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How to Read Emotion

Humans communicate emotion through language, sound, facial expressions, and body language.^[1] Language and culture can influence how people express emotion.^[2]

Despite these differences, all humans experience certain key emotions.^[3] Your ability to read and respond to emotion in others is known as emotional intelligence.^{[4][5]} By developing your emotional intelligence, you can improve awareness of emotion in both yourself and others.^[6]

Method One of Three:

Analyzing Emotion in Others



1

Recognize positive and negative human emotions. There are 6 universal human emotions: happiness, surprise, anger, fear, sadness, and disgust.^[7] These fall into two categories: positive (happiness, surprise) and negative (anger, fear, sadness, disgust) emotions.^[8] To identify these in others, you need to know what kinds of actions and behaviors they are associated with.^[9] These include:

Positive emotions reduce stress, improve mood, and increase our memory and

awareness. For example: happiness, surprise, sympathy, kindness, love, courage, confidence, inspiration, relief, etc.^{[10][11]}

Negative emotions increase stress, allow us to recognize threats, and deal with challenging situations. Examples are: sadness, fear, anger, contempt, disgust, etc.^{[12][13]}



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The two most important regions of the brain for expressing and understanding emotion are the amygdala complex and the prefrontal cortex. Damage to either of these areas can impair someone's ability to read emotion.^{[14][15]}



2

Focus on the eyes and mouth. In general, people express emotion through the eyes and/or mouth. The region of the face in which a person displays emotion is influenced by culture. For example, people focus on the eyes in Japan, while people in the United States interpret emotion in the mouth.^[16] When reading emotion, look at her entire face and not just the eyes.

Stand far enough away so you can see her face, but have a normal conversation. About 1 1/2 to 4 feet is a good distance to keep between yourself and the other person.^[17]



3

Listen to the tone of voice. Next to facial expressions, tone of voice is the second most important way people express emotion.^[18] People use their voice to both show and control their emotions.^{[19][20]} However, some emotions are not conveyed through voice. For example, people can easily identify relaxed, stressed, boredom, contentment, and confidence from tone of voice. Emotions weakly expressed through tone of voice include fear, friendliness, happiness, and sadness.^[21]

Similar tones of voice can express different emotions. For example, a tense/harsh voice is associated with anger and hostility as well as confidence and interest. A whispery or soft tone of voice can be associated with a range of emotions. These include relaxation, contentment, intimacy, friendship, sadness, and boredom. A soft, breathy voice (where the person takes loud breathes while they talk) is associated with fear, shyness, and nervousness.



4

Observe and note the general behavior and demeanor. When you look her does she portray a friendly atmosphere, or is she more reserved? Emotion can be experienced unconsciously – without you being aware of it.^[22] Using your best judgment and going with your gut feeling can sometime be the best way to read emotion.

Recognize emotion in others by noting your reaction. Often, we mirror the emotions of others in our facial expression, tone of voice, and behavior.^[23]

Emotions are contagious.^[24] We're affected by emotion in other people. Our mood and behavior changes depending on how someone else is feeling. This is why if someone smiles at you, you are likely to smile back!^[25]

