



Theories of Emotion ^[1]

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Anxiety and fear are emotional states. A brief overview of what emotional states are and how they work will prepare you to fully understand the specifics of fear and anxiety.

Fear and anxiety may feel similar in daily life. We may even talk about being fearful and anxious as the same thing. As we'll see, these emotions share many biological similarities in the mind but they are fundamentally different neurobiological experiences. They do, however, share one very common thread: They are both emotions.

What Are Emotions?

As this course will talk at length about two specific emotions, it's a fine idea to have a basic understanding of what emotions are and how they work. (For an intensive look into emotions, click [here](#) ^[3], [here](#) ^[4], and [here](#) ^[5].)

You may be tempted to write off emotions as "feelings." After all, since most of us live under the constant presence of emotions, it can be hard to define what they truly are. At their core, emotions are our reactions to sensations and events in the world as well as our subjective reactions to our own thoughts. Of course, these reactions aren't merely abstract—they are usually followed by certain physiological sensations. Where fear and anxiety are concerned, these could include increased heart rate, a rise in blood pressure, and sweaty hands and palms.

Many theories have put emphasis on certain facets of emotions to explain them. The James-Lange theory ^[6] of emotion states that emotions are the biological outcome of our reactions to stimuli (a basic cause/effect cycle). The Cannon-Bard theory ^[7] posits that we experience emotional arousal at the same time we interpret a stimulus. And the Schachter-Singer theory ^[8] emphasizes the cognitive (interpretive) role we introduce into emotional states. Emotional states don't merely activate some biological series of events; it is our ability to interpret these stimuli and give them context which colors and changes how we experience emotions.

These theories show the wide interest and many minds that have worked to understand emotions since psychology's beginnings. Evidence and experiments will continue to test and revise these theories, but one thing remains certain: Our emotions are both biological and cognitive, and their interplay helps us feel the world with exquisite richness.

Evolutionary Theories

The above theories may help us comprehend how emotions happen, but where did they first come from? Evolutionary theory [9] provides yet another explanation for emotions.

As we've seen, stimuli in the environment "arouse" certain emotional states. These states then trigger a cascade of particular physiological reactions, and our cognitive (thinking) mind further categorizes and shades these signals.

During early human development, many scientists believe that the emotions we experience today—especially "primal" ones like anxiety and fear—were biologically "selected" for their adaptive advantages and then transmitted through subsequent generations. These reactions appeared under very specific situations that then generalized and grabbed a firm hold of our evolutionary development.

For example, the fear response would activate if an early hominid was out hunting and came across a fierce predator. This reaction alerted our distant ancestor that danger was present and its life was in danger. It could decide to **fight, run away (flight), or freeze in place** to survive another day.

By contrast, another hominid who paid no mind to its fear reaction would have been easy prey indeed. Over generations, the sequence of arousal patterns and physiological reactions took root in our early ancestors. All emotions—from guilt, compassion, anxiety, and fear—likely have evolutionary origins akin to these. They all act to aid our survival, both socially and physically.

It's amazing to think that all of our modern emotions have a common point of origin during our species' emerging development. The same feelings that kept our ancestors alive and able to reproduce flow in our bodies and minds, too. Regardless of the specifics, the function of emotions, including the much-maligned fear and anxiety, solely exist to help us navigate and survive our day-to-day lives. They do what they have always done - it is in many cases the dangers (or imagined dangers) that have changed.

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