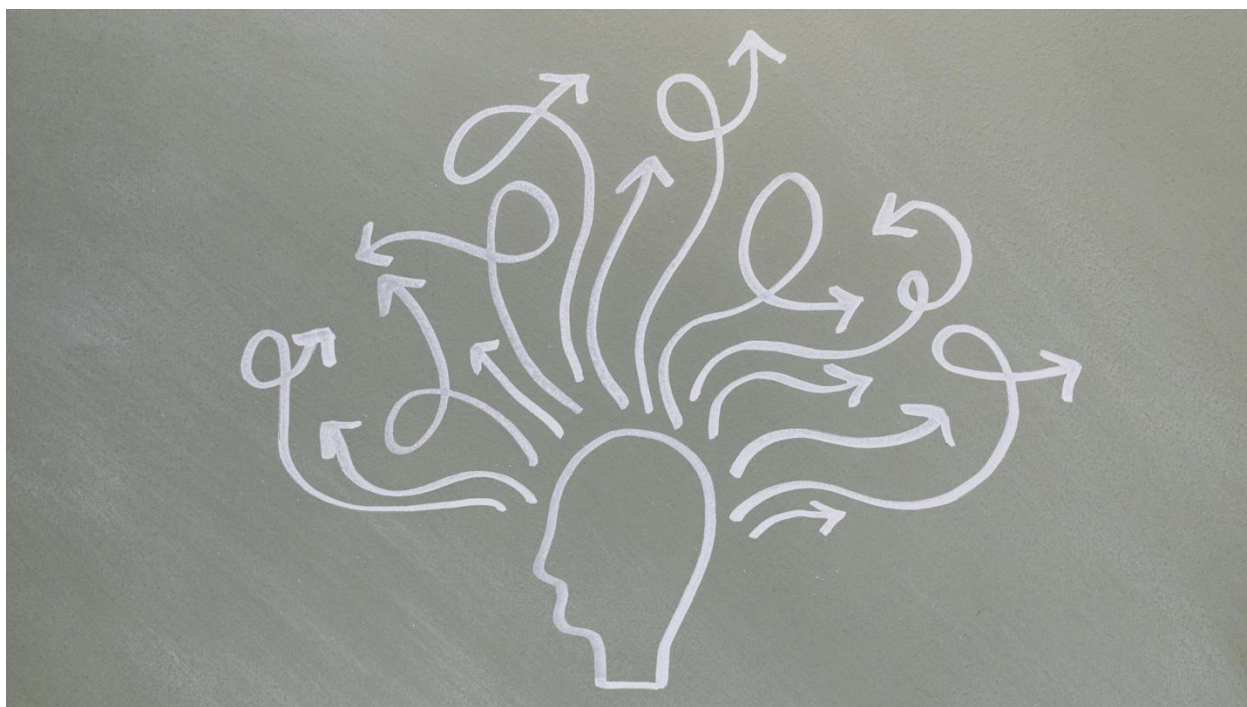




7 Amazing Facts About Emotions — What Science Reveals About the Way You Feel

by Michael Miller & Alexandra Tanon Olsson

Understanding how emotions work empowers you to navigate them more effectively

Emotions aren't just fleeting moods or problems that get in our way. They are powerful biological signals that flow constantly between our brains and bodies, collecting data and

regulating us; helping guide us through important decisions, meaningful relationships, and life's complexities.

While they can sometimes feel confusing or overwhelming, understanding emotions gives you tools to work with them instead of against them.

These **7 essential facts about emotions** will give you insight into how they work, why they matter, and how you can start using them to your advantage.

1. Emotions are electrochemical signals that flow through us in an unending cycle.

Every feeling you have begins as bursts of electrochemical activity shooting between your brain and body. When you notice something meaningful in our environment, like a smile, a threat, or an opportunity, the brain responds by releasing neurotransmitters like dopamine or norepinephrine, which shape how you feel *and* get your body ready to respond.

Think about the last time someone texted you “we need to talk.” Before you even typed a reply, your stomach might have dropped, shoulders tensed, and your mind may have started spinning. That isn't you being overly sensitive, that's just how your nervous system works. Your brain picks up on a possible threat, sends chemical messages through your body, your body reacts, and then those reactions feed the feeling right back into your brain.

Scientists call this a **feedback loop**: **Your brain interprets → triggers an emotion → your body responds → your emotional state then shapes your thoughts and behavior.**

And it goes both ways. Your body sends signals back, (a racing heart, tight jaw, warm chest) and your brain uses that information to reinforce, or sometimes amplify, whatever you're feeling.

This is why emotions can feel overwhelming at times: they are not only “in our heads” but also deeply physical, affecting heart rate, digestion, and even immune response. If you want to dig deeper into this mind-body link, [*The Physics of Emotion: Dr. Candace Pert on Feeling Go\(o\)d*](#) is a great place to start. It explores how emotions act as feedback loops carrying vital information to help us function.