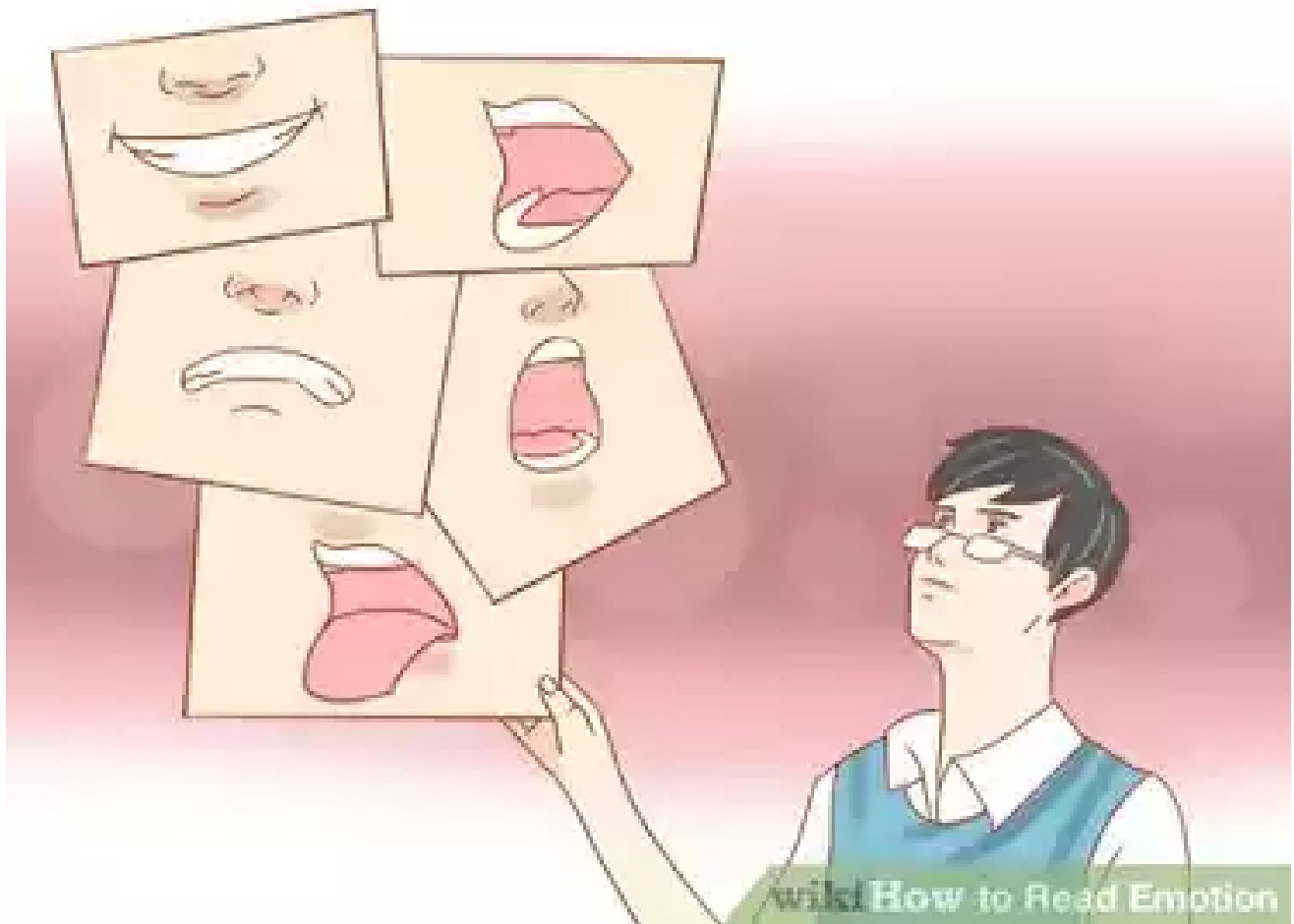


5

Assess the other person's physical well-being. Emotions can influence health in both positive and negative ways.^[26] If a friend or family member is sick or feels tired all the time, she might be stressed-out or depressed.^[27]

Physical symptoms of mental illness and depression include: headaches or migraines, low energy, stomach problems, back pain, changes in eating habits, and alcohol or drug use.^[28]

Mental and emotional symptoms of mental illness and depression include: confusion, sudden and extreme mood changes, isolation from friends, unable to cope with everyday problems, and increased anger or violence.^[29]



6

Develop and improve your emotional intelligence. Teach yourself to recognize emotions in others by becoming more aware of them in yourself.^[30] The four branches of emotion intelligence are: (1) be able to perceive emotions in yourself and others; (2) use emotions to promote thinking; (3) understand the significance of emotions; and (4) manage emotions.^[31] Strategies to improve emotional intelligence include:^{[32][33]}

Put down your phone and step away from your computer. Improve your social skills and ability to read nonverbal cues by engaging in face-to-face communication on a daily basis.^[34]

Don't back away from uncomfortable or negative feelings in yourself or others. These are important and necessary. If you feel sad or angry, step back and think about why you are feeling this way. Then, try to counteract the negative emotion with three positive ones.

