emotion in a variety of ways*. That is, the choices you make regarding emotion management are reflected outward in your verbal and nonverbal displays in the form of word choices, exclamations or expletives, facial expressions, body posture, and gestures ([Mauss et al., 2005](#)). The communicative nature of emotion is so fundamental that people developed emoticons to represent emotional expressions in mediated communication, such as social media posts, texts, and email.

Another way we communicate our emotions is by talking about our emotional experiences with others, which is known as [\*\*emotion-sharing\*\*](#). Much of interpersonal communication consists of disclosing emotions, talking about them, and pondering them. Studies show that people share between 75 and 95 percent of their emotional experiences with at least one other person, usually a spouse, parent, or friend ([Frijda, 2005](#)). Such sharing occurs through multiple modalities, including face-to-face encounters, phone calls, texting, and social media. Teens, for example, prefer sharing emotions face-to-face. When they share positive emotions through social media, the most popular platforms are Instagram, Snapchat, and status updates on Facebook ([Vermeulen et al., 2018](#)). The people with whom we share our emotions generally enjoy being confided in, and often share the incident with others, weaving a socially intimate network of emotion-sharing. The teens in the Gospel for Teens program (described in our chapter opener) use emotion-sharing to connect with one another and collaboratively work together to heal their individual experiences of grief and anger.

## self-reflection

With whom do you share your emotional experiences? Does such sharing always have a positive impact on your relationships, or does it cause problems at times? What ethical boundaries govern emotion-sharing? How do you choose when to use social media to share emotions?

What's more, when people share *their* emotions with *us*, we often—without knowing it—mimic or copy their emotional states through our facial expressions, leading us to experience a “pale reflection” of their emotion ([Hatfield et al., 2014](#)). Research also suggests that when people are inhibited from facially mimicking the emotions of others, such as when Botox injections paralyze facial muscles from being able to fully move, it is more difficult for those people to identify emotions in others.

This facial mimicry may be connected to [\*\*emotional contagion\*\*](#)—when the experience of the same emotion rapidly spreads from one person to others ([Olszanowski et al., 2019](#)). Emotional contagion can be positive, such as when sharing your joy over an unexpected job promotion spreads to your family as you tell them about it. At other times, emotional contagion can be negative. For instance, interacting with people who are anxious can increase your anxiety level—even if you don't share their worries or feel personally concerned about their well-being ([Parkinson & Simons, 2012](#)).

