

# The Anatomy of an Emotion

■ by Kathy Krentkowski, MA, LCPC, LMHC

Emotions are tricky things. They come in a variety of “shapes” and “sizes” but there are no instructions on what to do with them or how to make sense of them. Emotions such as fear, anger or guilt can be like un-invited dinner guests that won’t leave even after you started turning out the lights! Emotions such as love, joy and peace can be like an unexpected bouquet of flowers, showing up on a day when you thought all was lost.

Emotions are messengers. They have something to say to our body, soul and spirit. Before you can really hear the voice of the emotion and discern its message, it helps to understand what the emotion is made of.

Emotions can be traced back to an identified incident or event which triggered a thought. Most people can identify what was happening when they felt angry, happy, scared, etc. This is referred to as the “incident” or “trigger”. Immediately following the incident, a thought appears. If we had a cartoon thought bubble over our heads we would be able to see exactly what thoughts appeared at the time of the incident or just afterwards. As our thoughts develop, our brain becomes activated. If we had electrodes hooked up to the brain, we might actually see the brain light up in different ways, depending on what event just happened and what thought popped up.

Next our body may respond with a quickened heart rate, rising or dropping body temperature, increased blood pressure, etc. Our face may give us away through manifestations such as crying, tightened brows, or wide eyes. We may have an urge to do something such as yell or throw something, and we may, at times, actually act on that urge. All of these things give way to the emotion we are “feeling”. The feeling is actually the *last* thing that happens in this process.

Let’s take a look at an example.

**Incident:** You said you were going to take me out to dinner. When I came home, I found a note that said you had gone fishing and you never mentioned the dinner.

**Emotion:** Hurt

Most people stop here, making interpretations of what happened and reacting to how they feel. It’s really not that simple. There’s actually A LOT more to the hurt.

Let’s fill this in a little more.

**Incident:** You said you were going to take me out to dinner. When I came home, I found a note that said you had gone fishing and you never mentioned the dinner.

**Thought:** I’m not important to you. I can’t rely on you. I don’t measure up. I’m forgettable.

**Brain/Body response:** Face is flushed, body temperature increased, stomach dropped.

**Face:** Flat face, tears well up in my eyes. I look down.

**Urge:** Yell, scream, and throw something.

**Action:** Grab a pint of ice cream and watch TV.

**Emotion:** Hurt, Sad, Angry



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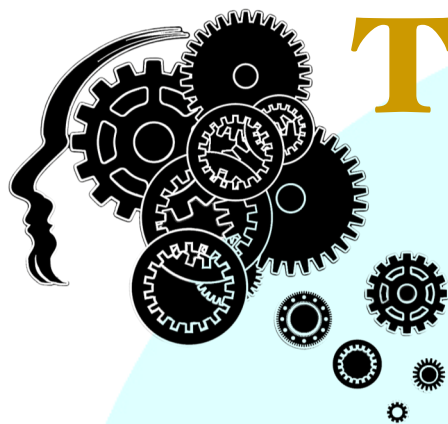
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Once I take the time to pull apart the feeling and all that comes with it, I can see what thoughts were triggered by the event. I also discover there is more than just the feeling of hurt.

We cannot control our feelings. Many times emotions come without warning and when we least expect it. We can get better at listening to what our feelings are telling us. The Bible gives us clear and specific instruction to “take every thought captive” (2 Corinthians 10:5). When we do this, we may discover a very different and unique relationship with our emotions.

**Thought:** “I’m not important to you.”

**Response:** “I believe I *am* important to him, and I **know** I am important to God (Jeremiah 31:3). I don’t know why he forgot about dinner. I can ask him when I see him.”

**Thought:** “I can’t rely on you.”

**Response:** “I was planning on our dinner together and I was let down. I want to rely on my partner. I am going to have to bring this up to him if I want to have a good relationship with him.”

**Thought:** “I don’t measure up.”

**Response:** “I am enough because God says I am fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:13-16). His forgetting of dinner is a reflection of **his** choice, not my worth.”

**Thought:** “I’m forgettable.”

**Response:** “That’s not true. Just because someone forgot about a plan we made does not mean that I am forgettable as a person. I am on the mind of God and that’s pretty incredible! (Jeremiah 29:11).”

Next time you are having a particularly strong emotion, ask yourself these questions:

*What’s the name of the feeling I am experiencing? Anger, sad, fear, joy, shame, guilt?*

*What happened prior to this emotion?*

*What went through my mind after the incident occurred? What did I tell myself? What did I believe was true based on the event?*

*Do I need to do something in response to this feeling?*

*Father God, what truth do you want me to know?*



What we think matters and will powerfully impact what we say, do and how we feel. You and I may have a completely different response to the exact same event, because we have a different narrative in our thought bubble. Do you ever wonder why other people don’t *feel* the way you feel? Their emotion may have a different anatomy compared to yours, and yours is worth investigating! ■



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