Is it a Feeling or an Emotion Retrieved on January 25th from

<http://karlamclaren.com/is-it-a-feeling-or-is-it-an-emotion/>

**Emotions, feelings, and the difference between them: It’s the difference between having and knowing**

An *emotion* is a physiological experience (or state of awareness) that gives you information about the world, and a *feeling* is your conscious awareness of the emotion itself. I hadn’t really understood why the distinction was such a big deal, because I don’t experience a huge gap between emotion and feeling. I mean, if there’s an emotion going on, I feel it.

But this isn’t true for everyone. Many people are honestly unaware that they’re having an emotion. For them, the emotion and the consciousness of it are not strongly connected, and they don’t even realize that they’re [**fearful**](http://karlamclaren.com/intuition-is-what), or [**angry**](http://karlamclaren.com/the-gifts-of-anger), or [**depressed**](http://karlamclaren.com/hello-darkness-my-old-friend). Their emotional state has to become so persistent that it drags them into a severe mood (or is pointed out by someone else), and *then* they can realize, “Oh, I guess I’ve been really sad about my mom, or afraid about money, or angry about work.”

For many people, there’s a disconnect between emotion and feeling; there’s no consciousness of the emotion at all. They *have* theemotion, but they don’t *know* about it. The emotion is certainly there, and their behavior displays the emotion (to others at least), but they aren’t *feeling* it properly.

Maybe they need a chart to show them what emotions look like! Thank goodness the Department of Lolcatz has provided us with one! But seriously, I hypothesize in my book that this disconnect between emotions and

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| Photo of cat emotions | feelings stems from the constant, repetitive, and relentlessly anti-emotion training we get, where emotions are allegedly the opposite of rationality (wrong), the opposite of spirituality (wrong), and the center of all the world’s problems (wrong [ish]). I think people aren’t aware of their emotions because they’ve been trained since birth to repress, suppress, ignore, demonize, and avoid them. This training isn’t helping anyone. It makes you emotionally unaware and emotionally chaotic — because an unfelt emotion can carom around inside you like a hyperactive pinball. Luckily, if you can *feel* your emotions, you can become more aware and more intelligent about them. |

And contrary to the rotten training we get about emotions, feeling and knowing your emotions can actually help you relieve them.

**Feeling, naming, and knowing**

[**Mathew Lieberman at UCLA has done some interesting research on emotion recognition**](http://www.apa.org/monitor/oct06/talking.aspx), and apparently, if you can name a troubling emotion, you can immediately calm yourself and your brain down. Lieberman’s research is showing us that there is a healthy link between having emotions, feeling emotions, and cognitively identifying emotions.

In the book, I write about using your verbal and cognitive abilities to identify, articulate, and support your emotions, and I’ve noticed in decades of practice and teaching that this does three things:

1) It helps you learn to feel and identify your emotions, which helps you calm and focus yourself;

2) It helps you understand when, why, and how your emotions arise so that you become more emotionally aware, and;

3) It recruits your verbal skills to support and consult with the emotion so that you can learn from it and take constructive, emotionally appropriate action.

In [***The Language of Emotions***](http://karlamclaren.com/books), you use your rational, verbal skills to *support* your emotional awareness, and that’s a huge leap away from the old, tired “emotions are the opposite of rationality” drivel.

Emotions certainly are not the opposite of rationality. Emotions are physiological signalers of what’s going on in your world. Emotions are simply data; *you* are the interpreter of those data, and [**how you interpret and work with your emotions**](http://karlamclaren.com/how-much-emotion-is-too-much) determines whether the outcome is rational or not.

Current neuroscience is showing us how vital emotions are to our thought and decision-making processes. If we can learn to feel emotions intelligently, we can widen the boundaries of our intelligence so that emotions and rationality are partners instead of combatants. It’s vital to know how to feel, name, and understand emotions, *especially* when the emotions are big, uncomfortable, or dangerous.

**Flowcharts!**

Let’s look at the simplest healthy pathway from emotion to action (these are simplified, clearly, and there’s a great deal more complexity involved when emotional illnesses are present, but these broad strokes are worth understanding):

**Emotion → Feeling → Naming → Acting on the information the emotion provides**

Let’s put sadness into this flowchart. It would go like this: I *have* an emotion; I *feel* that it issadness; I *name* the sadness; and I *take the action* my sadness requires (which might be sighing, slowing down, letting go of tension, or crying, among many other sadness-based actions).

But wait! I didn’t include the situations and stimuli that evoke emotions; let’s not leave those out. Emotional stimuli can be anything that evokes an emotion, including your own thoughts. Emotions tell you that something is up, and that something can include your own thoughts.

Notice that I’m using the word *evoke* here. Emotions are not created out of thin air, and they’re not created by your thoughts; emotions have evolved over millions of years to help you understand and respond to the world. Emotions exist within your brain and body, and they are *evoked* by specific stimuli.

**Emotionally evocative stimulus → Emotion → Feeling → Naming → Acting on the information the emotion provides**

But wait again! You may misperceive the stimulus! For instance, you may see a coiled up rope and experience fear as if you’re seeing a snake. Or, if your emotion is evoked by your thoughts, you can misperceive reality. Your thoughts might not be right, especially if you don’t regularly stop to question them. If you act on an emotion that was evoked by stimuli that aren’t valid, you might do something misguided or careless.

Stimuli can also be unrelated to emotion, yet evoke an emotion anyway. For instance, if your heart rate or your adrenaline rise, your body may respond as if a fearful stimulus is present. Similarly, [**if you are smiling or frowning, your body may respond as if you are happy or angry**](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=smile-it-could-make-you-happier). Emotions give you information that *something* is going on, but it’s up to you to figure out what that something might be.

That’s why I inserted a step that allows you to identify the stimulus and (hopefully) figure out what’s really occurring.

**Emotionally evocative stimulus → Emotion → Feeling → Naming → *Questioning the emotion* → Acting on the information the emotion provides OR deciding *not to act* because the stimulus is invalid**

I know this seems like a long pathway, but you can actually do it in a split second once you get your empathic skills under you. It’s not hard. It’s actually much harder in the long run to sleepwalk through your life, being pushed around by emotions you can’t identify or understand.

So an emotion does this: It gives you information about an emotionally relevant stimulus. It tells you what you’ve perceived and what you’re experiencing. Your job as the partner of your emotions is to feel the emotion, name it, ask the correct questions, and act in a way that is both emotional *and* rational. I’m saying it’s doable.

When you know how to feel your emotions, the process becomeseasy (and fun, and enlightening) once you get the hang of it! More importantly, when you know how to feel your emotions, your big, intense, and potentially dangerous emotions become less toxic, and so do you.