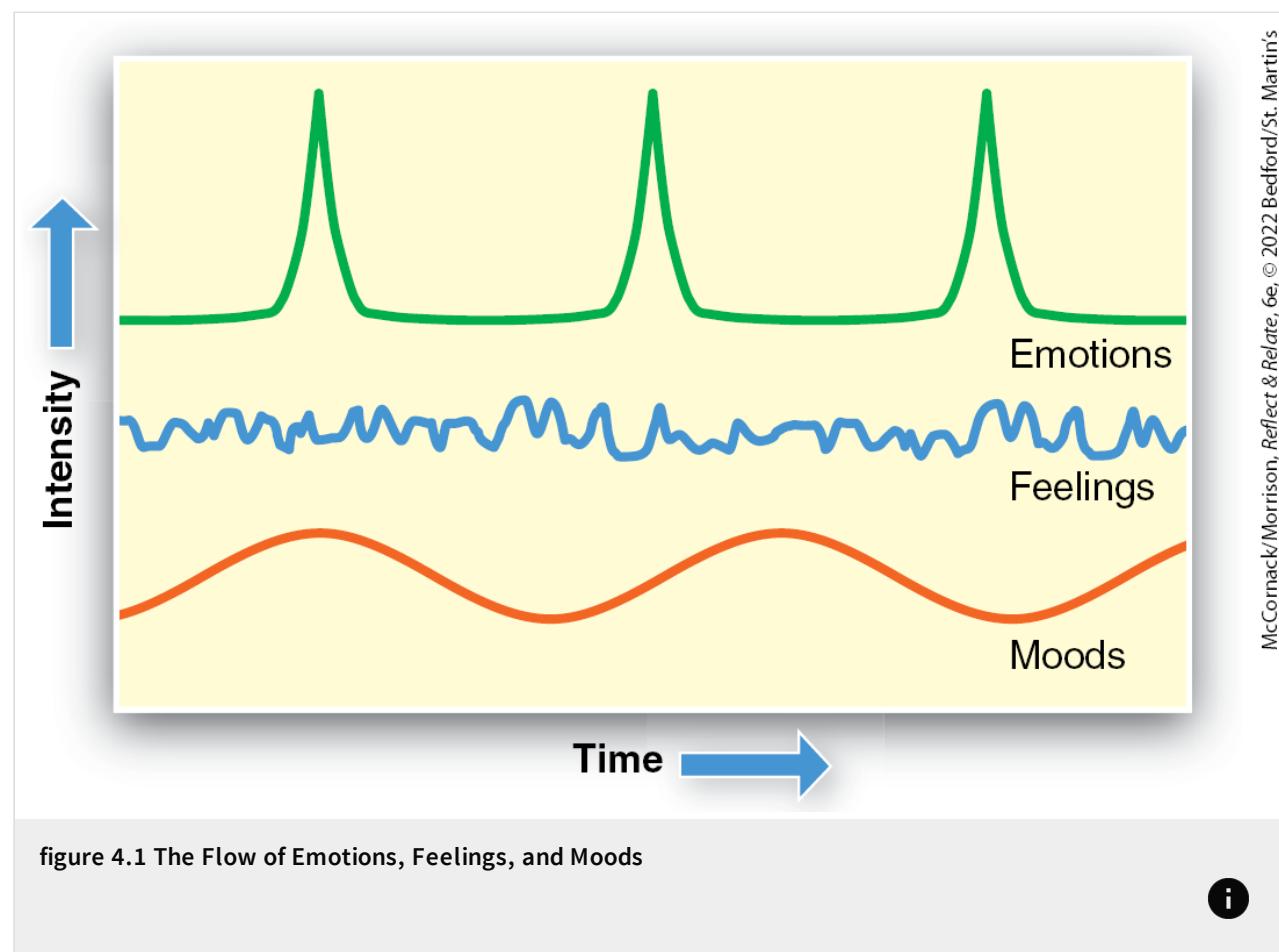
Now that we have described the nature of emotions, let's consider how they differ from feelings and moods.

## FEELINGS AND MOODS

We often talk about emotions, feelings, and moods as if they are the same thing. But they're not. [\*\*Feelings\*\*](#) are short-term emotional reactions to events that generate only limited arousal; they do not typically trigger attempts to manage their experience or expression ([Berscheid, 2002](#)). We experience dozens, if not hundreds, of feelings daily—most of them lasting only a few seconds or minutes. An attractive stranger casts you an approving smile, causing you to feel momentarily flattered. A friend texts you unexpectedly when you're trying to study, making you feel briefly annoyed. Feelings are like small emotions. Common feelings include gratitude, concern, pleasure, relief, and resentment.

Whereas emotions occur sporadically in response to substantial events, and feelings arise frequently in reaction to everyday incidents, [\*\*moods\*\*](#) are low-intensity arousal states—such as boredom, contentment, grouchiness, or serenity—that

typically last longer than feelings or emotions ([Fiske & Taylor, 2017](#)). We are almost always “in a mood” of some form or another; they are the slow-flowing currents in our everyday lives. We can think of our frequent, fleeting feelings as ripples, and occasional intense emotions as waves, riding on top of these currents, as displayed in [Figure 4.1](#).



Moods build, dissipate, and shift direction from positive to negative (or vice versa) in response to minor incidents throughout the day or even our own thought processes ([Parkinson et al., 1996](#)). So, for instance, you might start the day in a good mood, but during your commute to campus hear a song from Radiohead’s *OK Computer*—your ex-partner’s favorite album. This leads you to think about your ex, how you two first met at a Radiohead concert, your breakup, the heartache you experienced, and other associated challenges. As these thoughts arise and accumulate, your mood slowly shifts from positive to negative. Later that same day, however, you might arrive at work in a sour mood—only to learn that you’ve received

a promotion. As your workplace friends congratulate you throughout the evening, your negative mood slowly shifts back to positive once more.

