

Nathan

Hello listener. Welcome to Why Do I Feel? with me, Nathan Filer. I am an author and like every author on the planet, certainly since that old pandemic, I'm also a podcaster. There are millions of podcasts to choose from. This one I will admit is pretty niche. It's really only intended for people who are experiencing or have ever experienced emotions. If emotions aren't a part of your life, if you exist in a state of pure reason and are never a slave to the passions, if you've never once made a decision, be it wonderful or regrettable based on how you feel rather than logic, then this might be for you. Whoever's left climb aboard we're going to take an emotional journey into people's lives. Sometimes that will be fun. Sometimes it will be painful, but it will always be real. Let's start with Catherine. 01.12

Cathrine

I speak kindly to people. My intentions are good yet, as it turns out I am human. In my family, the abuse was not to be spoken of or about we danced around it. We pretend that it was not there. I was abused by my mother and she abused my father as well. It is still not spoken of nor about not even now after her death, she was never confronted. It would have been much healthier to speak to her about it, to confront her. Instead, it seems I have now made it my mission to not allow anyone else on the planet, do what she did, but I still find it hard to speak out. And this, this is where skadefryd grows. 02.02

Nathan

Catherine got in touch with me on Twitter when I'd been feeling some schadenfreude and put a whimsical callout to see if anyone else was feeling the same, turns out in Norway it's skadfryd.

Cathrine

If a coworker is nasty, it can bring me joy. If someone calls her out on it, it would be braver and healthier to do the calling out myself. Donald Trump is my mother.

Clip

Uh, thank you very much. And we love you. And I can tell you that from the bottom of my heart. Yes, sir. It's others be my mother through his example, we've accomplished so much together. I want to thank all.

Cathrine

Trump speaks so unkindly to people and he pushes every button. I own every abused button. It makes me furious. And if he's called out on it, I feel skadefryd. Him being mean, him being my mother has justified for others that they are allowed to do so and be so as well. My life mission feels threatened. When Trump lost I was so insanely happy. I swam in a sea of relief. Meanness had lost evil, had lost abuse, had lost. I was so happy. I swam in a sea of relief. And yet I noticed that the waters of that relief were not so crystal clear. In fact, it was pretty murky. There was plenty of skadefryd in my relief. I was happy that he had lost and that he would feel the loss of not being able to be nasty trump. The world was now a kinder place but was I? 03.54

Nathan

Well, as it happens, I suspect Catherine's probably one of the kinder people you could hope to meet, but we all have a dark side. This is Dougie, he's an author like me. Turns out, it can be quite a cut throat business.

Dougie

I had a close friend who screwed me over and as if that wasn't bad enough, they were also bad mouthing for me, um, to anyone and everyone who would listen.

Nathan

Oh, that sounds horrible.

Dougie

So, uh, there was nothing really I could do about it other than, you know, kind of address these issues as, and when they came up.

Nathan

Sure. What can you do?

Dougie

But, uh, I had another friend who was a psychic. And I asked her about it and stuff like that. And the conversation got around to curses.

Nathan

Right?

Dougie

So I asked her, can you put a curse on this person as long, it was out for blood really? And she said, well, I know how to do it, but I won't do it. But in the end I persuaded her to give me some ideas, years or tips. And so, uh, I put a curse on this person. Effectively to try and damage her career and do what she was trying to do to me. And I let it run for a while and after a year or so, I started to hear that her career had actually tanked. And it continued to tank for quite a long time. And, uh, I don't know, I didn't really put this down to my curse, but as time went on and I kept hearing what was going on, she has things happen to her that, um, I began to think if this is my fault, I'm feeling quite guilty. So I took the curse off. And, uh, I don't know if career got better as a result. Um, I don't really care, but my conscience is clear because I only did to her what she was trying to do to me and that's schadenfreude, I guess. 05.58

Nathan

Yeah, I guess it is schadenfreude, but it's not just that is it. I mean, there were some other emotions thrown in the mix there too. Some vengeance, some remorse and that's the thing with emotions, isn't it? There are just so many of them and sometimes we can be feeling more than one thing at a time, or sometimes we think we're feeling one emotion, but it's disguising another. Or sometimes we have no idea what we're feeling. To grapple with these thorny issues in this series. I'll be speaking with some experts. 06.37

Nathan

Okay. Okay. Okay. So hello. Oh, you talk to Dr. Tiffany, Watt Smith you experts like? Dr. Tiffany Watt Smith. She's a cultural historian who specialises in human emotion. And she's the author of the book of human emotions, an encyclopedia of feeling. If you will, from anger to wanderlust from melancholy to dread from envy to guilt, hopefulness, excitement, smugness, nostalgia, it's all in there. 07.17

