

Understanding Your Emotions

How do you feel right now? Are you in a good mood? Are you down or bored? Your feelings, or emotions, influence everything you do. They affect your thinking, your relationships with others, your behavior, and even your success or failure at accomplishing a given task. Your emotions have an impact on your mental and physical health.

HEALTH TERMS

emotions

empathy

phobias

hostility

HEALTH CONCEPTS

- Your emotions influence your thoughts and actions.
- Emotions are neither good nor bad.
- During adolescence, hormones can greatly affect your emotions.



Understanding Your Emotions

Emotions are signals that tell your mind and body how to react. They are neither good nor bad. They are simply the way your body and mind respond to input from outside your body.

Emotions can greatly affect all sides of your health triangle. Consider:

- When you are in a dangerous situation, emotions such as fear can trigger the body and mind to protect you by causing you to shout or flee the scene.
- Emotions such as joy can prompt the release of brain chemicals that not only cause warm, happy feelings but also promote mental health.

Did You Know?

- In the middle of the brain are two amygdalas, almond-shaped organs that receive and send all kinds of emotional messages.
- A woman whose amygdala had been destroyed was found to be unable to read the signs of fear and unable to feel the emotion itself.

- Strong emotions like anger can cause physical changes within your body, including a rise in heart rate, perspiration, and a tightening of the muscles of the stomach. If no emotional outlet is found for some of this tension, it builds up inside, eventually taking a toll on your physical health.

Learning constructive ways to deal with your emotions is, therefore, extremely important. A first step toward achieving this goal is learning to identify your emotions.

Identifying Emotions

Identifying emotions can be difficult, especially in situations where you have “mixed emotions,” for example, being jealous of and happy for a friend at the same time. Like two colors mixed together, it may at times be difficult to name what you are feeling.

It is especially important to learn to identify unsettling emotions. Feeling worried may call for a different action than feeling terrified does. Feeling a bit down is different from feeling hopeless and may require different kinds of help. Identifying emotions correctly can help you to know how to express them more effectively the next time you experience them.

Love

All human beings need to give and receive love. This emotion involves strong affection, deep concern, and respect. It includes supporting the growth and individual needs of another person and respecting that person's boundaries and values as well as your own. Love can be expressed through words, actions, facial expressions, touch, and good deeds. It comes in many forms, including caring for family and friends, loyalty to siblings, and even a deep sense of being connected to your country or to all people. Being able to receive and give love is central to what it means to be mentally and emotionally well.



▲ *Everyone needs to feel loved and be able to give love.*
ACTIVITY *Name three ways you express love to family members and close friends.*

Empathy

Empathy is *the ability to imagine and understand how someone else feels*. It is being able to “walk in another’s shoes.” People who have empathy for others feel more connected to the world. They are better able to help others in need. They can offer insight and understanding. When you have empathy, you can reach out to others and receive their gestures of warmth and caring in return.

As with other emotions, it is important to experience this feeling with some balance. It is not healthy, for example, to be overwhelmed with concern for others’ feelings at the expense of meeting all of your own needs.

Fear

Every time you hear an ambulance siren, a loud noise, or a scream, you probably feel some degree of fear. This response can be a safeguard or protection if you need to respond to a real threat.

As with other reactions, your body responds physically to the emotion, preparing itself for what it might need to do. When you experience fear, your **sympathetic nervous system** reacts by preparing your body for necessary action. Hormones cause your heart to beat faster, sending an increased supply of blood to your heart and muscles. Your breathing rate increases. Once the threatening situation has passed, your body returns to its normal state.

