

Primary vs Secondary Emotions: The Distinction That Could Positively Change Your Life Forever!

Sebastian Salicru
Registered Psychologist
Board-Approved Supervisor
PTS Psychology, Canberra, ACT, Australia

Primary vs. Secondary Emotions

Secondary emotions are emotional reactions to primary emotions

- Cover up or mask our primary emotions
- Are learned responses from our family of origin and culture (socialisation process) on how to feel about our primary emotions

Primary Emotions

- ✓ Fear
- ✓ Sadness
- ✓ Disgust
- ✓ Surprise
- ✓ Anger (although sometimes is secondary)
- ✓ Joy/Happiness

Primary (or basic) emotions are our most fundamental and direct initial reactions to an event or situation.

- Crucial for survival
- Innate and universal
- Serve an adaptive function
- Constitute a distinct affective state
- Don't require learning – are hardwired in the brain.

Primary emotions are mostly painful and feel uncomfortable (e.g. Fear, Sadness)

Make us feel vulnerable

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- Do you often feel anxious or depressed?
- Or do you ruminates (continuously think about the same issues) or procrastinate?
- Or do you perhaps find yourself blaming others and/or complaining more that you would like to?

If so, the chances are that you're unable to identify, get in touch with, understand, process, and express your primary emotions effectively.

The distinction between primary and secondary emotions is often elusive to most people. Yet, understanding and acting upon this distinction can be life changing.

But first, let's look briefly at why understanding our emotions is critical.

Three Main Reasons Why Emotions Are Important

1. Emotions convey information that signals what's important in our lives (our needs and wants), as they are linked to our biological states and [nervous system](#).
2. They connect us to action by facilitating movement towards what we need or want. The term '[emotion](#)' derives from French *émotion*, from *émouvoir*, 'excite' based on Latin *emovere*, 'out' and *movere* 'move'.
3. They also provide meaning, continuity, and wholeness in our lives. Emotions play a critical role in the [evolution of consciousness and functioning of all our mental processes](#).

Hence, blocking, ignoring or misreading our emotions preclude us from: experiencing optimal mental health and psychological well-being; making smart life choices; forming and enjoying intimate relationships, and living a fulfilling and meaningful life.

Primary Emotions

Primary (or basic) emotions are our most fundamental and direct initial reactions to an event or situation (e.g. experiencing sadness following a loss, or fear when perceiving a threat).

Primary emotions are:

- Crucial for survival
- Functionally adaptive
- Innate and universal
- Distinct affective states
- Hardwired in our brains (don't require learning).

Our key primary emotions are: fear; sadness; disgust; surprise; anger (although sometimes is secondary); contempt; and joy/happiness.

Each primary emotion has a distinct purpose and functionality, and can be either adaptive (healthy) or maladaptive (unhealthy), as depicted in the table below.

Purpose of Emotions				Functionality of Emotions	
Emotion	Action Tendency	Message	Need	Adaptive vs Maladaptive	
Sadness	Slow Down Withdraw	Loss Grief Sorrow	Healing	Grieving	Hopeless Despair Desperate Clinging
Fear/Anxiety	Avoidance Get away!	Danger, Threat, Apprehension, Dread, Fright, Panic	Safety	Signals Sanger	Traumatic
Anger	Attack or Assert	Unfairness "Someone is taking advantage of me"	Protection Draw Boundaries	Empowering	Destructive
Shame	Hide Cover up	"There is something wrong with me"	Social-acceptance Approval	Belong to Group	Self-hate Contempt
Guilt	Make Amends Solve Problem	Regret Remorse "I have done something wrong to you"	Self-respect	Apologising	Blaming
Disgust/ Contempt	Aversion Revulsion	Distaste	Protection	Healthy Outrage	Self Other abuse
Love/Joy	Care, Nurture Protect, Kindness Do More of the Same	The Recipient is Worthy Stay Close This is Good	Connection Relationship	Caring Freeing	Addictive Clinging

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More later on how primary emotions can be expressed adaptively or maladaptively.

Secondary Emotions

Secondary (or complex) emotions are emotional responses that follow the primary emotions, unless these are processed effectively in the first instance. They are defensive or inhibitory emotions (e.g. feeling guilty when angry and then turning the anger inwardly).

Secondary emotions are not necessarily recognised or expressed universally across cultures. Hence, they are socially constructed. They constitute the learned response from our family of origin and culture (socialisation process) on how to feel and react about our primary emotions.

