

Understanding MYSELF

A kid's guide
to intense
emotions
and strong
feelings



by Mary C. Lamia, PhD

Contents

Getting to Know Yourself	5
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Part one Feeling Your Emotions

Chapter 1 The Science Behind Your Emotions	9
Chapter 2 Moods, Emotions, and Feelings	14

Part two Feeling Self-Conscious

Chapter 3 Embarrassment	19
Chapter 4 Guilt	25
Chapter 5 Shame	30
Chapter 6 Pride	36

Part three Feeling Threatened

Chapter 7 Anxiety	43
Chapter 8 Fear	51
Chapter 9 Disgust	58

Part four Feeling Gloomy

Chapter 10 Loneliness	67
Chapter 11 Sadness	71
Chapter 12 Grief	77

Part five **Feeling Elated**

Chapter 13	Excitement, Joy, and Happiness	85
Chapter 14	Love and Infatuation	91

Part six **Feeling Stormy**

Chapter 15	Anger	99
Chapter 16	Envy and Jealousy	105

Keep Learning About Yourself	112
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Part one

Feeling YOUR Emotions

Imagine ignoring your emotions and what they make you feel. If you did, you would not be disgusted about eating something that was rotten, a dangerous situation would not make you frightened, and you might not react negatively to a friend who always hurts you. You wouldn't even care if someone likes you or about getting the award you've won! So one purpose of emotions is to provide you with information about a situation that can help you to respond or make decisions.

Your emotions also send information to others through your facial expressions or body language. Your ability to interpret the emotions of others helps you to make sense of what they express and know how to respond to it. But while your emotions convey information to others and to yourself, your emotional response to a situation may differ from that of another person because the same situation can have different meanings for different people. For example, if your friend is terribly afraid of spiders and you aren't afraid of them at all, a huge spider crawling out from under the teacher's desk would create different emotional responses in each of you. She might be afraid and lift up her feet. You might just be amused and smile.

You might describe some of your emotions as positive, and others as negative, because of the ways in which emotions make you feel. But emotions are not necessarily good or bad. Even though we can consider them as positive or negative, you'll find as you read the next chapter that there's much more to experiencing an emotion than whether or not it makes you feel good. In fact, there are many ways in which those so-called negative emotions are just as useful to you as the positive ones.

Chapter 1

The Science Behind Your Emotions

Every day is filled with situations that cause you to respond emotionally. Emotional responses (the feelings and thoughts that are created by your emotions) are signals that allow you to react, protect yourself, communicate, and make decisions. Without having to take the time to think about a situation, your brain instantly creates an action to help you respond.

Your Emotional Brain

Your emotions are in your brain even though you feel them in your body. Your feelings are created by signals sent from your brain that activate the *nervous system* of your body, which affects your muscles and organs. Depending on the emotional response that is signaled by your brain, your nervous system can do things like boost or lower your heart rate, cause your hands to sweat, make your mouth dry, or help you rest. It can even create a feeling of butterflies in your stomach or a lump in your throat.

This is all because your brain has the ability to size up circumstances and automatically create an emotional response that is experienced cognitively (through your thoughts) and physiologically (in your body) as a feeling. Psychologists call it an *appraisal system*. Your brain's appraisal system instantly sizes up a situation and triggers an emotional response even before you are aware you're thinking about it. So if a certain situation causes your brain's appraisal system to trigger the emotion of anger, then you will think negatively and feel irritable. Or if it triggers sadness, then you will think unhappy thoughts and have a heavy feeling in your chest. Your brain will do its best to give you information and help you respond to a situation by having you experience an emotion. However, your appraisal system may not always make the right choice when it triggers an emotion, and I'll tell you more about that later.

The Qualities of an Emotion

Now that you know where emotions come from, can you describe what makes something an emotion? Well, this would lead you right into a scientific controversy. For now, let's go along with a definition of emotion that is often used by psychologists and other emotion researchers:

- *Emotions are automatic and reflexive.* That is, an emotion is a reaction to something and has a particular reason behind it. You may experience disgust *because* you stepped in dog poop and you can smell it on your shoe.
- *Emotions cause body and behavior changes.* The smell of the dog poop on your shoe causes your nervous system to react, and the smell makes you feel sick to your stomach and want to get away from it.

- Emotional responses give you quick information about a situation that can lead you to take action. In the situation of your smelly shoe, you might be motivated to leave it outside and be more careful about where you step.

Decisions, Emotions, and Feelings

The idea that your brain automatically makes decisions and triggers an emotion, which then creates a feeling in your body, may sound very strange. But the most important purpose of this process is to give you information about a situation that can help you to decide what to do—an action you should take or a goal you should pursue. Here is an example. Suppose you are walking down the hallway at school, and as you turn the corner you see the person you really like who then smiles at you. You suddenly become very alert and have that excited feeling of butterflies in your stomach.

What does this have to do with your brain? When you saw the person you really like who was smiling at seeing you, your brain instantly—before you knew it—recognized the person, evaluated the situation, and triggered emotions that activated your nervous system which then made you feel alert and excited. But how exactly did your brain help you? Well, it helped you interpret what the person you like was doing—smiling at seeing you—as exciting, which then created the feeling of butterflies in your stomach.

If the other person had behaved as though you didn't exist, your brain would also instantly evaluate the situation and would likely trigger an emotion that would create feelings of discouragement in you. All of this happens in less than a blink of an eye!

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A kid's guide to intense
emotions and strong feelings

Can you feel sad and
happy at the same time?

Does anger
really make you hot?

Are you likely to be
envious?

Why is stuff so
embarrassing?

Chock-full of cool psychology and info on emotions, real-life stories from kids, interesting facts, and feelings quizzes, *Understanding Myself* will help you notice just what all your emotions and feelings are telling you about yourself, your friends, and your family.

So go ahead, take a peek inside! Soon you'll be an expert . . . on you.

"A young person can get really confused about emotions! I would know, considering I'm 12. But this excellent book can help you a lot."—Katja Lohrer, age 12

"*Understanding Myself* is full of information necessary for a kid to know. After reading this book you will see the way your emotions work in a new light."—Venezia Harrison, age 12

"A valuable book for kids by a gifted psychologist which can truly help children better understand themselves."—Michael Krasny, PhD, host of KQED's Forum, professor at San Francisco State University, and author of *Off Mike* and *Spiritual Envy*.

"*Understanding Myself* is an insightful, smart book that will definitely help preteens. But if you're a parent, buy an extra copy for yourself. I lost track of how many times I found myself saying, 'Gee, I didn't know that!' *Understanding Myself* will make you a better parent, too."
—Armin Brodt, host of *Positive Parenting*, KOIT Radio, San Francisco, and author of *The Expectant Father: Facts, Tips, and Advice for Dads-to-Be* and *The Military Father*.

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