Nathan

You say, you say very early in the book, um, you write the time. Sometimes it feels more like we belong to our emotions than they are to us. This observation really resonates with me. Uh, I I'm an emotional person. Uh, my days are frequently more defined to me by how I felt than by activity. And, and I do feel often that I belong to my emotions. So. Big question to get us started what actually our emotions and why do we feel? 07.59

Tiffany

Hmm. So, um, so this is a good question and it's a good thing to think about. Uh, but it hasn't got a, I don't think a simple answer in that people have been debating this for. Thousands of years and they're still debating it now.

And despite all the extraordinary technologies that we have at our fingertips now and, um, and the amazing ways of, of kind of reading and calibrating our emotions, you know, I think there's questions still remains, you know, quite what is an emotion, you know, for some people. It's quite simple and emotion is a biochemical reaction in the body and the brain, you know, you can see an emotion. If you turn FMRI scanner, look at it, she's a puppy or whatever. Um, you know, and that's a very, for some people, that's a very clear um, definition of an emotion as a, as a physiological response, almost a reflex. And, and these are things that have evolved to protect us from harm and to sort of guide us towards things which are good for us, um, forming relationships, having fun, resting and so on. Um, uh, but then there were other people that may be more annoying. People like me and people who are historians, but also ethnographers and anthropologists and, uh, people who come more from a kind of cultural perspective who might question that idea that emotions are just physiological responses and think about emotions as a much more complex interplay between things that are happening in the body and, and, and the languages that we use, the kind of concepts with which we frame our experiences. Um, to me, emotions are kind of the, the physiological aspects of emotions are very kind of drifting and inchoate. And I think I, in the book I described. I saw opened with this image of, of, um, of John Constable, the artists who kind of went up onto Hampstead Heath and, uh, sat there with his. Paint brushes in his papers. And he tried to capture the clouds, you know, for him, the sky was the kind of the great canvas of emotions. And he tried to, he tried to sort of very quickly draw a paint, the clouds, and then he'd take them home and he'd take these sketches home and he would try and, um, sort of order them in terms of a sort of taxonomy of clouds, um, and, and then kind of 40 years later, John Ruskin, the art critic did the same sort of thing. And John Ruskin said, you know, when I tried to put my sketches of clouds into, into groups, I, um, I realised that that, that these kind of labels that I was putting on on them were more a matter of description. Um, and I thought that was a really useful way of thinking about emotions. You know, this is kind of like the sky, like the clouds, you know, they sort of the are bodily states are drifting in and out of focus. They're sort of melding together and pulling apart and. And then we are, you know, then our conscious minds, we try and put categories on them, we try and put labels on them. We try and kind of order them. We try to order our experience. Um, and it's at the point in which we ordered them and the point at which we named them, that for me, that experience becomes an emotion.10.54

Nathan

In this series, we'll be having a go at ordering and naming some experiences and also getting right up close and personal with some of the stories behind those experiences, cue montage.

Clip

So I'm now in love and with somebody I've said happily ever after, you know, I've committed to, I have the dream. This should be easy. Regardless of my age, people, we know people get pregnant in their forties and I was 40 when I started trying, this is not going to be hard. I got a really dangerous skill, which was, I learned how to carry on with my day, but have those thoughts sort of playing as a screen behind your eyes. So I would spend all day whether I was at work and being shouted at on the phone or doing spreadsheets and refunds, whether I was skating or whether I was playing music whenever I was doing anything, it was always there. I couldn't stop it. I do think of Brian every day, but his memory is no longer this punitive voice. It's the reminder of how far I've come and what matters to me in life. And to, um, not fuck around, excuse my language. 12.13

Nathan

Those are just a few of the people that we'll be getting to know really well over the coming episodes. I cannot wait to share their stories with you. Your feelings are the voice of millions of ancestors. So says the historian, an academic Yuval Noah Harari. When you listen to your feelings, you follow an algorithm that evolution has developed for millions of years, and that has withstood the harshest quality test of natural selection. Our feelings are incredible and you know what else is incredible kissing. Back to me and Tiffany Watt Smith. I was going for a walk in the park the other day. Uh, and I saw, uh, a couple, uh, kissing and I found, uh, a sudden pang of, uh, basorexia. I wouldn't have known that word basorexia if I not read your, uh, if I had not read your book, but basorexia is a sudden desire to kiss someone. Um, I'm not, I'm not saying I want it to join in with their kissing, by the way, Tiffany. Kissing's nice. I want to be kissing someone too. Uh, and, and I told my wife about this. We had a, we had a conversation about it and we had a bit of an argument about it, a judge and an argument, a debate, but it wasn't because I'd seen people kissing and felt a sudden desire, uh, to kiss what she took umbrage with was that I was describing this as basorexia and saying that's a discrete emotion. And she was saying, but surely that is just an extension of desire. Could I say I've got a sudden urge to walk down the stairs or to turn the light on. So, you know, where do we sort of get off on describing these things as discrete emotions. 14.04

