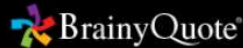




# Human behavior flows from three main sources: desire, emotion, and knowledge.

Plato



## WHAT IS AN EMOTION?

“An emotion is a complex psychological state that involves three distinct components: a subjective experience, a physiological response and a behavioural or expressive response” (Hockenbury & Hockenbury, 2007).

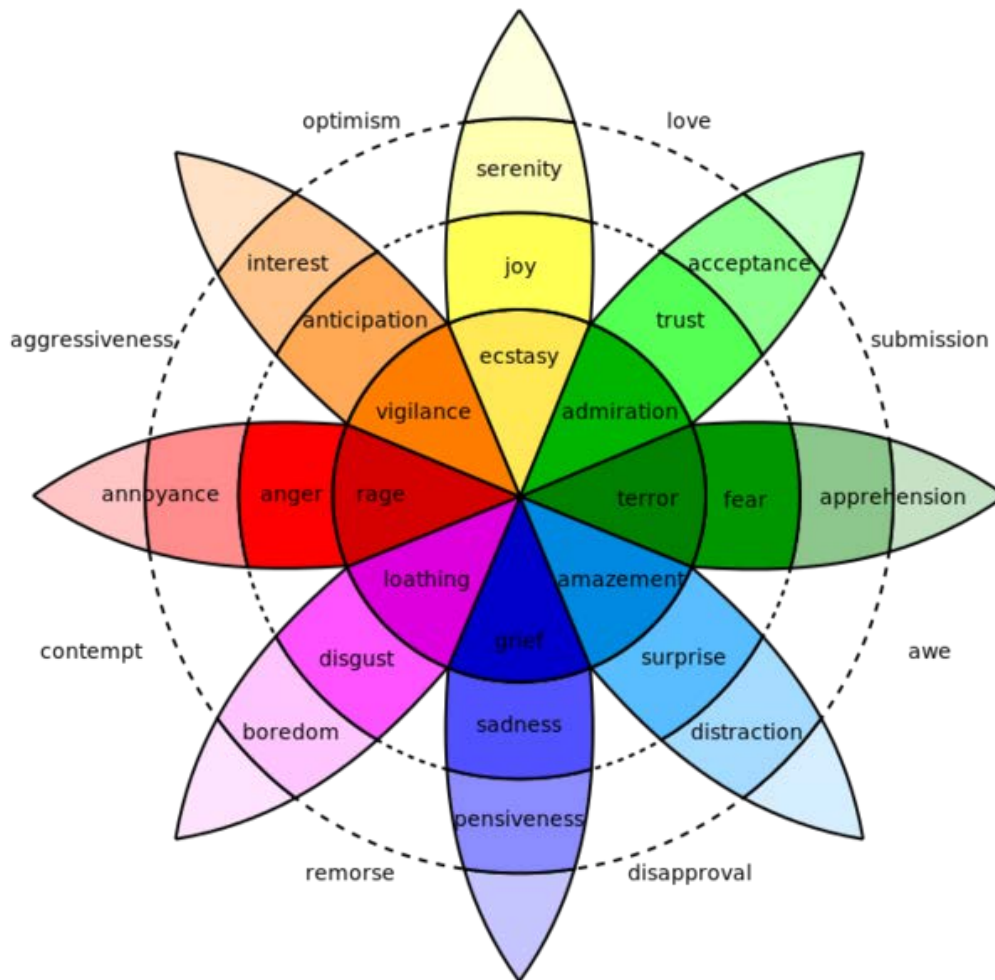
The subjective experience is what it feels like to you to be ‘angry’ or ‘sad’ or ‘excited’.

The physiological response is the bodily sensations you get along with subjective experience. For example, the feeling of anxiety is commonly accompanied by sweating palms, racing heartbeat and rapid breathing.

The behavioural or expressive response is how that emotion is expressed to the people around us, for example, a smile to indicate happiness.

Emotions are distinguished from moods as being shorter-lived, more intense, and more clearly attributable to a specific cause.

It is generally considered that there is a core set of primary emotions (e.g. anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise) but a larger range of complex emotions. For example, consider the following diagram by Robert Plutchik. Complex emotions most likely reflect mixes of different core emotions, or modification of core emotions by the cultural context in which the individual lives.



## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF EMOTIONS?

Emotions, including unpleasant ones, have a number of purposes.

- 1) They motivate us to take action – for example, anxiety as a motivator to study for an exam.
- 2) They help us survive, thrive and avoid danger – for example, fear as a sign to flee, anger as a sign to attack, love as a sign to seek a mate.
- 3) They help us make decisions – for example, emotions influence many of our decisions, from the mundane (what to have for breakfast) to the important (should we marry this person?)
- 4) They help other people to understand us – for example, emotions (particularly their behavioural or expressive components) help communicate to others how we are coping with different situations. In situations where we are not coping, others might first become aware of this through our emotions, before we actually communicate that we are not coping.
- 5) They help us to understand others – emotions in others provide us with a wealth of social information. They give us valuable information about how others are coping with different situations; when to help, when to avoid.