Listen to your body – a knot in your stomach may be stress, or a fluttering heart may be attraction or excitement.

Keep a journal or record of your thoughts and feelings. Several times a week, stop and write down what you are doing and how you are feeling. You can include other information such as how much sleep you had the night before, or what you had for

breakfast.

Ask a close friend or family member – someone you know and trust – to read your emotions. Sometimes other people know us better than ourselves. Their answers can be surprising and insightful.

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Was this method helpful?

No

Analyzing Emotion in Others

Yes

Sorry! Thanks for letting us know.

Method Two of Three: Interpreting Facial Expressions



1

Take note of her facial expressions. How we feel inside is expressed in our eyes and on our faces.^[35] Learning to recognize the association between facial expressions and certain types of emotion goes a long way in being able to read emotion.

Don't be fooled! People can manipulate their facial expressions to appear to look happy when they are angry or sad – actors do this convincingly all the time. Look for other cues as to how they really feel. Note her body language or tone of voice. Make eye contact – open, penetrating “cold” eyes suggests a different emotional state than a “warm” smile.



2

Recognize a genuine smile. A genuine smile uses more muscles than one that is faked or forced. The corners of her mouth and cheeks should be raised. If the muscles around her eyes also tighten and “crow’s feet” form (clusters of wrinkles around the outer corners of eyes), then it is a good indicator of a genuine smile.



3

Distinguish sadness from happiness. This might seem obvious, but people try to control or cover-up their true emotions by smiling when they are sad. Genuine and spontaneous emotions are hard to fake.^[36] Sadness is associated with frowning (lowering the corners of the mouth). It is also associated with raising the inner corners of the eyebrows (near the nose). Additional cues are loose, drooping eyelids that cover part of the eye.



4

Recognize anger and disgust. Anger and disgust are often associated with one another and create similar facial expressions.^[37] We wrinkle our noses when we are disgusted, angry, or annoyed.

Anger and resentment can be towards someone or about something.^[38] When we are angry, we pull our eyebrows down, purse our lips (tighten them and suck-in the margins), and bulge our eyes.

In contrast to anger, expressing dislike, disgust, or disdain for someone or something is associated with a raised upper lip and loose lower lip. We also pull our eyebrows down, but not as much as when we are angry.



5

Recognize fear and surprise. While fear is a negative and surprise is considered a positive emotion, both activate the sympathetic nervous system and trigger a “fight or flight” response.^[39] When something unexpected happens, whether it is good or bad, it stimulates a part of the brain that is outside of our direct control. When this happens, we pull up our eyebrows and eyelids so our eyes are wide open.^[40]

When we are afraid, we also pull our eyebrows in (towards the nose), our pupils dilate (get bigger) to take in more light, and our mouth is open. We also tense up the muscles in our face, especially around our mouth and cheek.

When we are surprised, we tend to arch our eyebrows and drop our jaw. Our mouth is open, and the muscles around it are relaxed and loose.^[41]

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No

Interpreting Facial Expressions

Yes

Uh oh! Thanks for letting us know.

Method Three of Three: Reading Emotion in Other Ways



1

Look for nonverbal cues. In addition to facial expression and tone of voice, humans express emotion in other ways.^[42] While nonverbal cues can be misleading, learning to pick up on them can help you read emotion.^[43] Important nonverbal cues that convey emotion are body movements, posture, and eye contact. Make an effort to notice whether she appears animated and moving around or is stiff and tense. Also, does she stand up straight and make eye contact, or hunch her shoulders, fidget with her hands or, cross her arms.

Moving around and standing up straight shows she feels open and comfortable. However, too much movement (e.g. energetic arm waving) combined with a loud voice could mean she is excited or angry.

