

Understanding and Reconciling The Seven Primary Emotional Drives

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Effective coaches assist their clients by helping them “learn to learn” — the topic of which is themselves and their relationships. Coaching, with its strong affiliation to organisational effectiveness and efficiency, can be mistakenly viewed as a practice that celebrates a narrow and analytical view of rationality.

This misunderstanding can be perpetuated by prospective coachee’s who may ‘only’ want to focus on the perceived keys to performance (perception, thinking), banishing emotion to the realm of the therapist. Whilst this is likely not the approach for any coach with a rigorous degree of psychological training, it can still be a mode of performance we are tempted to slip into when a client is impatient for results.

Emotions and Conscious Choice

Recent work in the fields of affective neuroscience, embodied cognition, and interpersonal neurobiology is revealing how important emotions are for the conscious choices we make. This article explores the foundations of this pioneering work, emphasising the seven primary emotional drives and the importance of understanding them for the purpose of our and our client’s emotional needs and development.

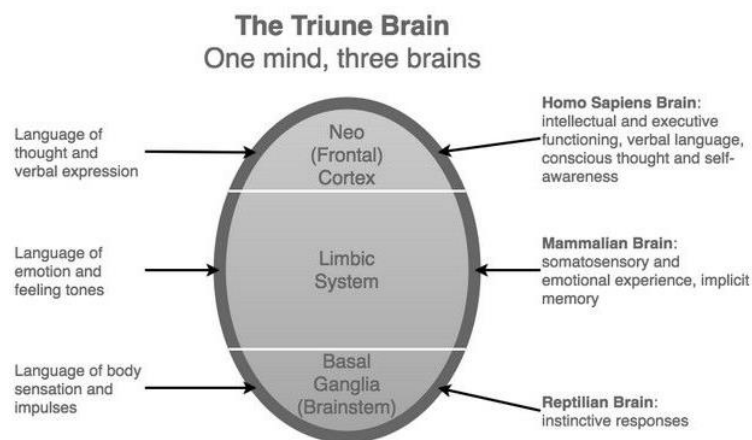
‘The Hidden Spring’

The word *emotion* comes from the French word *émotion*, a compound of old French and Latin terms meaning, “to stir up,” to “agitate,” and “to move.” By dropping the *e* from emotion, we are left with the word *motion*; a useful way of understanding how our thought and behaviour is driven by what we feel. Professor of Neuropsychology and Psychoanalyst Mark Solms argues in his book, [The Hidden Spring](#), that our consciousness is rooted in this feeling. The title alludes to the fact that our conscious awareness, rather than being found in our more evolved, analytical faculties, emerges instead from the ‘hidden spring’ of our emotions.

How can you be unaware of a feeling?

Our brain is a hierarchical system with the most evolved faculties of language, conscious thought and self-awareness at the top, and the most ancient functions of body sensations and instinctive responses at the bottom. Our emotional experience springs primarily from the middle, the top of the brainstem and limbic system, what is referred to as the Mammalian Brain.

Figure 1. The Triune Brain



The emotional drives that emanate from the lower-and-middle parts of the brain have a significant impact on how we think, talk, and behave. As Solms' states convincingly in his work, it is these emotional drives that form the basis of consciousness, (how can you be unaware of a feeling?) instinctively shaping our cognition in a way that enables us to meet our needs.

Needs, Drives, Feelings and Learning

Homeostasis and the difference between needs and drives

A need in this context is something autonomic. Physically we need to keep our body temperature within a certain range, a nonconscious process called homeostasis. It is only when these automatic responses no longer work — and we need to make a conscious choice — that this need becomes a drive. For example, if our body temperature drops below a certain level, we become aware of the drive to put on a jumper or turn up the heater. Our *need* to regulate our body temperature becomes a *drive* to put on a jumper when our autonomic homeostatic responses are no longer sufficient.