Moods powerfully influence our perception (see also [Chapter 3](#)). People who describe their moods as “good” are more likely than those in bad moods to form positive impressions of others ([Forgas & Bower, 1987](#)); to perceive new acquaintances as “sociable,” “honest,” “giving,” and “creative” ([Fiedler et al., 1986](#)); to cast *halo effects* over others, perceiving them positively because of a positive initial impression; and to fall prey to the *fundamental attribution error*—attributing others’ behaviors to internal rather than external causes ([Forgas, 2011a](#)). Taken together, these findings suggest that people in positive moods aren’t especially good perceivers and are more gullible ([Forgas, 2019](#)). Why? Because they tend to selectively focus only on things that seem positive and rewarding ([Tamir & Robinson, 2007](#)), rather than processing information thoughtfully. In simple terms, when you’re happy, you tend to skim along the perceptual surface instead of deeply diving in to ponder things ([Hunsinger et al., 2012](#)).

## self-reflection

How do you behave toward others when you’re in a bad mood? What strategies do you use to better your mood? Are these practices effective in elevating your mood and improving your communication in the long run, or do they merely provide a temporary escape or distraction?

Our moods also influence our communication, including how we talk with partners in close relationships ([Cunningham, 1988](#)). People in good moods are significantly more likely to disclose relationship thoughts and concerns to close friends, family members, and romantic partners, regardless of whether those partners welcome such sharing. In contrast, negative moods enhance attentiveness to the communication of others—and as a result, people in bad moods are actually better than those in good moods at matching the intimacy level of their responses to the disclosures that have been shared with them. So, for instance, if you reveal that you’re “ashamed of how you treated your parents in the past,” a friend who is in a

bad mood will be more likely to respond by sharing something similarly intimate about *their* family challenges than a friend who is in a good mood (Forgas, 2011b). At the same time, though people in negative moods may be more “tuned in” to the intimacy level of others’ communication, they also often prefer *not* to communicate at all; desiring instead to sit and think, be left alone, and avoid social and leisure activities ([Cunningham, 1988](#)).

Despite the perceptual shortcomings associated with positive mood states, most people prefer positive moods because negative moods are so unpleasant. Unfortunately, some of the most commonly practiced strategies for improving bad moods—drinking alcohol or caffeinated beverages, taking recreational drugs, and eating—are also the least effective and may actually *worsen* your bad mood ([Thayer et al., 1994](#)). More effective strategies for improving bad moods are ones that involve active expenditures of energy, especially strategies that combine relaxation, stress management, deep breathing, and mind–body awareness. The most effective strategy of all appears to be rigorous physical exercise, with evidence indicating that even just a single exercise session can help shift mood in a more positive direction ([Chan et al., 2019](#)). Sexual activity does not seem to consistently elevate mood.

Now that we have distinguished between emotions, feelings, and moods, let’s turn to consider different types of emotions, and some forces that shape emotions.



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Research indicates that exercise is usually the best strategy for improving moods. What strategies have you used to successfully pull yourself out of a bad mood?



## focus on CULTURE

### Happiness across Cultures

A Chinese proverb warns, “We are never happy for a thousand days” ([Myers, 2002](#), p. 47). Although most of us understand that joy is fleeting, we also tend to presume that greater happiness lies on the other side of various cultural divides. If only we made more money, lived in a different country, or were a different age, *then we truly would be happy*. But the science of human happiness has shattered these assumptions, suggesting instead that happiness is more personal and relational than cultural.

Consider economic status. Having enough money to afford health care, housing, food, water, and safety is essential, and people who struggle to make ends meet typically are less happy than those of sufficient means ([Fischer & Boer, 2011](#)). At an international level, this means people in wealthier nations tend to be happier than those in impoverished countries ([Veenhoven, 2014](#)). At the same time, however, once basic needs *are met*, gaining additional wealth has no impact on happiness. People in the United States, for instance, have tripled their buying power since 1950, and yet their happiness has flatlined during this same period ([Myers, 2015](#)).

