

Primary and Secondary Emotions

Primary emotions are fairly simple to understand. They are your reactions to external events. Some precipitating event may cause you to experience emotion. Example: You may feel sad that someone hurt you or anxious about an upcoming test.

A secondary emotion is when you feel something about the feeling itself. Example: You may feel anger about being hurt or shame about your anxiety.

Secondary emotions turn emotions into complex reactions. They increase the intensity of your reactions. Differentiating between primary and secondary emotions provides powerful coping skills.

Types of Secondary Emotional Reactions

1. Discomfort with or judgment about your primary emotion. When you fail to validate your primary emotion as normal, reasonable, even helpful, you will create a secondary emotion. Example: When you are hurt by another, you will often turn this hurt into anger. Then you will be dealing with the anger and avoiding the primary emotion of hurt. It is wise and easiest to deal with the hurt.

2. Emotions evoked from your perceived identity. If you assume that an event or the behavior of another person says something about you, your worthiness, your goodness, your value, or your image, then the emotion evoked from the event will be intense. If you realize that the event only says something about the event or the other person/people involved, you decrease the intensity of your reaction.

3. Intense emotions from past events. Intense emotions are stored in memory. You can recall your emotional reactions to particular events – particularly intense emotions or traumatic events. Emotional memory can be triggered by present events that offer a similarity to past events. If you stop avoiding your emotions and experience them in present time, old emotions lose their power and lower in intensity.

4. Emotions from assumption you make about your world. We all make assumptions about our world. Some are accurate; some are inaccurate. Either way, these assumptions either increase or decrease the intensity of our emotional experience. If you think that everyone must approve of you then, every time you experience disapproval, you will experience intense emotions. If you have learned that some people will disapprove and that is okay with you, your emotional state in the face of disapproval will be lessened.

5. Emotions from your fear or anticipation of the future. Fear or anticipation about your future will intensify your emotional states. If you expect failure, evidence of problems will create intense emotions. If you expect success, this same evidence will create emotions that are less intense or immediate.

Differentiating Between Primary and Secondary Emotions

- Is this emotion a direct reaction to an external event? Primary
- Is the emotion becoming more intense over time? Secondary
- Do you experience the emotion more frequently than the events that prompted the emotion? Secondary
- When the initiating event receded, did the emotions recede? Primary
- Does the emotion continue long after the event, interfere with your abilities in the present, and affect
 - new and different experiences? Secondary
- Is the emotion complex, ambiguous, and difficult to understand? Secondary

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