According to Solms this process of homeostasis also applies to our emotional needs and the seven primary emotional drives. An emotional need, like the need for self-efficacy (the belief you can achieve your goals) is one that sits within the range of homeostatic equilibrium. As shown above, a need becomes a drive when we become conscious of it — when it is prioritised in the mind, and we are required to choose a response. In the case of self-efficacy, our inability to meet our goals doesn't feel good, an unpleasantness that triggers a drive to find new approaches. According to Solms, it is this tipping outside of homeostatic balance — experienced as a negative feeling — that triggers an emotional drive.

The Seven Emotional Drives

The seven emotional drives, reliably map onto specific instinctive, physiological responses that are common across all mammals. First coined by Jaak Panksepp, these categorisations do not have unanimous support, but they are the most widely used within the field of affective neuroscience. The names of each drive are capitalised by those within this field to distinguish them from the subjective feelings we associate with them:

The Seven Primary Emotional Drives:

- FEAR (Response: Freeze/Flight)
- RAGE (Response: Fight)
- PANIC/GRIEF (Response: Relates to attachment to caregivers and involves distressed calling/crying in the PANIC phase and despair in the GRIEF phase)
- CARE (Response: Nurturing)
- LUST (Response: Erection, Lubrication)
- SEEKING (Response: 'Foraging behaviour/novelty seeking')
- PLAY (Response: rough and tumble play)

In the previous example, a client's unmet need of self-efficacy might trigger their SEEKING drive — leading to instinctive emotional responses of searching and exploration to find new ways of meeting their goals. However, it is also possible that they feel conflicting responses like RAGE, causing them to fight against their current situation, or FEAR which leads to avoidance and inertia. What is important to remember is that we can't do everything at once. We can't eat AND sleep and we can't PLAY if we are consumed by FEAR. This need for prioritisation is what can lead to the inner conflict that leads people to seek coaching in the first place.

The importance of learning

Another aspect making these drives difficult to reconcile (compared to say a bodily drive of feeling cold) is that they mostly emerge in relation to the unpredictability of others. What is important to remember is that these drives are instinctive, meaning they have a narrow range of response. Anyone who is or has been a parent to a toddler knows how narrow this range can be. A toddler has not developed the more advanced brain functions that allow for reasoning and self-reflection, and so are relatively at the mercy of their emotional state.

A toddler's instinctive reaction in situations where the PLAY drive has been thwarted often leads to a drive of RAGE, expressed as tantrums and aggressive behaviour (hitting and throwing). The conflict between the PLAY/RAGE drives leads the toddler to be flooded with emotion; expressed as screaming, crying and tears in response to being prevented from playing with the power point. The challenge for the toddler's development is learning how to reconcile their drive to play and the shifting requirements of their parent's rules to keep them safe.

Thought, feelings and learning

Our conscious thought and capacity to analyse, predict and learn from experience has evolved in response to the unpredictable environment we live in. Whilst our primary emotional drives may form the foundation for our conscious thought, their narrow range of responses requires us to expand this range via learning — a process which is governed by feeling and memory.

Feelings are a hybrid of thinking and emotion. Whilst emotions arise as sensations within the body, feelings arise from our thoughts about these emotions. Feelings are how we have learnt to interpret and respond to the emotions moving through us. Feelings can be thought of as a compass that guide our approach to problems, bringing what psychologists call *valence* to situations. Valence is how we evaluate and value certain kinds of experience (does this feel good or bad?) and is the basis for voluntary decision making. The defining feature of voluntary behaviour and subsequently of decision making is choice — choices grounded in values moulded over time by feeling.

Learning, Long-and Short-term Memory

The choices we make then are heavily informed by what we have learnt. To learn, we need to remember what did or didn't work in the past (and how we felt about it) and predict what might work in the future. It is here where the instincts of our emotional drives meet up with the expectations and predictions of the analytical faculties we have accumulated through learning. The better our predictions of the environment, the less uncertainty we experience and the more likely we can meet our goals — something that feels good. The unpleasant feeling of making a series of wrong predictions or choices, provides the impetus for us to learn from our actions and seek what other alternatives may help us reach our goals. Whilst this long-term memory of the past is how we try and predict what may work in the future, it is our short-term or working memory where we monitor and evaluate whether or not we are on the right track.

