

# Primary & Secondary Emotions

## PRIMARY EMOTIONS: WHAT ARE THEY?

In simple terms: primary emotions are the feelings we get as a direct result to an external event.

Primary emotions occur quickly, strongly and very close to the event in question. They are the body's first response to the external event.

**For example:** Someone cuts you off in traffic, you feel angry, frustrated, etc. Someone says something mean, you feel hurt.

## SECONDARY EMOTIONS: WHAT ARE THEY?

The easiest way to understand secondary emotions is that they are emotional reactions to our primary emotions.

While primary emotions offer us useful information, secondary emotions often cloud our thinking and make it difficult to parse out exactly why we're feeling what we're feeling.

**Example:** If you were raised in an environment where anger was not an acceptable emotion to feel or express, likely you will feel shame or embarrassment, or even anxiety when your anger does come around. Or if someone says something mean and your primary reaction is to feel hurt, your secondary reaction may be anger at being hurt or vulnerable, shame at being able to be hurt, etc. These are reactive emotions to the primary emotion.

## EXAMPLE:

*Someone cut me off in traffic, so I am angry is a lot easier to understand and get to the root of than someone cut me off in traffic so I am embarrassed.*

Learning to differentiate between your primary and secondary emotional reactions can be of enormous help. You will be able to understand your initial emotional reactions as well as the way in which you process emotions (secondary emotions).

## TYPES OF SECONDARY EMOTIONAL REACTIONS:

### DISCOMFORT WITH OR JUDGEMENT REGARDING THE PRIMARY EMOTION:

When you are uncomfortable with your initial, primary emotional reaction (see above example of anger) you will formulate a secondary emotion that can be used to deflect your attention away from the emotion you are uncomfortable with, and onto a new emotion.

### EMOTIONS EVOKED FROM YOUR PERCEIVED IDENTITY:

This happens when we assign personal meaning to an external event. When we perceive someone to be passing judgement on us, our worthiness, our value, our image, our morals, etc., we react to that rather than to the situation in which we actually exist. Reminding yourself that another person's behavior, or an external event actually only says something about the event/person at hand (not you or your value) you can decrease the intensity of your emotional reaction, and react to the situation rather than the meaning you have assigned it.

## INTENSE EMOTIONS FROM PAST EXPERIENCES:

Intense emotions that we have experienced in past events is stored in our memory. Your emotional memory can be triggered by current experiences. When we haven't processed the intense emotions from past—often traumatic—events, those emotional reactions will resurface in the present.

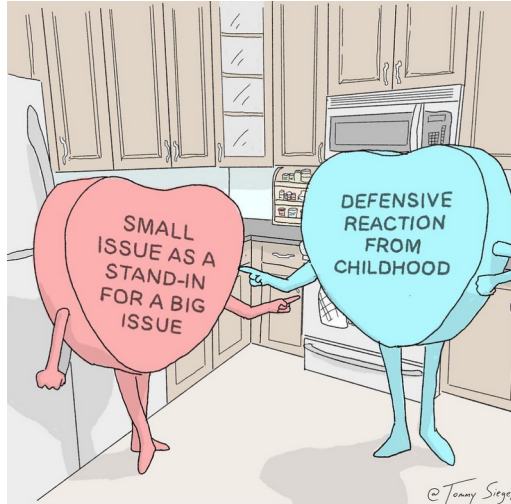


Image Credit: @tommysiegel

## EMOTIONS FROM YOUR ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT YOUR ENVIRONMENT:

When we make assumptions or create expectations that we want our environment to always match up with, we inadvertently increase the intensity of the emotions we feel in response to the world around us. Example: if you want everyone to approve of you and your choices, your emotional response to disapproval is much stronger than if you recognized that not everyone will always approve of you. Then, instead of reacting to the failure you feel as a result of not getting that approval, you can focus on & react to the situation at hand.

## EMOTIONS DERIVED FROM FEAR OR ANTICIPATION OF THE FUTURE:

When we fear or anticipate the events of the future, we intensify our emotional reactions & emotional states. Example: If we are nervous because we expect failure, any sign of a setback or problem will trigger intense emotions. (Fear, shame, anxiety, etc).

## PRIMARY OR SECONDARY EMOTION?

When you are trying to unpack what you're feeling, use these questions to determine if the emotion you're experiencing is a primary or secondary one.

1. Is what I'm feeling a direct reaction to an external event?  
[Primary]
2. Is the emotion I'm feeling becoming more intense over time?  
[Secondary]
3. Am I experiencing the emotional reaction with more frequency than the event that prompted it? [Secondary]
4. When the initiating event subsided, did my emotional reaction subside as well? [Primary]
5. Is the emotional reaction I'm having continuing on long after the event that caused it? Is it interfering with my abilities in the present moment? Has it been affecting new experiences?  
[Secondary]
6. Is what I'm feeling complex, ambiguous, or difficult to understand? [Secondary]