Common examples

- You may feel anxious (and likely depressed over time) when you experience anger (primary emotion). This could be because when you became angry as a child, you were punished. Alternatively, you were told either that “anger is bad” or “dangerous”, or that “you need to control your anger”. So, when you become angry now, you experience fear (primary emotion) about either being punished or that something bad will happen if you acknowledge and express your anger.
- You may feel shameful, angry, anxious, overwhelmed, numb or shut down when you experience sadness (primary emotion). Likely this is because you’re unable to cry or express your sadness, because as a child you were told either that “crying is a weakness” – or, if you are a man, that “real men don’t cry”. So, either you internalised this message as an implicit core belief/assumption (you are unaware of it), or you hold this message as an explicitly strong belief and way of being. Either way, it’s very likely that since the time you absorbed this message, you have not allowed yourself to cry or become vulnerable – a state in which the self possibly feels fragile, deeply ashamed or insecure. Yet, vulnerability is a universal aspect of the human condition (common humanity), and essential to achieve healing and develop intimacy in relationships.
- Anxiety, depression, passive aggression and/or resentment, for instance, are complex emotional states that can result from shrinking oneself, due to having learnt to be a [people pleaser](#). This entails a deep fear of abandonment, rejection, disapproval and of disappointing others. So, ‘people pleasers’ do what it takes to make others happy, in order to avoid feeling rejected or disapproved of.

Four Types of Emotional Responses

Not all emotional responses are the same. Some are adaptive or constructive (healthy, useful or helpful). Others are maladaptive or destructive (unhealthy, not useful or unhelpful).

Let’s use anger as an example.

1. Primary Adaptive Responses

Primary adaptive responses are natural, biological and evolutionary emotional responses. Adaptive, assertive or constructive anger, for example, used to set boundaries in response to violations, such as being humiliated, physically abused or injured, are examples of adaptive emotional responses. This entails acting in ways to help you protect yourself to maintain boundaries when your rights or boundaries have been threatened or violated (e.g. you have been attacked, disrespected or your property has been damaged). Such types of responses indicate an assertive sense of self that demands respect and will not tolerate abuse. They are the most direct and useful responses to a situation, and best way to shape an adaptive action. When we act this way, we don’t get stuck (e.g. ruminating, blaming or engaging in passive aggressive behaviours – secondary and unhealthy responses). Hence, they are useful, healthy and constructive emotional responses.

2. Primary Maladaptive Responses

These are, for example, destructive or damaging types of anger responses (e.g. road rage, overreactive, harmful or damaging aggression). This type of anger tends to be rooted in the past (unfinished business or exposure to unconstructive role models). They are the product of a history of previous experiences or events, don't help us to cope, and they aren't useful because they keep us stuck, as they no longer fit our current situation.

3. Secondary Maladaptive Responses

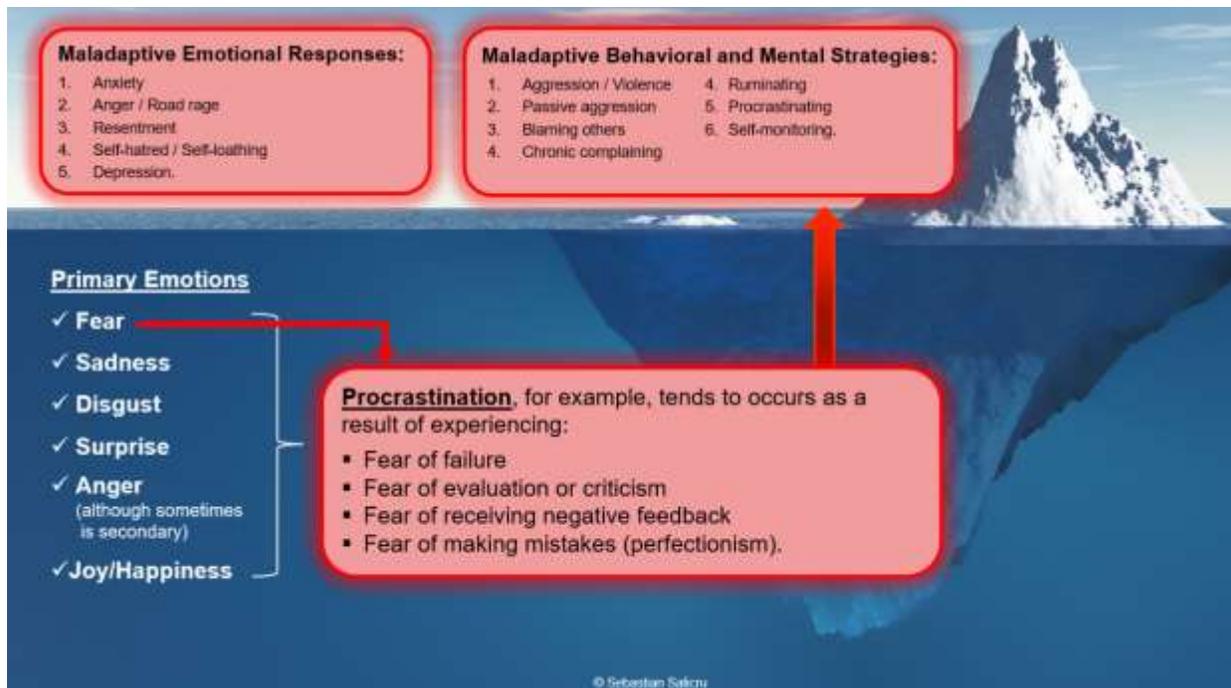
These relate to the experience and expression of secondary or more complex emotions, as outlined above (i.e. responses to primary emotions). For example, if someone puts you down or insults your pride, your primary emotion is likely to be shame. Then, you may attack or retaliate (secondary reactive anger).