Tiffany

Yeah, this is a great question, because of course there are all kinds of ways in which we can simplify that. The great range of, I mean, I think we'd all agree that we're all capable of a feeling, a great range of emotion, huge range of emotion, but there are many, many attempts over, over, over history to kind of organise and categorise our emotions into, I mean the most basic one is to categorise them as two, as two different states, you know? Being drawn towards something and I'm being repelled from it. There's this sort of the sense in which we, when we try and, um, name and articulate these kinds of precise little moments in our emotional repertoire, you know, what we're doing is drawing attention to parts of our experience that we might. Otherwise overlook or not take seriously or not even realise a shared experiences. So for example, I remember feeling great relief when I, when I came across, um, FOMO, fear of missing out. I mean, I definitely had had some sort of experience of this, but until I learnt this word for it or this term for it I, I don't think I quite sort of took it seriously. I don't think it quite consolidated in my mind as a, as a distinct experience and something that was worth taking seriously and worth noticing and, and worth managing, you know, it seems I had a word it's I sort of, oh, um, oh, it's just that, I'm just feeling like that. Never mind, move on. You know, whereas before, when I didn't have a word for it, I might have sort of been more nervous about that feeling or, or not known what to do with it. 15.32

Nathan

Or maybe, literally not knowing what it was feeling bad, but not sure why you feel bad. Was it something like, sort of learning that, that term became an education? So you realised though yeah. And other people feel fill there. So in one sense you felt less alone, but also just literally understanding what that, what the cause of that negative feeling might, might be. 15.52

Tiffany

Yes, I think that's exactly. I think you've put it exactly right. I think that that sort of generalised sense of feeling bad, which can just create more bad feelings. Um, it is, you know, it's resolved. I think once you do discover, uh, a name for it, um, yes, you discover a sense of community, but you also. You understand it gets a narrative it's made to make sense. And that's very important for, for us as humans, I think to make sense of our experience. 16.20

Nathan

Amen. It's crucial for us as humans to make sense of our experiences. And we can do that. By finding the narrative and that listener in a little nutshell is what this series is all about. Finding the narratives, hearing the stories that will help us understand. Why we feel not in the way a neuroscientist might, but in the way that we can come to a deeper understanding of ourselves by spending time with other people who may have felt the same way. 17.00

Lisa

Sometimes people ask me as a neuroscientist, you know, what's the best way to manage my emotions.

Nathan

Oh, yeah, but I don't want you to feel like you're missing out on the neuroscience either. So let's finish up by listening to professor Lisa Feldman Barrett. She's widely acknowledged to be one of the world's foremost experts on the neuroscience of emotion. I asked her what's the best way to manage our emotions when they seem to be getting out of hand. 17.32

Lisa

Make sure that you get enough sleep. Make sure that you eat healthfully and make sure you exercise every day or at least get out for a walk because. Even though exercising is, uh, you know, withdrawal. You're basically, you're making an investment in a future healthy brain. So I sound like I'm being a mother. Um, and I am a mother and believe me, when I tell my daughter to do these things, she doesn't take it any, but you can imagine just how poorly she takes it. But the fact is that I'm actually speaking to you as a neuroscientist. These are really important things. Um, you know, having close social connections with others, it turns out. That you know, we evolved as a social species and that means that we are the caretakers of each other's nervous systems. So the best thing for a human nervous system is another human. 18.25

Nathan

So there we go. We heard it from a world-leading expert. If your emotions are overwhelming, you eat, sleep, get some exercise and hang out with someone.

Lisa

Of course, you know, the worst thing for a human nervous system is also another human. So it's a, it's a bit of a double edged sword.

Nathan

Shit. Yeah. Nothing's simple is it? What if the person you're hanging out with is driving you mad? Or what if, for instance, you're horribly envious of them? That's what we'll be thinking about in the next episode, make sure that you subscribe so you don't miss it. 19.05