

My Discontent.

The man sat in sadness. He had been happy with his life until today, but now he wanted to be liked by others and, perhaps, treated better. He was in a funk.

He got to thinking about a topic he often pondered: Are emotions fundamental to our lives? If so, are we stuck having them? Do genetics and nature require us to be emotional in ways we didn't choose to be? Or are emotions something we can unlearn and then pick only the ones we want?

The man had cried uncontrollably after the death of his father, and it was only after he stopped being so emotionally out of control that he began to feel better. So after his beloved dog passed, he decided not to cry and, instead, he chose to smile whenever he remembered his buddy. He never did cry, and to this day, the memories of his dog make him happy. He was devastated when his dog died, of course, and he doesn't think he'll ever have another because loving that deeply requires a quantity of responsibility he no longer wants to expend.

The man was well-read and remembered reading that the basic emotions are happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, anger, and surprise. Love, however, was not included.

His quandary and curiosity about emotions were because he didn't believe many emotions were fundamental to his or anyone else's existence. He believed they were learned from others.

Still unsatisfied, he searched more, finding this broadly agreed-upon list of primal emotions put together by scientists, doctors, psychiatrists, and more: joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, anger, anticipation, love, and remorse.

He searched further and found another list that many in the professional world agreed on: optimism, love, submission, awe, disapproval, remorse, content, and aggressiveness.

The man was trying to find a proven, broadly agreed-on, scientific list of existential emotions because he had come to believe that many emotions are a product of humans and, therefore, not existential. But such a list did not seem to exist.

He had seen anger, disgust, fear, joy, happiness, and sadness in his children as infants, and it did seem to him that they were born with those emotions. Some of the other emotions mentioned in the lists he found, anticipation, love, remorse, surprise, and trust, came after those six primary emotions. Another factor that scientists and psychiatrists concluded from their studies was that non-existential emotions were learned by a child, primarily up until five years of age.

This knowledge allowed him to understand that many fundamental human emotions are not, in fact, existential, but they are learned emotions.

His earliest years were chronically abusive, so the emotions he learned were not the emotions society deemed usual. Reunited at five years old with his father, he was told to behave, but he didn't know what that meant. His constant inability to behave led to him being beaten whenever he misbehaved, but the beatings didn't teach him how 'to behave', nor did he understand why he was being hurt.

He had, decades ago, forgiven everything and everyone who had harmed him physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and sexually, or even in ways he couldn't comprehend. He was mindful that forgiveness is different than forgetting.

He believed his current emotions, now existential to his well-being, were happiness, optimism, curiosity, and creativity. His current learned emotions are sadness, surprise, fear, disgust, and anger. Love was not included, and no other emotions seemed core to his existence.

The man's sadness disappeared. He sat content in the knowledge that whatever he needed, he had, and whatever he didn't have shouldn't make him sad. One of the man's favorite sayings was this: learned behavior can be unlearned.

Written by Peter Skeels © 3-16-2025