

Handout 1: Understanding Emotions

Emotion	Function
Fear	<p>Fear is nature's alarm system. It lets us know that we might be in danger and that we need to take steps to protect ourselves. For example, imagine you are crossing the street when you notice that a car is coming straight at you. This situation would instantly prompt fear for pretty much everyone. The feeling would be associated with physical sensations that prepare the body to flee such an unsafe situation, like an increased heart rate to pump blood to the arms and legs and pupils dilating to scan for danger. Fear also provides a sense of urgency to act – often without thinking. In this situation, you would likely jump out of the way onto the sidewalk. If you felt nothing, you might continue to walk leisurely across the street, possibly being run over. So, as you can see here, the uncomfortable emotion of fear actually plays an important role in keeping us safe.</p>
Sadness	<p>Sadness is the emotion that naturally occurs after a loss or setback related to something or someone that is important to us, such as a death of a loved one, a break-up, or losing a job we enjoyed. This emotion is also really common when we notice significant differences between the way our life is and how we want it to be. For instance, we might feel sad about a job because we find ourselves not progressing like we had hoped, or we feel sad because we are experiencing struggles in a relationship that we really care about. Sadness is associated with physical sensations like heaviness in the body and feeling tired. Sadness signals the need to pull back so that the loss or setback can be processed. For example, feeling sad after a break-up lets you know that the relationship (or aspects of that relationship) was important to you. Withdrawing to process what went wrong and what characteristics you want to look for in a new relationship may help you find greater success with a future partner. This information would be lost if you jumped immediately into a new relationship because you wanted to avoid feeling any sadness. This emotion also signals to others that we may need support and comfort. Humans are social animals, which means we sometimes need help to get back on our feet. Expressing sadness naturally draws others toward us. So, here again, a seemingly “bad” emotion of sadness serves an important function in our lives.</p>
Anxiety	<p>Anxiety is the emotion that helps us prepare for the future. Anxiety alerts us to important or potentially dangerous situations that might occur. This emotion also prompts us to focus our attention on whatever is causing the anxiety so that we can prevent or decrease a negative outcome (or “threat”). For example, feeling anxiety before a big presentation at work or school lets you know that this task is important. It also prompts you to begin preparing so that you’re not caught off guard. Imagine if you didn’t feel anything as the day of this presentation approached. You probably wouldn’t feel motivated to practice and might not be prepared for difficult questions from the audience. Yet again, we see an uncomfortable emotion that serves a very clear purpose in our lives.</p>

Anger	Anger is the natural response when we feel we (or people we care about) have been wronged in some way. Anger (and the similar emotion of frustration) also occurs when we feel like we are being blocked from achieving important goals. This emotion alerts us that our boundaries have been crossed and motivates us to do something about it! For example, imagine you discover that your phone company has been charging you hidden fees for months and expects you to pay them right away or they'll shut off your service. Feeling anger in this situation lets you know that something unfair has happened – you shouldn't be expected to pay for services you didn't use. This anger would also probably prompt you to speak to a customer service manager to demand that the charges be reversed. Here the emotion of anger also signals to the other person that they have frustrated or wronged you. Anger has a bad reputation because it is can be associated with destructive behavior like yelling and breaking things. It is important to separate this possible response to anger from the experience of the emotion itself. It is very important to pay attention to anger when it occurs because it signals to you that you may need to defend yourself.
Guilt/ Shame	Guilt and shame occur when we fall short of some standard. Specifically, guilt is the natural response when we go against society's expectations in some way. For example, you might feel guilty if you forget to pay your friend back after borrowing money. Guilt in this situation would likely prompt you to make amends by apologizing and getting your friend the cash. Shame occurs when we fail to achieve a personal standard and feel "lesser in value." For instance, being <i>unable</i> to pay a friend back because you don't have any money may trigger feelings of shame. Shame, similar to sadness, prompts withdrawal from others. This withdrawal may give a person room to think about how they might achieve their goals going forward to feel better about themselves in the future. In both cases, these emotions motivate helpful behavior. Guilt helps people maintain important relationships by apologizing, and shame helps people achieve their goals by prompting hard work.**
Positive Emotions	Positive emotions, like happiness, excitement and pride, also communicate important information. Positive emotions help us identify what we value in life and how we want to be spending our time. For example, if you pick up a new hobby that brings you a lot of joy, what are you likely to do? Keep doing it! Sometimes people try to avoid positive emotions because they're afraid that once the emotion ends they'll feel even worse than they did before. Or, they'll prevent themselves from getting excited because they worry that if things don't work out, they'll feel more disappointed than if they hadn't gotten excited in the first place. Sometimes people with depression avoid positive experiences like socializing because they find it distressing that they don't enjoy these experiences as much as they used to. Without positive emotions, though, we wouldn't know what direction to go in our lives. It is important to allow ourselves to feel the full range of emotions, negative and positive.

***A note about shame and abuse: Very often, people who have experienced abuse (emotional, physical, or sexual) feel ongoing shame long after the abuse has ended. Even though abuse is NEVER the fault of the victim, people often report feeling shame while the abuse is happening. This is because shame can communicate submission to the abuser through body language (tears, head down). Submission in the moment of abuse may serve a protective role as it might prevent the abuser from hurting the person more. For example, if a person refrains from fighting back while being beaten, the abuse may stop sooner. Unfortunately, the feelings of shame can last much longer than is helpful. As we work through this treatment, we will identify ways that shame (and other emotions) are maintained in situations where they are not warranted and work to change these responses*