

## Emotions as signals: a core idea behind emotion-focused therapy

Emotions are one of the most complex biological processes in the human body.

The term dates back to the 1500s and comes from the French word *emouvoir*, which means “to stir up”.

Emotions are powerful experiences. They can be both positive and negative, and both positive and negative emotions are experienced by all of us in our daily lives. Despite - or perhaps because of - this, many psychologists believe that emotions are an essential aspect of being human.

Emotion-focused therapy centers the role of emotions in human behaviour. Emotion-focused therapists believe that humans are fundamentally problem-solvers, and that emotions function both to tell people *what the problem is*, and keep them motivated to *do something about it*.



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In particular, emotion-focused therapists argue that emotions are *signals*. They offer messages that you are in danger, that your boundaries are being crossed, that a safe and familiar person is absent, or that you are close to someone safe and familiar.

Emotion-focused therapy argues that rather than attempting to control, interrupt, change, or avoid the experience of emotions, people need to learn to live in harmony with them.

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People can start to incorporate an emotion-focused approach into their daily lives by attending to their bodies and learning to recognize and **label** what they feel. They can first acknowledge these labels to themselves, and then, when appropriate, to others.

Having acknowledged and labelled their emotions, people can then begin to **understand** these feelings. To do this, people have to 'use their heads' to make sense of their experiences, by working out what their feelings and emotions might be trying to signal to them



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## **Emotions as signals: a core idea behind emotion-focused therapy**

Let's walk through some examples to see how this might work in practice.

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## Emotions as signals: a core idea behind emotion-focused therapy

### Example one

Imagine you are away on a trip and your partner tells you they are enjoying the time alone

A reasonable response to hearing this may be to initially withdraw into yourself and think "I know they mean well, but hearing this makes me feel rejected."

From an emotion-focused perspective, the first step with dealing with this situation would be to **recognise and label the emotions you are experiencing**.

Which of the following do you think you might feel in this situation?

- ☐ sad   ☐ lonely   ☐ embarrassed   ☐ relieved

What signal or message do you think these feelings might be trying to convey?

- ☐ you are in physical danger  
☐ an important relationship may be at risk  
☐ you are close to someone safe and familiar

Which of the following do you think might be a good response to this signal?

- ☐ hang up the phone and leave the room  
☐ say to your partner "When you sound so enthusiastic about me being away, I feel pushed away"  
☐ say to your partner "I'm also really happy right now"

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### Example one

Imagine you receive a message from a close friend saying that they are thinking of you

Which of the following do you think you might feel at this point in time?

- ☐ angry   ☐ upset   ☐ content   ☐ secure

What signal or message do you think these feelings might be trying to convey?

- ☐ your boundaries are being crossed  
☐ an important relationship may be at risk  
☐ you are close to someone safe and familiar

Which of the following do you think might be a good response to this signal?

- ☐ turn off your phone and don't respond  
☐ reply to your friend "I'm feeling rejected right now"  
☐ reply to your friend "When you message, I feel close to you"

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### Your turn!

Bring to mind a challenge that you are facing at the moment, perhaps at work or at home.

Observe any emotions or bodily sensations that come to mind when thinking about this particular challenge.

Briefly describe these feelings below.

What do you think these emotions might be trying to signal to you?

Does thinking about the message or signal behind the emotions seem helpful in deciding what to do next?

Choose...



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### Your turn!

Now, bring to mind something you think is going well in your life at the moment - perhaps at work, in a relationship, or a hobby you enjoy.

Observe any emotions or bodily sensations that come to mind when thinking about this particular situation.

Briefly describe these feelings below.

What do you think these emotions might be trying to signal to you?

Does thinking about the message or signal behind the emotions seem helpful in deciding what to do next?

Choose...



continue



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### Putting it all together

To finish up this part of the study, we'd like to ask you some questions about the information you've just read.

Please note, these questions are just to try and understand how clearly we have explained the material - your answers will not affect the chance of your submission being approved, and you will continue on to the final main part of the study at the end, whichever options you choose.

**For each group of sentences below, which best summarises the information you just read?**

1

- ☐ The first step of an emotionally-informed response to a situation is to recognise and then discount whatever emotions you are feeling
- ☐ The first step of an emotionally-informed response to a situation is to recognise and label what emotions you are feeling.
- ☐ The first step of an emotionally-informed response to a situation is to ignore whatever emotions you are feeling.

2

- ☐ The second step of an emotionally-informed response to a situation is to walk away from the situation to take a breath.
- ☐ The second step of an emotionally-informed response to a situation is to dive straight into whatever your gut tells you to do.
- ☐ The second step of an emotionally-informed response to a situation is to try and work out what signal these feelings are trying to convey.

3

- ☐ Emotions usually get in the way when trying to figure out the rational responses to situations or events.
- ☐ Making sense of the messages or signals conveyed by emotions can help us to decide how best to respond to a situation or event.

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