Honestly, it still amazes me that I grew up learning how to divide fractions and memorizing the entire story of Henry VIII (and all his very unfortunate wives), but no one taught me the basics of my own emotional biology; something I use every hour of every day. We should absolutely be learning about feelings with the same seriousness we give to the French-Indian War or calculating triangle angles.

 **Research Spotlight:** [Studies show](#) that simply naming an emotion (like saying to yourself “*I feel anxious*”) can reduce activation in the amygdala (the brain's fear center) and increase regulation in the prefrontal cortex, which helps us think clearly.

💡 **Practical Tip:** Next time you feel your body reacting strongly (like tension in your shoulders or a rush of excitement), pause and ask:

What signal is my body sending me right now?

That tiny moment to pause, brings that awareness that helps shift you from reacting automatically to responding intentionally.

“While sometimes they’re confusing, emotions are part of us, so we might as well learn to use them well – and these 7 essential facts about emotions is a good place to start. If you want to learn more about emotional intelligence, [get started here](#).”

2. There are 8 basic emotions – and countless variations.

Psychologist Robert Plutchik proposed that there are **eight basic emotions: Joy, Sadness, Fear, Disgust, Surprise, Anticipation, Anger, and Trust**. These are the “primary colors” of our emotional world; the building blocks that blend into everything else we feel. [Plutchik’s Wheel of Emotions](#) shows how these core emotions intensify, interact, and even combine to create new emotional states. For example, when **Anticipation** mixes with **Joy**, you get **Excitement**. When **Fear** softens with **Trust**, you get **Submission**. And when **Anger** blends with **Fear**, you get **Frustration**: a feeling most of us can spot instantly. The point is: emotions are constantly shifting and combining. They’re not fixed moods we “have”; they’re *dynamic signals*, always giving us information about *what we need, what we value, and how safe or connected we feel*.

This is why **emotional literacy** is so important. When you can name what you’re *actually* feeling instead of defaulting to broad statements like “I’m overwhelmed,” “I’m stressed,” or “I’m fine, just a bit off, things become more clear.

Maybe “I’m overwhelmed” is actually **pressure** because expectations feel too high. Maybe “I’m stressed” is really **frustration** because something isn’t working the way you hoped. And “I feel off” might be **loneliness**, **disappointment**, or an **anticipation** that you haven’t acknowledged yet.

Once you identify the real emotion underneath, you finally understand what it’s trying to tell you: the need you have, the boundary that was crossed, or the support you’re longing for. Your *empathy deepens* and you find a way forward. This is not only supportive in your life but also in the lives of those around you. It becomes easier to notice subtleties in others’ emotions, creating deeper, more connected relationships in your life.

Research Spotlight:

- Emotions don't show up one at a time; they interact. These pairings, sometimes called [dyad emotions](#), create more specific feelings like **excitement** (joy + anticipation) or **frustration** (anger + fear). Understanding these blended states expands your emotional vocabulary and strengthens self-awareness.
- Research also shows that **emotional clarity**, the ability to accurately identify what you're feeling, is linked to better mental health. A study in [Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience](#) found that people with higher emotional clarity reported greater life satisfaction and lower levels of depression, partly because they used more effective coping strategies. In other words: the more clearly you understand your emotions, the better equipped you are to navigate life.

Practical Tip:

Use [Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions](#) as a daily tool. When you feel an emotion, try to **pinpoint its exact nuance**. Ask yourself:

- Is my anger actually frustration or resentment?
- Is my sadness loss, disappointment, or loneliness?
- Could my joy include excitement or anticipation?

The more precise you are in naming emotions, the more effectively you can **respond instead of react**, and the more insight you gain into what you truly need.

3. Emotions are neutral.

It's so easy to think that emotions are either "good" or "bad." After all, joy feels amazing and sadness definitely doesn't. But that way of thinking works against us for two reasons. First, joy and sadness have more in common than we realize. Joy means we've *gained* something we care about. Sadness means we've *lost* something we care about. They're two sides of the same longing, making it impossible to [experience one without the capacity to experience the other](#).

Second, every emotion is simply a messenger. Even difficult feelings like fear, anger, or sadness are serving a purpose. They're not moral judgments or signs that something is "wrong with us." They're Information about what we need, what matters to us, or what feels off. When we stop labeling emotions as "good" or "bad," we can begin to understand what they're trying to tell us.

[Every emotion carries useful information:](#)

- **Fear** helps us stay safe.
- **Anger** helps us defend what matters.
- **Sadness** helps us let go and process change.
- **Joy** points us toward what brings life.

When we learn to see emotions as *neutral messengers* rather than enemies to fight, we can begin using them in ways that support us.

