

Why do we have emotions?

What a great question! Emotions are supposed to function like an internal alarm system, letting us know when it's time to take action. When we feel peaceful, calm, relaxed, or mellow, our alarm system is telling us that we're in the right place, doing the right thing, thinking the right thoughts. When we feel tense, nervous, irritated, frustrated, angry, etc., our bodies are sounding the alarm. As emotions, they are telling us that something's wrong and it's time to take action.

But not everyone's alarm system works well. Some alarm systems sit silent when smoldering embers need to be doused before they become towering infernos. Other alarm systems are set at such a low threshold that they blare at even the most distant, harmless spark. Stated in real-world terms, some people ignore their pain until they can't stand it anymore and then act in ways that are terribly self-defeating. Others explode under even the least threatening of circumstances...also terribly self-defeating.

What makes it so difficult to process emotions effectively (so they trigger constructive action)? The answer is often **trauma**. When people are exposed to trauma, and especially chronic trauma, their alarm systems are damaged. They may produce false alarms or no alarms. They may be too sensitive, picking up every little potentially threatening cue, or not sensitive enough.

If you have an alarm system that is no longer well calibrated, so that everything feels painful or you've gone numb, what are your options? Your best options begin with careful self-evaluation, answering questions like, "When is my alarm most likely to be triggered?" "What is my alarm trying to tell me?" "What's the healthiest strategy for getting my alarm to stop ringing?" "If I don't

carefully evaluate this alarm, what mistakes might I make?" "If I react too quickly or slowly to the actual problem triggering the alarm, what will the consequences be?"

Emotions should be understood from this perspective. They need to be valued for what they are: alarm systems telling us that something needs to be fixed and not further broken. People with alarm systems that are activated too easily need to practice sitting in their discomfort until they know how to turn off the alarm without setting a new 10-alarm fire. Those who don't pay enough attention to their alarm systems need to ask themselves, "When I feel slightly uncomfortable, what's going on? What can I do about it, before things turn much worse?"

These recommendations fall under the larger ***mindfulness*** umbrella. It is through deliberate, intentional, reflective, mindful contemplation that you can eventually tell the difference between real fires and benign sparks; real enemies and imagined enemies. Consider this question: Is your alarm set to high or too low? Whichever it is, strive for constructively putting out fires, rather than starting new ones or ignoring fires until they're unmanageable. Make sure your alarm system triggers positive action, that protects you from smoke and fire damage. You have the equipment to put out the fire; extinguish it mindfully, deliberately, intentionally, skillfully.