Secondary emotions, therefore, are reactive emotions. They mask or cover up our primary emotions, and require exploration to transform them into more adaptive emotions.

4. Instrumental Responses

These are deliberate angry responses displayed to intentionally scare or intimidate others (e.g. bullying). While such behaviour is generally manipulative and destructive, other types of instrumental aggressive responses can be useful as protective, deterrent or even lifesaving measures. For example, yielding to certain wild animals (e.g. mountain lion) to avoid being attacked, or hitting a shark on the nose to avoid being hurt.

Six common maladaptive behaviours as responses to avoid primary emotions



Rumination and procrastination are two maladaptive behaviours for ways to deal with fear of failure or even success ('fear' is the primary emotion avoided).

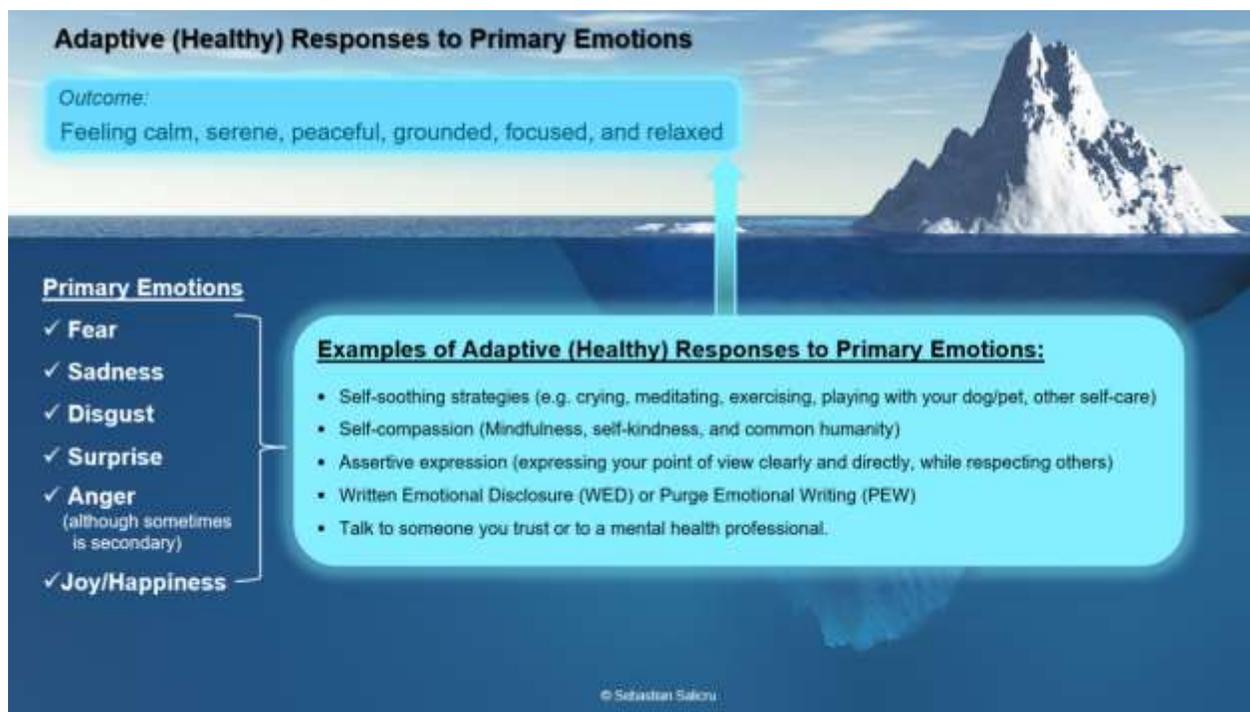
1. **Rumination** – the process of continuously thinking about the same thoughts, which tend to be sad or dark – is a common way to avoid painful emotions. However, it is not mentally healthy, as it can prolong or intensify depression as well as impair your ability to think and process emotions.
2. **Procrastination**, for example, is very common among people with perfectionistic tendencies. Think about it – the best way of avoiding failure is not even trying to do or accomplish something in the first place.
3. **Self-monitoring** relates to over-regulating your behaviour to accommodate social situations by protecting yourself from social disapproval.
4. **Blaming others**, along with passive aggression, is another maladaptive behaviour. It is a way to avoid being assertive, or to avoid criticism, receive negative feedback, fear of making mistakes, or fear of being humiliated or feeling rejected ('fear', again is the primary emotion avoided).
5. **Chronic complaining** is another maladaptive behaviour people use to deal with the 'fear' associated with accepting the reality of a situation, and taking responsibility for subsequent action.
6. **Passive aggression** is the pattern of indirectly expressing negative feelings instead of openly addressing them. Passive-aggressive individuals might appear to agree — perhaps even enthusiastically — with someone else's request. However, rather than complying with the request, the passive aggressive person might express anger or resentment by failing to follow through or missing deadlines. Specific signs of passive-aggressive behavior include:
 - Blaming others
 - Acting stubborn
 - Acting hostile or cynical
 - Being disagreeable or irritable
 - Procrastinating or being forgetful
 - Frequently criticising or protesting
 - Being cynical, sullen or hostile attitude
 - Complaining about being unappreciated
 - Performing tasks inefficiently or making mistakes
 - Resentment and opposition to the demands of others
 - Displaying a cynical, pessimistic, or aggressive demeanour
 - Frequently complaining about feeling underappreciated or cheated
 - Procrastinating and intentionally making mistakes in response to others' demands
 - Displaying resistance, bitterness, or resentment toward the requests or demands from others

