

Facial Expressions Turn On Physiology of Emotions

Source: [Big Think](#) 

Facial expression allows us to self-generate any emotion! Sadly, self generating enjoyment is apparently the most challenging.

Renowned psychologist and emotion-guru Paul Ekman describes how introducing conscious awareness to facial expressions can help one override and control their emotions.

Transcript— One of the most amazing discoveries, it completely surprised me, and that's what I like most in research is when you learn something you didn't you were going to learn. That's very different from research where you prove something you think you already know. You have to do that too 'cause maybe you were wrong, but when you discover something you didn't expect, that's really exciting.

And what we discovered, published this more than 20 years ago, made the front page of the New York Times. We didn't kill anybody. What it did was show that if you put on your face one of the universal expressions you will turn on the physiology of emotion. You will begin to experience that emotion. So the face is not simply a display system that tells you what's happening inside me. I can self generate any emotion by making the movements on my face.

Now some of them are harder to make than others, and wouldn't you know it the one that's the hardest to make is the one that turns on enjoyment 'cause a smile alone won't do it. You have to be able to activate one of the muscles around the eyes and only about ten percent of the people we've tested can do it.

We are just beginning to use this discovery of how you can self generate emotion to teach people how to become more aware of what they're feeling at the moment they feel it. Because it is my belief – and I want to underline the word belief 'cause I can't prove this – it's my belief that the way in which emotions evolved it was to deal with things like saber-toothed tigers. The current incarnation of which is the car that's suddenly lurching at your car at a high speed.

You don't have time to think. You have to do and make very complex decisions, think of what you do to avoid that car you make split seconds estimates of speed and angle and what you need to do with your feet and your hands. And if you had to think about what you were doing, you'd be dead. So it's a system that evolved to deal with really important things without your thinking about it.

So that means that sometimes you're going to be very inconsiderate, very thoughtless, sometimes your emotions aren't going to fit the situation and you're not even going to know it until someone says to you, "What are you getting so upset about?" And you think, "Oh, my God. That's right. I'm really afraid. I don't know why. Maybe I shouldn't. Maybe I misunderstood the situation."

Well these exercises that we're giving people – moving their facial muscles, concentrating on the sensations that they then experience to make them more aware of an emotion when it arises, so that they will feel it at the moment and then can say, "Did you really mean to ignore me when she put the toast on the table? No. That was just an accident. Or maybe I shouldn't jump to the conclusion that she doesn't care about me at all. And why doesn't she care about me?" That whole business, it takes the way in which we can improve our emotional life is to introduce conscious awareness into the process and that will take practice and nature did not want you to do that so you have to do it yourself.

Directed / Produced by Jonathan Fowler and Elizabeth Rodd

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