What about age? A study of 170,000 people in 16 countries found no difference in reported happiness and life satisfaction based on age ([Myers, 2002](#)). Gender? No overall differences in happiness between women and men exist, although women living in countries with greater gender equality *are* substantially happier than women in less-equal countries ([Veenhoven, 2014](#)).

What *does* predict happiness? People high in optimism, extraversion, and agreeableness tend to be happier; as are people who exercise regularly ([Myers, 2015](#)). People with jobs or careers they find fulfilling are happier ([Tay & Diener, 2011](#)). Faith also matters: religious people are more likely to report being happy than those who are nonreligious ([Myers, 2002](#)). And one of the most potent predictors of happiness is also one of the least recognized: *gratitude*. People who routinely communicate grateful emotions to others, and who notice and appreciate their positive experiences, tend to be happier than those who don't ([Portocarrero et al., 2020](#)). But what is *the* most important factor? Relationships. When asked, "What is necessary for your happiness?" people overwhelmingly cite satisfying close relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners at the top of their lists ([Berscheid & Peplau, 2002](#)).

#### **discussion questions**

- What are your own sources of happiness and life satisfaction?
- Do you agree that interpersonal relationships, spiritual beliefs, and healthy living are the most essential ingredients for happiness? Why or why not?

## **TYPES OF EMOTIONS**

Take a moment and look at the emotions communicated by the people in the photos along the top of the following pages. How can you discern the emotion expressed in each picture? One way to distinguish between different types of emotions is to examine consistent patterns of facial expressions, hand gestures, and body postures that characterize specific emotions. By considering these patterns, scholars have identified six **primary emotions** that involve unique and consistent behavioral displays across cultures ([Ekman, 1972](#)). The six primary emotions are surprise, joy, disgust, anger, fear, and sadness.



Photos: Kiratsinh Jadeja/Getty Images; michael simons/Alamy; Digital Vision/Getty Images; Howard Kingsnorth/Getty Images; SFIQ CRACHO/Shutterstock; Marc Romanelli/Getty Images

According to studies performed by psychologist Paul Ekman (1972), people around the world associate the same facial expressions with particular emotional states. Part of improving your interpersonal communication is to recognize others' emotions. Can you identify the ones displayed in each of these photographs? (From left to right, the emotions shown are joy, surprise, anger, disgust, fear, and sadness.)



Some situations provoke especially intense primary emotions. In such cases, we often use different words to describe the emotion, even though what we're experiencing is simply a more intense version of the same primary emotion ([Plutchik, 1980](#)). For instance, receiving a gift from a romantic partner may cause intense joy that we think of as "ecstasy," just as the passing of a close relative will likely trigger intense sadness that we label as "grief" (see [Table 4.1](#)).

**table 4.1 Intense Primary Emotions**

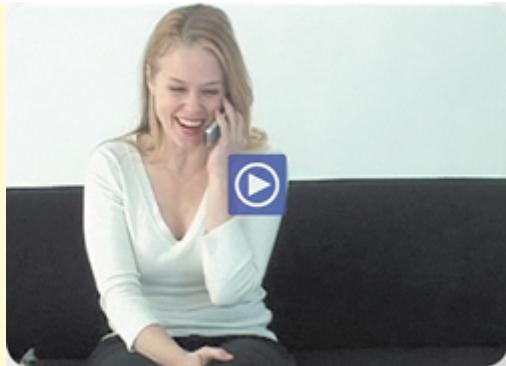
Primary Emotion	High-Intensity Counterpart
Surprise	Amazement
Joy	Ecstasy
Disgust	Loathing
Anger	Rage
Fear	Terror
Sadness	Grief

## LaunchPad Video

[launchpadworks.com](http://launchpadworks.com)

### Blended Emotions

*Watch this clip online to answer the questions below.*



What blended emotions is the woman in the video experiencing? What type of situation could cause this? What types of communication situations make you experience blended emotions? Why?

