



AWARENESS AND INTELLIGENCE WITH EMOTIONS¹

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Emotion is defined by Merriam-Webster (n.d., Definition 1a) as “a conscious mental reaction (such as anger or fear) subjectively experienced as strong feeling usually directed toward a specific object and typically accompanied by physiological and behavioral changes in the body.”

Everyone has emotions. There are hundreds of emotions with variations, mutations, and blends of those emotions. They tell us about what we are experiencing and help us to know how to react. There are no good or bad emotions, but good and bad ways of expressing (or acting on) emotions. This publication intends to educate Extension professionals and 4-H volunteers on the use of emotional awareness and emotional intelligence in programming with youth. In working with youth who have the least experience dealing with their emotions, these adults must pay special attention to their interactions with youth. Like building a pyramid with cups, any small action or interaction can make things tumble downward.



Figure 1. Youth at a 4-H Event practice stacking cups into pyramids.

Credit: Heather M. Futch, UF/IFAS

Emotional Awareness

As we age, we are better able to understand and identify emotions. Once we start to identify emotions, we can

identify and describe what we are experiencing. Young children often express emotion by pouting, screaming, giggling, or exhibiting unidentifiable reactions; however, as we age, emotional awareness allows us to better identify what we are experiencing and respond more appropriately. The more emotional awareness we have (LeDoux, 1996), the easier we can use words to describe how we feel, which then enables us to explain why we feel that way.

Emotional awareness helps us know our emotional needs, giving us the skills and abilities to build better relationships. We can also talk about our feelings more clearly and avoid or resolve conflicts. Emotional awareness allows us to move past complicated feelings more easily. Some people are more in touch with their feelings and emotions than others. With practice, anyone can become more aware of their emotions. Emotional awareness builds emotional intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence, or EQ, can help people be successful in life. EQ is not the same as IQ. It is like the difference between “world smarts” versus “book smarts” but deeper than that. One can have a high IQ but may not be able to effectively apply themselves in the real world.

EQ is when individuals can recognize, understand, and manage their own emotions and their reactions to the emotions of others (Goleman, 1995). In other words, EQ raises our awareness of how emotions drive our behavior and can impact others. Increasing our emotional intelligence allows us to better control and manage emotions, even when under pressure. EQ is especially important when giving and receiving feedback, meeting tight deadlines, working through challenging relationships, coping with change, and facing setbacks and failures. High levels of emotional intelligence in those providing Extension programming may increase the levels of participant motivation and may also increase the decision-making skills of participants (Russell, Andres, Barnhart, & Andres, 2020).

How Do the Two Intermingle?

Having emotional awareness is not the same as having emotional intelligence. Relate that back to IQ. Having book smarts does not always mean you can apply yourself similarly in real-world interactions. Likewise, if we are aware of our emotions, we can use that awareness to manage them and our reactions to others' emotions; then we have mastered both emotional awareness and emotional intelligence. Why is this important? Well, having emotional awareness and emotional intelligence can lead to better relationships and positive interactions with others. It can help us to react to others with greater understanding. For example, think of a time when a youth is having a really bad day because they failed a test or their parents fussed at them before school. Then, they come to an Extension event and express those feelings. Having the understanding that there are many contributing factors to someone's emotional state, should help you react more calmly and be better able to respond to them in a positive manner that will not cause additional emotional distress. These interactions help spread a little more kindness in the world.



Figure 2. Youth at 4-H camp display a wide range of emotions dependent upon their experience with the program, their age, and their surroundings. As shown here, emotions of youth may not be easily interpreted, and adults working with these youth can utilize emotional intelligence to minimize situations of emotional distress. Credit: Heather M. Futch, UF/IFAS

A Call to Action

Now that we understand the difference between emotional awareness and emotional intelligence, as well as how the two intermingle, we have arrived at the

question of “Now what?” How can we ensure that those in our communities show positive knowledge gain and behavior change in emotional awareness and emotional intelligence? Although a tangible solution would be ideal, data shows the proper solution begins with you (Russell et al., 2020). If you practice emotional awareness and emotional intelligence as a trusted adult, soon those in your circle of influence will follow suit. Here is how that looks:

- Be an authentic and genuine resource.
 - In the field of education, it is easy to become extremely busy and thus overwhelmed. Be sure to see community members and stakeholders as partners rather than clientele. Remember, they are the reason for the Extension service.
- Practice self-care.
 - We are more emotionally stable when we are well-rested. According to Saghir, Syeda, Muhammad, and Balla Abdalla (2018), the amygdala (the brain's emotional center) functions better when not sleep-deprived. Understanding that if we are well-rested with a healthier emotional baseline, we will be focused on the task and less susceptible to distractions when educating others.
- Embrace the input, creativity, and individuality of the group.
 - Youth have a voice, and you will find yourselves learning when you seek to listen to and understand it. That voice may result in fresh ideas, new knowledge, and helpful feedback for you, the educator. After all, in the words of Robert Heinlein, “When one teaches, two learn.”
- Be a stable resource for the community.
 - A community deserves stability. Building community partnerships and relationships take time but is a valuable investment for the community to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and emotions. If they are vulnerable and share, we as education professionals can target root understanding, knowledge gain, and behavior change. If you see your current position as temporary, looking for the next step in your career, then the community changes you make will also be temporary.

The rather lengthy answer can be summed as this simple thought: lead by example. Whether you serve as Extension faculty, a formal or informal educator, a parent or guardian, or want to learn more about emotions, we must be the change we wish to see in this world.

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