Research Spotlight:

Psychologists describe emotions as “[action tendencies](#)”: natural impulses that prepare us to respond to our environment. Fear sharpens focus and primes us to protect ourselves. Anger gives us energy to confront what’s not working. Sadness slows us down so we can reflect and seek support.

[Neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett notes](#) that emotions aren’t hardwired reactions but constructed experiences. Your brain gathers clues from past experiences and makes its best guess about what’s happening now and how to keep us safe. That means emotions are neither right nor wrong; just information your brain thinks you need in that moment.

Practical Tip:

When you notice a strong emotion, try this:

1. **Pause** — Take a breath and name what you’re feeling.
2. **Ask** — “What might this emotion be trying to tell me?”

Respond — Choose an action that honors the message rather than resists it.

4. Emotions guide us to survive and thrive.

Every emotion has a purpose. They are wired into us to focus our attention and move us toward action, especially when something is important to us. Take anger, for example. Anger is a signal that our path is blocked. Maybe a boundary is crossed, something feels unfair, or you’ve reached your limit. It focuses our attention on the threat and motivates us to respond and push through the obstacle. It can be used destructively if we aren’t careful, but when used wisely, anger is fuel. It gives us the energy to find the right solutions to important and pressing problems.

From a [neuroscience perspective](#), this motivational role of emotion is essential for survival. When anger appears, there’s a lot happening under the surface. The **amygdala** quickly scans for threats and activates physiological responses, sharpening our focus. Meanwhile, the **prefrontal cortex** helps regulate how we respond; balancing instinct with reasoning. Anger’s job isn’t to cause chaos but to help us protect a boundary or regain a sense of control when something important feels blocked.

And then there’s joy, which does quite the opposite. We feel joy when we experience meaning and connection, and the purpose of the emotion is to tell us that those are good things, which we should seek out. In the brain, joy lights up our reward pathways, especially the [ventral striatum](#), reinforcing connection, presence, and play. Think about a moment when your kids laughed so hard you couldn’t help but join them. Joy calls your attention to the experiences that enrich your life.

It's important to understand that emotions aren't trying to overwhelm us, they are [intelligent messengers](#) trying to orient us.

Fear protects.

Anger energizes.

Sadness softens and recalibrates.

Joy expands.

These signals evolved to keep us not only alive, but fully engaged in what makes life meaningful. That's why Six Seconds developed a tool called the [Emotoscope Feeling Chart](#). It helps decode the purpose and meaning of different feelings and helps translate those messages into everyday language. The other day, I felt completely overwhelmed. I had way too many tasks and not enough time. My thoughts were racing, so I looked up "overwhelmed" on the chart under sadness, and the message was simple: *prioritize*. It was exactly what I needed. Not to add more judgment or pressure on myself, which usually keeps me stuck, but a way to work with what I was feeling.

You can download the [Emotoscope Feeling Chart](#) for free and keep a copy at your home or office.

Research Spotlight

[Research](#) highlights how emotions evolved as adaptive mechanisms that focus attention and mobilize energy. The amygdala and prefrontal cortex work together to evaluate threats and regulate responses, while reward pathways like the ventral striatum reinforce behaviors linked to joy and connection. In essence, our emotional brain is designed to keep us both safe and engaged in what gives life meaning.

Practical Tip

Next time you notice a strong emotion, ask yourself: *What is this feeling trying to help me do?* Anger might be urging you to set a boundary. Sadness might be inviting rest or reflection. Joy might be pointing you toward purpose. Treat emotions as signals, not obstacles, because each one carries wisdom to guide your next step.

5. Emotions are contagious.

One of the wildest things about emotions is how easily we ["catch"](#) them from each other, sometimes faster than we realize. You've probably felt it when you've walked into a room where two people have just argued and you instantly feel the tension in the room. Or someone bursts out laughing and suddenly your whole body softens and you find yourself smiling too even if you don't know what was funny.

This is how humans are wired. Whether we're in a group or with one other person, we can "catch" both positive and negative emotions. We are social creatures who survived by reading each other's cues quickly and accurately. If someone from your tribe saw danger long before you did, it was pretty helpful, life-saving, actually, to feel their fear before you even knew what was happening. If you see fear on someone's face, you're more likely to survive if your own fear response activates instantaneously. It could be the difference between getting eaten by that tiger your friend just saw or getting away.

Modern life isn't full of cliffs and predators, but our nervous systems run on the same ancient wiring. Inside your brain are special cells called [mirror neurons](#) and they're a big reason emotions spread the way they do. These neurons help you *feel* others' emotions. This is why your partner's stress can make your own stomach tighten. Why you might tear up during a movie without fully knowing why, and why calm is contagious too. Have you ever noticed how the whole energy shifts when someone grounded enters a room?