Want to see more? Check out LaunchPad for a clip on **emotional contagion**.

In other situations, an event may trigger two or more primary emotions simultaneously, resulting in an experience known as [\*\*blended emotions\*\* \(Plutchik, 1993\)](#). For example, imagine that you borrow your romantic partner's phone and accidentally access a series of flirtatious texts between your partner and someone else. You'll likely experience [\*\*jealousy\*\*](#), a blended emotion because it combines the primary emotions anger, fear, and sadness: in this case, *anger* at your partner or the person sending the texts, *fear* that your relationship may be threatened, and *sadness* at the thought of potentially losing your partner to a rival. Other examples of blended emotions include contempt (anger and disgust), remorse (disgust and sadness), and awe (surprise and fear; [Plutchik, 1993](#)).

While people in North America often identify six primary emotions—surprise, joy, love, anger, fear, and sadness ([Shaver et al., 1992](#))—some cultural variation exists. For example, in traditional Chinese culture, shame and sad love (an emotion concerning attachment to former lovers) are primary emotions. Traditional Hindu philosophy suggests nine primary emotions: sexual passion, amusement, sorrow, anger, fear, perseverance, disgust, wonder, and serenity ([Shweder, 1993](#)).

# Forces Shaping Emotion

Personality and gender affect emotion



© Universal Pictures/Courtesy Everett Collection

The characters in *Bridesmaids* display many intense emotions, leading to frequent and sometimes explosive conflicts between them.



In the movie *Bridesmaids* (2011), Annie is a woman struggling to overcome the failure of her beloved small business, Cake Baby, as well as her breakup with her boyfriend Ted, who continues to lead her on. Annie's sadness and sense of hopelessness lead her to seek comfort from her best friend Lillian, whose own life is on the upswing because of her recent engagement. Lillian asks Annie to be her maid of honor, but the situation quickly devolves as Annie's anxieties and neuroses cause

a series of emotional displays, culminating in her ruining a “girls weekend together” and causing a jealous scene at Lillian’s bridal shower.

Surrounding Annie throughout the story are other vivid characters. Becca is perpetually upbeat and perky; Helen—Annie’s primary rival for Lillian’s affections—is fanatically conscientious; Rita, Lillian’s cousin, is always sarcastic and negative. Adding to the dispositional mix is Nathan, a warm and friendly state trooper who exempts Annie from a traffic ticket and subsequently tries to romance her. But dominating the group is Megan, who is outgoing to the point of aggressiveness. When Annie succumbs to her sadness, it is Megan who lifts her up:[2](#)

**ANNIE:** I can’t get off the couch, I got fired from my job, I got kicked out of my apartment, I can’t pay any of my bills, I don’t have any friends....

**MEGAN:** You know what I find interesting, Annie? That you have no friends. You know why that’s interesting? Here’s a friend standing directly in front of you trying to talk to you, and you choose to talk about the fact that you don’t have any friends. No, I don’t think you want any help; you just want to have a little pity party. I think Annie wants a little pity party. I’m life, is life bothering you Annie? ... Fight back for your life!

As with the characters in *Bridesmaids*, our emotions and their expression just seem to happen: an incident occurs, an emotion arises, and we communicate accordingly. Although emotions seem unfiltered and immediate, powerful forces shape how we experience and express them. Two influential forces are personality and gender.

## PERSONALITY

Personality profoundly impacts our emotions. Recall the Big Five personality traits described in [Chapter 3](#)—“OCEAN,” that is, openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Three of these five traits strongly influence our experience and communication of emotion ([Pervin, 1993](#)). The first is extraversion, the degree to which one is outgoing and sociable versus quiet and reserved. High-extraversion people experience positive emotions more frequently compared to low-extraversion people. This appears to be due to the tendency of high-extraversion people to look for happiness in their everyday lives, and focus their attention more on positive than negative events ([Larsen & Ketelaar, 1991](#)). They also

are better able to regulate their emotions ([Pocnet et al., 2017](#)), and they rate themselves as better able to cope with stress and as more skilled at managing their emotional communication than low-extraversion people ([Lopes et al., 2005](#)). In *Bridesmaids*, we see this trait in Megan when she discusses her success in overcoming her challenging high school years by working hard and believing in herself, leading her to land a high-ranking government job (with the “highest possible security clearance”).