Hunched shoulders, a quiet voice, and crossed arms are signs she feels uncomfortable or nervous. If she refuses to make eye contact with you, it could mean she is upset or feels guilty.^[44]

Keep in mind that culture, social situations, and individual personalities influence

how we express emotion through body language.^[45] In this sense, facial expressions are considered more universal and reliable. For example, Italians tend to move their arms when they speak, but this could be considered impolite in Japan. Or, making eye contact is a sign of respect in the United States and Europe, but is considered rude or aggressive in some Asian and African cultures.



2

Notice her body movement and posture. Focusing on the entire body in addition to the face is the best way to read and interpret emotions.^[46] Posture and body movements not only reflect emotion, but also the intensity of an emotion.^[47] There are degrees of positive and negative emotion. For example, positive emotions range from interested (low) to elated (high), and negative from sadness (low) to violent anger (high).

Shoulders and torso: hunching the shoulders and leaning forward is associated with intense anger. In contrast, leaning backwards can be a sign of panic or fear.^[48] If she stands up straight with her shoulders back and head held high, this is a sign she feels confident. However, if she hunches their shoulders or slumps forward, then she is looking for sympathy, is bored, or feels nervous.^[49]



Arms and hands: If she is sad, she will likely place her arms next to her side and put her hands in her pocket. If she is annoyed or irritated, she might place one arm on her side or hips, and gesture with her opposite hand (pointing or flat palm). If she feels indifferent or doesn't care, then she will place her hands behind her back.^[50]



Legs and feet: If she shakes her legs or taps her toes, then she might be anxious, annoyed, or in a hurry.^[51] However, some people naturally shake their legs while sitting without it meaning anything.



3

Look for signs of “fight or flight”. When something unexpected happens, whether it is good or bad, it stimulates a part of the brain that is outside of our direct control. This results in physical responses such as dilated pupils, rapid breathing, increased sweating, and increase heart rate.^{[52][53]} You can tell if she is nervous, stressed, or anxious by looking for signs such as a sweaty palms or armpits, red or flushed faced, or shaking hands.

When men are upset or stressed, they tend to show signs of aggression, frustration, and anger. In contrast, women might become more talkative or seek social support. Depending on their personality, some men and women become more withdrawn and quiet when experiencing negative emotions. ^[54]



4

Ask how she is feeling. Sometimes the best way to read emotion is to be direct. While the other person might lie and say she is fine when she isn't, it never hurts to ask. You can also use her response to read between the lines by noting tone of voice combined with facial expression and body language. You can also look for specific verbal cues

that suggest how she feels inside.^[55] For example, if she is bored or sad, she will speak slower and at a lower frequency.^[56] If she is excited or upset, the speed and frequency of her voice will increase.

Try speaking to her alone rather than in a group. She may be more open and truthful about her emotions if she is with a trusted friend or family member.^[57]

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No	Reading Emotion in Other Ways	Yes
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Tips

Try looking at someone who you know is sad, happy, excited and other emotions to see what those emotions really look like. Then try spotting it in other people.

10 Helpful? 2

Practice by guessing how you think the people around you feel. If you think someone looks happy, confirm your guess by asking them if something good happened.

9 Helpful? 1

Try practicing with your friends or family first before reading emotions in others. At lunch or dinner, go around and share emotions with one another.

8 Helpful? 2

Try asking the person different questions. Start with casual, basic questions such as “how are you” or “what did you do yesterday”. Then move on to personal questions such as “how is your (name of family member or friend)” or “how are things going with your (significant other)”. See their reactions, but stop if they become uncomfortable.

6 Helpful? 1



Add

Warnings

Be aware that she might hide their emotions on purpose. This may be because she suffered mental or emotional abuse, or is dealing with a difficult situation in her life. Be a good friend by respecting her decision to withhold her emotions.

28 Helpful? 3

If you're trying to read the emotion of a complete stranger, avoid staring at her or coming off as impolite.

22 Helpful? 2

Reading emotions is not an exact science. Be aware that people express emotions in different ways and avoid jumping to conclusions about how someone really feels.

19 Helpful? 2

Don't act like a know-it-all and bother her about her emotions. Respect her privacy if she doesn't want to share. .

18 Helpful? 5



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