Mirror neurons are also at the heart of empathy and connection. We are born with the ability to resonate with each other emotionally. Even infants will cry when they hear another baby cry. Before we learn rules, logic, or language, we learn connection.

Yet over time, many of us are taught, directly or indirectly, that logic matters more than feeling. That being efficient is better than being emotionally aware. We learn to fix instead of feel and to perform instead of simply being present. And slowly, often without noticing it happening, we grow more disconnected. We are essentially built for connection, yet conditioned for disconnection.

The beautiful thing is, we can practice awareness and presence in the way we meet each other. The more aware we become of how we show up emotionally, the more power we have to choose what we pass on. A calm presence. A steady voice. A moment of real listening. These are just as contagious as stress and tension.

If you'd like to explore this more deeply, I share more about presence, empathy, and emotional connection in [*The Power of Presence: Strengthening Relationships with Emotional Intelligence*](#).

Research Spotlight:

[Studies](#) show that emotional contagion happens both in person and online. Mirror neurons in the premotor cortex and parietal lobes, along with amygdala and insula activation, allow us to unconsciously mimic and internalize others' emotional expressions. This emotional contagion supports social bonding and group survival. A large study by [Facebook and Cornell](#) found that even just seeing emotionally toned posts can shift our own mood without a single face or voice involved.

Practical Tip:

Emotional contagion means we are always affecting one another, often without even realizing it. But the moment we become aware of that influence, we begin to have a choice.

Before your next interaction at work, at home, or even in a quick conversation at the store, pause for a second and ask:

What emotional tone am I about to bring into this space?

That single moment of awareness is often enough to shift everything that follows.

6. Emotions, feelings, and moods are connected — but they're not the same.

We often use these words interchangeably, but they each play a different role in our inner world. As we explain in our article [*Emotions, Feelings & Moods: What's the Difference and Why It Matters*](#), emotions happen first as fast, automatic reactions that spark in the body. Then feelings emerge as our brain starts making sense of those signals. And moods develop when feelings linger and begin to color how we see the world.

For example, you're driving, someone suddenly cuts you off, and before you even have time to think, your heart leaps and your hands tighten on the wheel. That instant surge is *emotion*. It's the body reacting in a split second to a perceived change or threat.

A few seconds later, if you're still irritated or replaying what happened, that's the *feeling* taking shape. And if it sticks with you for the next hour, tinting the rest of your day, that's where a *mood* can form, which can last days.

Research Spotlight

[Neuroscience shows](#) emotions as rapid, automatic reactions driven by the brain's limbic system, especially the amygdala, which responds before we're even aware something happened. Feelings emerge a moment later as the prefrontal cortex interprets those reactions and gives them meaning. And moods last longer because they involve broader patterns of brain activity, including neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine that shift our overall emotional "set point."

In simple terms:

emotion is the spark, feeling is the story, and mood is the climate.

Understanding the difference helps us interrupt the cycle before a single moment shapes our entire day.

Practical Tip

When you notice an internal shift inside like a quick jolt, a lingering heaviness, or a sudden lift, pause and ask yourself one clarifying question:

“Is this an emotion, a feeling, or a mood?”

That tiny bit of awareness gives you options.

If it's an *emotion*, take a breath and let the body settle.

If it's a *feeling*, name it so you can understand what it's tied to.

If it's a *mood*, gently reset your system: step outside for fresh air, drink water, stretch, or change your environment.

A little clarity goes a long way. It doesn't just help you understand yourself, it gives you the power to choose how you want the rest of your day to feel.

7. Emotions move through the body in about six seconds.

Here's something that surprises most people the first time they hear it: the actual chemical “wave” of an emotion only lasts about six seconds. From the moment the hypothalamus releases those emotion chemicals to when they're fully absorbed and broken down, it's roughly six seconds. [That's how our organization got its name.](#)

If we're feeling something for longer than six seconds, we are at some level *choosing* to recreate and refuel those feelings. Sometimes that's useful. If a car swerves into your lane, you *want* fear to last more than six seconds so you stay alert. But other times, like when we replay an argument or imagine the worst-case scenario, we're essentially re-triggering the emotion again and again, pouring more fuel on the emotional fire.

Emotional intelligence begins when we pause long enough to notice what we're feeling, where it came from, and whether we want to carry it forward.

Research Spotlight

Neuroscience shows that emotions are short-lived bursts meant to move quickly through the body and help us take immediate action. They only linger when our thoughts keep cycling back to the trigger.

[Research on emotion duration](#) supports this, showing that emotional episodes usually unfold within seconds — and fade unless we continue to mentally “refuel” them.

In other words:

The body completes the emotion.

The mind decides whether it continues.

Practical Tip

When you feel a strong emotion, take six intentional breaths before reacting. This short pause gives your body time to process the chemical wave and respond intentionally.