Another personality trait that influences emotion is *agreeableness*. Like Nathan in *Bridesmaids*, people high in agreeableness (who are trusting, friendly, and cooperative) report being happier in general, better able to manage stress, and more skilled at managing their emotional communication compared to people low in agreeableness. Highly agreeable people also score substantially higher on measures of emotion management, are rated by their peers as having superior emotion management skills ([Lopes et al., 2005](#)), and—when combined with high self-esteem—are more likely to engage in the disclosure of negative emotions ([McCarthy et al., 2017](#)).

The tendency to think negative thoughts about oneself, known as *neuroticism*, also affects emotional experience and expression. Highly neurotic people, like Annie in *Bridesmaids*, focus their attention primarily on negative events ([Larsen & Ketelaar, 1991](#)). Consequently, they report more frequent negative emotions than do low-neurotic people and rate themselves as less happy overall. They also describe themselves as less skilled at emotional communication, and they test lower on scientific measures of emotion management than do people low in neuroticism ([Lopes et al., 2005](#)).

## self-reflection

To what degree are you extraverted, agreeable, and neurotic? How have these traits affected your emotions? Your relationships? Are these traits, and their impact, enduring and permanent, or can they be changed in ways that will improve your interpersonal communication?

Although these findings seem to suggest that highly neurotic people are doomed to lives of negative emotion, this isn't necessarily the case. Psychologist Albert Ellis (1913–2007) dedicated much of his professional life to helping people who were neurotic change their self-defeating beliefs. Ellis believed that much of neurosis and its accompanying emotional states—sadness, anger, and anxiety—are tied to three irrational beliefs: "I must be outstandingly competent or I am worthless," "Others must treat me considerately or they are absolutely rotten," and "The world should always give me happiness or I will die" ([Ellis & Dryden, 1997](#)). Ellis developed **Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT)** as a way for therapists to help patients who are neurotic systematically purge themselves of such beliefs.

If you find yourself frequently experiencing negative thoughts similar to those mentioned above, you can use Ellis's five steps to change your thoughts and the negative emotions that flow from them. First, call to mind common situations that upset you. Second, identify irrational beliefs about yourself and others that are tied to these situations. Third, consider the emotional, behavioral, and relational consequences that you suffer as a result of these beliefs—negative outcomes that you would like to change. Fourth, critically challenge these beliefs, disputing their validity. Is there really any support for these beliefs? What evidence contradicts them? What is the worst thing that can happen if you abandon these beliefs? The best thing that can happen? Finally, identify more accurate and realistic beliefs about yourself, others, and the world at large that lead to more positive emotional, behavioral, and relational outcomes, and embrace these beliefs fully.

Clearly, your degree of extraversion, agreeableness, and especially neuroticism influences how often you experience positive and negative emotions and how effectively you manage and communicate these emotions. At the same time, keep in mind that personality is merely one of many pieces that make up the complex puzzle that is emotion. Part of becoming a competent emotional communicator is learning how your personality traits shape your emotional experience and expression, and treating personality-based emotion differences in others with sensitivity and understanding.

## GENDER

Like personality, gender also impacts our experience of emotions, but the way in which it does so is more nuanced than simple binary differences. Scholars once believed that women experienced more sadness, fear, shame, and guilt, and less anger and hostile emotions compared to men ([Fischer et al., 2004](#)). But more recent findings suggest that these differences might not hold across cultures, and that we need to consider the influence of other factors, such as age ([Gong et al., 2018](#)), sexual identity, and social setting. For example, *gender socialization* (a concept we discussed in [Chapter 2](#) and will discuss in more detail in [Chapter 6](#)) creates prescriptive norms and stereotypes that shape how we experience and express our emotions. Women may experience and express certain emotions more than men because they are conforming to the standards that they have been taught to follow in their particular culture. Recent studies suggest that this conformity may dissipate as individuals age, leading to less pronounced gender differences in older people.