## WHERE DO EMOTIONS COME FROM?

The answer to this question depends on the approach you take. For example, a neuroscientist might look at what parts of the brain are active when someone is having a specific emotion. A therapist might consider the situations the person is in when having the emotion, or the kinds of thoughts the person is having that trigger the emotion.

From a psychology/clinical psychology perspective, there are a few important things to consider:

1. The situation the person is in (e.g. confronted by a snake)
2. The person's cognitive appraisal of the situation (e.g. "snakes are dangerous") which may be conscious or unconscious
3. A corresponding emotion arising which is logically connected to the cognitive appraisal (e.g. fear)
4. How the person experiences that emotion (e.g. breath quickens, strong desire to escape)
5. The person's behavioural response to the emotion (e.g. running away)

## DISTRESS TOLERANCE AND EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION

Having a range of pleasant and unpleasant emotions is a normal part of life. It is normal to feel sad when experiencing loss, or to experience anger when attacked. However emotions can get out of control for some people.

Distress intolerance refers to a "perceived inability to fully experience unpleasant, aversive or uncomfortable emotions, and is accompanied by a desperate need to escape the uncomfortable emotions".

Distress intolerance is quite common, and most of us can probably identify times in our lives where we've tried to escape feeling uncomfortable.

You can learn more about distress tolerance by looking at this intervention from the Centre for Clinical Interventions - [http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infopax.cfm?Info\\_ID=54](http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infopax.cfm?Info_ID=54) – This is a good resource for both understanding distress intolerance, but also how we help people tolerate discomfort more effectively.

Emotional dysregulation is more severe and refers to the inability of a person to control or regulate their emotional responses in response to particular situations or triggers. For example, a person might be unable to control feelings of sadness or annoyance in the presence of a highly critical parent.

Emotional dysregulation consists of five components

(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3973423/>)

1. Emotional sensitivity – that is, some individuals are more sensitive to having emotions triggered (e.g. being sensitive to even the smallest amounts of criticism)
2. Heightened emotional severity – that is, some individuals experience emotions in a heightened (e.g. experiencing extreme levels of anger)
3. Inadequate healthy emotion management strategies – that is, some individuals don't know how to healthily manage strong emotions (e.g. through healthy lifestyle)
4. Maladaptive emotion management strategies – that is, some individuals have an excess of unhealthy management strategies (e.g. drinking to numb emotional pain)
5. Destructive consequences – that is, some individuals, unable to manage emotions, may make poor decisions which affect others or themselves (e.g. attacking someone).

Severe emotional dysregulation is actually fairly rare and limited to individuals with certain psychiatric disorders. However, the tools that have been developed to manage emotional dysregulation are also applicable to those without disorders.

## **TOOLS FOR MANAGING EMOTIONS**

Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) is a type of therapy designed for people who experience frequent negative and overwhelming emotions. Some of the techniques used in DBT to help individuals manage difficult emotions include the following:

- Helping individuals recognise and name emotions
- Reducing an individual's emotional vulnerability through encouraging them to take care of their physical health, eat a balanced diet, avoid excess sugar/fat/caffeine, avoid alcohol and drugs, get regular sleep and get regular exercise
- Creating positive experiences in life as a balance to negative incidents
- Training in mindfulness to learn to identify, name and let go of strong emotions
- Taking opposite action, for example, training individuals to respond in the opposite way to how they are feeling (e.g. approaching situations in which there is fear) in order to achieve positive outcomes.
- Engaging in "check the facts" thinking to identify incorrect interpretations or assumptions the person might be making about a situation that is causing them emotional distress.

## **THE CHALLENGE OF THIS BRIEF**

The tasks for student groups that take this brief is to develop a good understanding of normal emotions, emotion dysregulation and tools/techniques for managing difficult emotions and use this to achieve one or more of the following:

- Educate people about the range of normal emotions
- Find innovative and interesting ways to communicate techniques for managing or tolerating difficult emotions
- Encourage people to explore their emotions

## **WHERE TO LEARN MORE**

You will find a lot about feelings and emotions on the internet. It can be difficult to determine what is good quality information and what is not. If in doubt, check with Gareth. Searching for the terms 'emotional dysregulation', 'distress intolerance' and 'DBT emotion' will lead you to more appropriate resources on tools for managing difficult emotions.

The Wikipedia entry on emotions is quite comprehensive. It presents a number of views and theories about emotion. You are welcome to focus in on a specific theory in pulling together your project -

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotion>

<http://www.wikihow.com/Understand-Your-Emotions>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201205/the-complete-guide-understanding-your-emotions>

[http://dbtselfhelp.com/html/emotion\\_regulation.html](http://dbtselfhelp.com/html/emotion_regulation.html)

<https://psychologytools.com/dbt.html>

**CONTACT PERSON(S)**

Any of the participating psychologists can be approached in relation to this brief:

Dr Gareth Furber – [Gareth.furber@gmail.com](mailto:Gareth.furber@gmail.com)

Richard Oborn – [gazebo@bigpond.net.au](mailto:gazebo@bigpond.net.au)

Dr Rachel Reilly – [Rachel.reilly@sahmri.com](mailto:Rachel.reilly@sahmri.com)

Sarah Burton – [sarahburton@inspiredpsychology.com.au](mailto:sarahburton@inspiredpsychology.com.au)