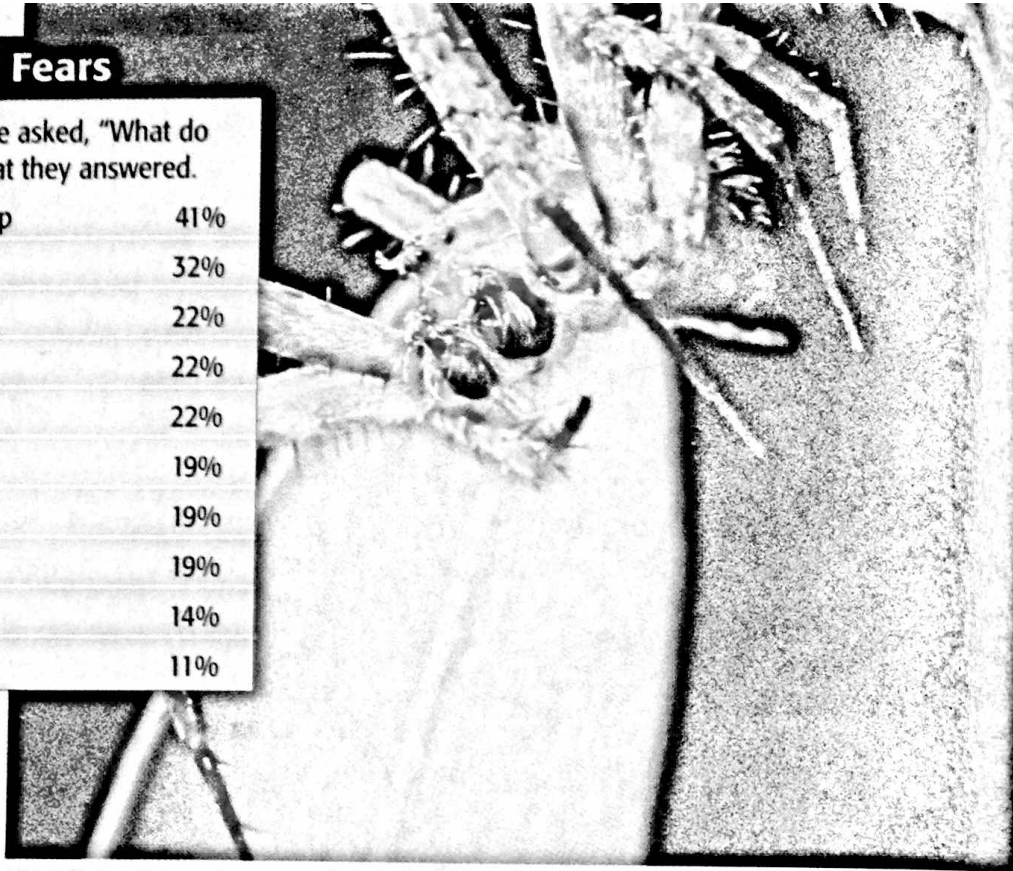
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sympathetic nervous system
For more information on the sympathetic nervous system, see Chapter 16, page 370.

A Top Ten List of Fears

Some 3,000 Americans were asked, "What do you fear most?" Here is what they answered.

1. Speaking before a group	41%
2. Heights	32%
3. Insects and spiders	22%
4. Money problems	22%
5. Deep water	22%
6. Sickness	19%
7. Death	19%
8. Flying	19%
9. Loneliness	14%
10. Dogs	11%



► **A fear of insects and spiders is quite common. As long as fear doesn't control your daily activities, it is a normal emotion to have.**

ACTIVITY List your top three fears and possible ways to overcome each one.

Some fears—the fear of falling, for example—may be inherited. Most fears, however, are learned. The fear of fire was probably instilled in you when you were small to protect you from the potential danger of playing with matches. Such fears, which are *rational*, or reasonable, are helpful as you grow. Other fears, such as a fear of heights, are not helpful. These *irrational fears*, or **phobias**, can get in the way of leading a normal life.

Anger

Everyone feels anger at one point or another. At times it may be displayed as a simple annoyance, at other times it may rise up as boiling rage. As with other emotions, how you choose to handle that anger is one of the key factors in your mental and emotional health.

When people do not handle their anger in constructive ways, they can do great damage not only to others and to other's property but also to their own bodies and minds. **Hostility**, the intentional use of unfriendly or nasty behavior, can be particularly damaging. In fact, experts now think that hostile behavior is the key personality trait in predicting heart disease. People who show chronic hostile behavior are four to seven times more likely to die of heart disease and cancer than those who are not prone to anger. According to Redford Williams, a researcher at Duke University, silent "seethers" are even more likely to die earlier than those who are openly hostile.

Guilt

Everyone feels guilty for their actions or thoughts some of the time. Guilt is an emotional response when you think you have done something wrong. It often results from acting against one's values or from not acting at all when direct action might have brought about a better outcome. Frequently, guilt is associated with low self-esteem. It may also act as a smokescreen, keeping you from other feelings. For example, it may seem easier to feel guilty than it is to overcome your fear of taking a particular action and perhaps failing. Though guilt can eat away at you, leaving you feeling inadequate, it can also motivate you to make positive changes. You are less likely to engage in a negative behavior if you know yourself well enough to realize that you will be left with a guilty conscience afterward.



Emotions and Adolescence

Strong emotional responses are common during your teen years. Rapid growth and other changes brought on by hormones may make you feel oversensitive on some days, insecure on others. You may overreact or suddenly feel flooded by an emotion. Such reactions are normal. Just remember, you are not alone. The other teens you know are experiencing similar kinds of emotional changes, too.

▲ *During the teen years, it is normal to experience rapid changes in emotions.*

ACTIVITY *List ways you could deal with quickly changing emotions (for example, going for a walk if you are feeling angry).*