Further, in terms of the intensity of the emotional experience, when women and men experience the same emotions, there is no difference in the intensity of the emotions ([Fischer et al., 2004](#)). Whether it's anger, sadness, joy, or disgust, people of all genders experience emotions with equal intensity.

Now that we've covered factors that impact our experience of emotions, let's turn our attention to exploring the concept of emotional intelligence, and the ways we can manage, prevent, and reappraise our emotions.

# Managing Your Emotional Experience and Expression

Dealing with emotions after, before, and while they occur

It's arguably *the* most well-known psychology experiment, ever.<sup>3</sup> Over a six-year period, Stanford psychologist Walter Mischel brought 653 young children from the university's Bing Nursery School into a room and offered them a tasty treat of their choice: a marshmallow, an Oreo cookie, or a pretzel stick. But he also presented them with a dilemma. If they could resist eating the treat while he stepped out for several minutes, they would get a second treat as a reward. The children were then left alone. The experiment was a simple test of impulse control: the ability to manage one's emotional arousal, excitement, and desire. Most of the kids gave in and ate the treat, usually in less than three minutes. But about 30 percent held out. Years later, Mischel gathered more data from the same children, who were then in high school. He was stunned to learn that their choices in the experiment predicted a broad range of outcomes. Children who had waited were more socially skilled, were better able to cope with stress, were less likely to have emotional outbursts when frustrated, were better able to deal with temptations, and had closer, more stable friendships than those who hadn't waited. They also had substantially higher SAT scores. Why was "the marshmallow test" such a powerful predictor of long-term personal and interpersonal outcomes? Because it taps a critical skill: the ability to constructively manage emotions. As Mischel notes, "If you can deal with hot emotions in the face of temptation, then you can study for the SAT instead of watching television. It's not just about marshmallows."

## EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE



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Can you recall a time when you had to resist an emotional impulse or desire, as in the marshmallow study? What was the outcome of this event?



Managing your emotions is part of **emotional intelligence**: the ability to interpret emotions accurately and to use this information to manage emotions, communicate them competently, and solve relationship problems ([Gross & John, 2002](#)). People with high degrees of emotional intelligence typically possess four skills:

- Acute understanding of their own emotions
- Ability to see things from others' perspectives and to have a sense of compassion regarding others' emotional states (*empathy*)
- Aptitude for constructively managing their own emotions
- Capacity for harnessing their emotional states in ways that create competent decision making, communication, and relationship problem solving ([Kotzé & Venter, 2011](#))

Given that emotional intelligence (EI) involves understanding emotions coupled with the ability to manage them in ways that optimize interpersonal competence, it's not surprising that people with high EI experience a broad range of positive outcomes. For example, within leadership positions, people with high EI are more likely than low

EI people to garner trust, inspire followers, and be perceived as having integrity ([Kotzé & Venter, 2011](#)). High EI individuals are less likely than low EI people to bully people or use violence to get what they want ([Mayer et al., 2004](#)). Because of their strong empathy and skill at emotion management, high EI people even find it easier to forgive relational partners who have wronged them ([Hodgson & Wertheim, 2007](#)). And high EI people have the ability to harness the power of positive emotions, savoring them rather than dampening them, thus boosting their overall life satisfaction ([Szczygiel & Mikolajczak, 2017](#)) and experiencing better health and well-being ([MacCann et al., 2020](#)).

## self-QUIZ

### Assessing Your Emotional Intelligence

Consider your emotional experience and communication in your daily life. Then look at the statements listed under each of the four emotional intelligence dimensions, placing a check mark next to each statement that describes your abilities. Follow the directions below to interpret your score.

#### Perceiving Emotions

Accurately perceiving and interpreting emotional messages as they are communicated by others' facia