

## Recognising and Managing Emotions

See also: [Positive Thinking](#)

Our page on [Emotional Intelligence](#) explains why it is important to understand your emotions and those of others.

This page helps you to recognise and understand your own emotions, and explains why they are sometimes so strong. It offers some practical ideas about how you can manage your own emotions so that you can use and harness them, but are not governed entirely by them.

## What are Emotions?

**Emotions are feelings. To start to understand your emotions, you need to ask yourself two questions:**

**How do I feel?**

**How do I know?**

**But others also have emotions.** At the same time as being aware of your own feelings, you also need to be aware of those of others.

**You also need to ask:**

**How do others feel, and how do I know?**

There are several ways that we can tell how others are feeling, but particularly by observing what they say, and how they behave, including their **body language**. Research suggests that more than 80% of communication is non-verbal, meaning that it comes from body language and facial expression. Many of us don't like to talk about our emotions, especially not if they really matter to us, so they tend to be expressed even more in our body language. See our page on [Non-Verbal Communication](#) for more.

## Emotions and the Brain

**Emotions are not consciously controlled.** The part of the brain that deals with emotions is the limbic system. It's thought that this part of the brain evolved fairly early on in human history, making it quite primitive. This explains why an emotional response is often quite straightforward, but very powerful: you want to cry, or run away, or shout.

It's because these responses are based around the need to survive.

Emotions are strongly linked to memory and experience. If something bad has previously happened to you, your emotional response to the same stimulus is likely to be strong.

Babies feel emotion, but can't necessarily reason. Emotions are also closely linked to values: an emotional response could tell you that one of your key values has been challenged. See our page on [Dilts' Logical Levels](#) for more about this.

Understanding this link to memory and values gives you the key to managing your emotional response. Your emotional responses don't necessarily have much to do with the current situation, or to reason, but you can overcome them with reason and by being aware of your reactions.

Try This:

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Take some time to notice your emotional responses and consider what might be behind them, whether values, memories or experiences.

Also consider what results in positive emotions and what is more negative.

**Remember, you can change how you feel.**

For more about this, see our page on [Neuro-Linguistic Programming](#).

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## Learning to Manage Emotions

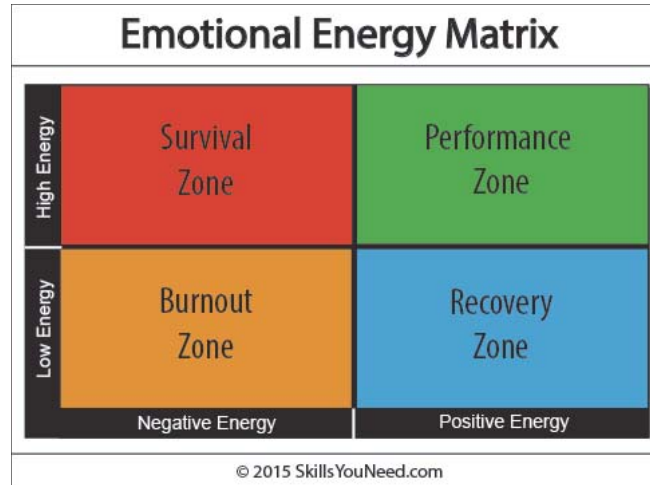
Much has been said and written about how to manage and control emotions.

*You can choose how you feel. - Anon*

*You can't control other people, but you can control how you react to them. - Anon.*

*Anybody can become angry - that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way - that is not within everybody's power and is not easy. - Aristotle*

The grid below shows the balance between high and low, and negative and positive energy:



**High positive energy** enables you to perform well, but you can't stay in that state for ever. Sooner or later, you need to reduce the energy. Stay positive, and you will recover quickly. Dip into more negative feelings, and you will feel burnt out.

**High negative energy** is quite an uncomfortable place to be: it feels like you're fighting for survival all the time. Again, you will have to reduce the energy at some point since it could lead to burnout.