Suffering from our Feelings and Memory Reconsolidation

What is interesting for the coach is that these short-term memories can become more labile when our evaluations trigger an emotional response. As these memories haven't been consolidated into the stickiness of long-term memory, they are less automatic and more susceptible to change.

If we are continuously predicting correctly, there is very little reason for us to change our approach. It is when things are not going well that we begin to, in the words of Solms, suffer from our feelings. Feelings that arise from conflicting emotional drives and the defences that emerge to protect against this negative experience — defences that can keep us stuck in patterns of self-sabotage.

Like the example above, this person's need for self-efficacy may lead to a drive of SEEKING being prioritised in the mind, but it may also lead to RAGE or FEAR, and the subsequent

inner conflict that causes anxiety. The role of the coach would be to reactivate the emotional memory of the client, creating new experiences in the 'now' of the coaching session that re-consolidate that memory as something less restrictive. In psychotherapy this process would be referred to as lowering a patient's defences, a process that enables a client to learn a new way of experiencing their emotions — rather than acting out of habit.

“Notice it, name it, tame it” How we can help to reconcile our emotional drives

As mentioned earlier, a coach helps a client help themselves, by helping them “learn to learn” about themselves and their relationships. Helping a client develop insight into their inner states of emotion, feeling and thought can form a foundation for becoming aware of, and in time regulating those states. The repressive power of the executive functions of our brain (and the difference between the adult and the toddler) is that we are able - through self-awareness and language - to regulate the vagaries of our emotional experience.

Emotional Awareness (Notice it)

We cannot regulate what we are not aware of, so this process begins with cultivating emotional awareness by becoming mindful of our inner world. By becoming mindful of our inner world, we can start to pick up on cues relating to thoughts, feeling, behaviour, sensation — and start to learn from them.

Emotional Literacy (Name it)

Becoming aware of emotions forms the basis of being able to notice and label those emotions with language. This ability of being able to name what emotion is occurring (“ah, that tightness in my chest is anxiety,”) not only develops a vocabulary, but separates the client from their experience. By transforming the unarticulated nature of a feeling into an object in language, the client can begin to recognise and take steps to deal with these sensations. The client then reclaims a sense of themselves as experiencing anxiety, rather than being consumed by anxiety. It is the difference between saying, “I notice a feeling of anxiousness,” compared to, “I am anxious”.

This process involves a simultaneous curiosity about our emotional life, but also the ability to step back from it. In my coaching practice I use the process of ‘feeling/saying’ combined with ‘tracking/reflecting.’ During this process the client is encouraged to notice their sensations and say what they feel — regardless of how fuzzy or indeterminate that feeling may be. It is the coach’s role to track in mind what the client is saying and reflect this feeling as they hear it. This process then becomes a ‘mindfulness-for-two’ practice as we both pay attention to the here-and-now of each other’s experience. Through this practice, the client begins to sharpen their awareness and develop a literacy of their emotional life by labelling and hearing the reflections of their thought.

Emotional Regulation (Tame it)

This process of separating the client from their immediate emotional experience can carve a space to regulate emotion and make more conscious choices. The client can then begin to learn from this new relationship with their feelings and over-time change how they are responding to them. These processes of noticing and labelling provide us time to make more deliberative, rather than instinctive responses. By practicing this we can realise, in the words of Psychiatrist Dan Siegel, that by naming it, we are able to tame it.

Conclusions: Bringing It All Together

The poet W. H. Auden wrote that, “We are lived by powers we pretend to understand.” This phrase describes how much of our mental life is swirling below the surface of our cognition, powering our thought, feeling and behaviour. However, our behaviour is not completely determined by these powers — we have the capacity for choice, and as coaches, we can help ourselves and our clients develop the skills to increase this capacity. The great task of mental development is to find an equilibrium that enables conscious choices that supports our growth and sustains our relationships. By cultivating practices that maintain this equilibrium we can begin to integrate our competing emotional drives, the feelings which mediate our learning and the conscious choices we make.