

**PART 1**  
**UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONS**

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

# KNOWING WHY WE HAVE EMOTIONS

*Everyone knows what an emotion is until asked to give a definition. Then it seems, nobody knows. – B. Fehr and J. Russell*

Emotions play an important role in how we think and behave. Emotions help protect you and keep you physically safe by prompting you to react to the threat of danger. Basic emotions such as fear, anger and disgust don't wait for you to think, to reason and process what's going on. In circumstances where rational thinking is too slow, these emotions instantly warn you of danger and get you to react – through fight or flight – immediately.

Other emotions – social emotions – enable people to live and work with each other. Social emotions such as guilt, shame, gratitude and love guide and maintain interactions and bonds that bring people – families, friends, neighbours and communities – together.

Emotions also allow us to create and express ideas and thoughts that wouldn't necessarily come about through rational thinking. Anger, for example, can inspire a dramatic painting. Despair and sadness can inspire beautiful, moving poetry, songwriting and music. Art, music and literature all provoke and inspire emotions and create an emotional connection between the art, music or writing and the viewer, listener or reader.

Emotions then, all have a positive intent; they help keep you safe, help you establish and maintain connections with others, and inspire creativity. On the one hand, emotions can focus our thoughts and behaviour and on the other hand, can enhance and widen thoughts and experience.

## In Practice

*Nothing vivifies and nothing kills like the emotions. – Joseph Roux*

**Be more aware of and develop your understanding of the physical safety and the social and creative purposes of emotions:**

- Think of situations when an emotion prompted you to do or say something automatically, without thinking. Where you acted instantly, for example, out of fear, disgust or anger, you responded without thinking.
- Think of times when you've experienced a social emotion; an emotion that has prompted you to do or say something to manage the interactions between you and someone else.

Have there been occasions when, for example, you've tried to put things right because you've felt guilty about a wrongdoing?

- Think of a time when someone else has shown you empathy, compassion or kindness. Did it help you to feel understood, comforted or supported?
- What about the times others' emotions have influenced you? Perhaps you've noticed that someone was frustrated and upset and it prompted you to offer them your help.

**Think of the songs and music you like to listen to.** How do particular songs or pieces of music make you feel? What music, films, poems, books, paintings inspire you? Which songs and music lift your spirits? What films, music, poems, etc. make you feel sad and reflective?

Over the next few days, notice when your emotions motivate your action, save you time, help you get something done, or help you to reach out and respond to someone else.