## Positive Actions to Help you Manage Emotions

There are a number of actions that you can take that will help you to manage your emotions. Many of them are very general, but try them because you may just find that they work.

**Exercise:** this releases reward and pleasure chemicals in the brain such as dopamine, which makes you feel better. Being fit also makes you healthier, which helps in managing emotions.

**Be kind to others,** because this helps stop you worrying about yourself.

**Be open and accept what is going on around you.** Learn to appreciate what is happening and avoid excessive criticism of others or of situations. This is linked to [mindfulness](#), which is about being aware of what is going on in the moment.

**It's good to talk.** Spend time with other people and enjoy their company.

**Distract yourself.** Yes, you really are that shallow. Watching a bit of TV, reading, or surfing the internet will probably help you forget that you were feeling a bit down.

**Don't give in to negative thinking.** If you find yourself having negative thoughts, then challenge them by looking for evidence against them.

**Spend time outside.** Being in the fresh air, especially around nature, is very helpful for calming the emotions. There is evidence that we need to see horizons, so if you can go up a hill and look at the view then do.

**Be grateful.** Thank people in person for doing nice things for you, and remember it.

**Play to your strengths.** That often means doing things that you enjoy, but it also involves doing things that are good for you.

**Notice the good things in your life.** In old-fashioned terms, count your blessings.

This list may sound quite old-fashioned, but then perhaps our grandparents knew a thing or two about managing emotions that we may have forgotten. Finding the right balance for you can help [reduce your stress levels](#) and may help fight [depression](#).

## Applying Reason to Emotion

As we said above, you can change how you feel. The key is to be aware of your emotional response, and understand what might be behind it. That way, you can apply some reason to the situation.

For example, you might ask yourself some questions about possible courses of action, like:

**How do I feel about this situation?**

**What do I think I should do about it?**

**What effect would that have for me and for other people?**

**Does this action fit with my values?**

**If not, what else could I do that might fit better?**

**Is there anyone else that I could ask about this who might help me?**

This helps you to apply reason to an emotional response before reacting.

There is more about this in our page on [Neuro-Linguistic Programming](#)

## Example

Suppose you are afraid of being in the dark because once you got shut in a dark room when you were a child.

You always have an emotional response to the dark because of your earlier experience. But you can remind yourself that you are now grown up and that there is nothing to frighten you. All you have to do is walk over to the light and turn it on.

By practising this, you can help your brain to understand that there is no need to be frightened and gradually retrain your limbic system.

## Making Decisions with Emotions

When you make decisions, you can draw on reason, emotion, or a mixture of the two.

**Emotional decisions** are sometimes seen as made in the 'heat of the moment', but emotions play a greater part in most decisions than we may be aware. If you're married, for example, you'll know that considerable thought may go into the decision about whether or not to get married. Very few, however, would argue that the decision is made solely on the basis of logic.

**The best decisions are made using both logic and emotion.**

If you only use one or the other, your decisions may either not be very balanced, or not support your emotional needs. Instead, you need to combine your emotional response with more rational considerations.

**You can do this by:**

Stopping before you decide, to give yourself a chance to think.

Think about how you will feel as a result of each possible action.

Consider what might happen as a result, and how your decision might affect others. Would you be happy with those effects?

Take some time out before making a decision.

Consider the decision against your values. Does it fit with them? If not, why not?

Think about what someone whom you respect would think about your decision. Are you happy with that?

Finally, consider what would happen if everyone were to take the same action. If this would be a disaster, then probably best not to do it.

## Emotions are Important

**It pays to be aware of our own and others' feelings. Highly emotionally intelligent people do this all the time. Like any other, it is a skill that can be developed and which is well worth acquiring.**

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

Maya Angelou

## Further Reading from Skills You Need

### [The Skills You Need Guide to Life](#)

Based on some of our most popular content, this book will help you to live a happier, healthier and more productive life

Learn how to look after your body and mind: the fundamental first steps to personal development.



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