Emotional Awareness

Emotional awareness entails being aware of our primary emotions. This involves being aware of and naming (express) the actual feeling associated with the emotion felt at hand. This always occurs after the emotion is felt in the body.

Increasing the awareness and acceptance of our emotions is the first step to be able to change them into a healthier, more adaptable, functional and productive state.

Failure to do so leads to experiencing more complex secondary emotions and/or maladaptive behaviours, as described earlier.



Emotional Processing

Emotional processing relates to the decreased inhibition of emotion, increased self-understanding, and enhanced positive self-reflection.

This entails the following six stages:

1. Emotional awareness
2. Emotional expression
3. Emotional regulation
4. Emotional reflection
5. Emotional transformation
6. Corrective emotional experience and generation of alternatives.

Benefits of emotional processing

- Enhances our sense of self and our relationships.
- Derives our integration, completeness, fullness, sureness, balance, serenity, calmness, aliveness and clarity.
- Relieves us when we suffer (emotional pain or adversity). That's why crying is good for you! Crying is [self-soothing](#).

10 Ways Crying Benefits Your Health



**Health
benefits of
tears.**

When you suppress your tears,
you suppress your healing

1. Dulls pain.
2. Rallies support.
3. Improves mood.
4. Helps self-soothe.
5. Detoxifies the body.
6. Restores emotional balance.
7. Helps you recover from grief.
8. Activates your parasympathetic nervous system – aka our calm state.
9. Releases oxytocin and endorphins, which help to relieve pain and elevate mood.
10. Helps sleep.

Tears can serve as a means of 'secondary evaluation', helping us to realise how much we are upset now, to understand our feelings.

If you are a man, remember this:



Conclusion

Primary emotions are direct reactions to events or situations. Secondary emotions are conditioned responses we use when we struggle with our unresolved feelings related to our primary emotions.

Primary maladaptive emotions and behaviours such as reactive anger or passive aggression make us feel bad and stuck, and tend to be rooted in the past. They also include: feeling depressed; self-pity; complaining; having tantrums; being hysterical, ranting, or experiencing false-calm; overexcitement, or anxiety. Such responses are destructive to yourself and others.

When you experience a secondary emotion, the key is to figure out what is your primary emotion. So, you can then take an action that is most adaptive and helpful.

Practical principles:

- Distinguish between primary and secondary emotional experiences that are adaptive or maladaptive.
- Become aware of and express your primary adaptive emotions in healthy ways.
- Notice your immediate (here and now) bodily experience, using mindfulness, as a means of activating and regulating your adaptive emotions.
- Be conscious and reflect about your emotions as a means of integrating your new experience into a meaningful personal narrative.

Caveat

The developing cortex added to the emotional brain's in-wired emotional responses leads to the ability to learn and form internal neural networks. They produced signals that evoked emotional responses from your previous life experiences. These emotional memories and networks of lived emotional experiences form [emotion schemas](#).

[Emotion schemas](#) are organised responses, and experience-producing units, stored in memory networks. They assist us to interpret, evaluate and respond to our emotions and the emotions of others. Instead of being governed simply by biologically and evolutionarily-based affect motor programs, emotional experiences are produced by the synthesis of highly-differentiated structures that have been refined through experience and are bound by culture into emotion schemas. These emotional structures are enduring, pervasive, and resistant to change.

If you are feeling overly anxious, depressed, stuck, hopeless, helpless or in despair over a period of time, contact a mental health professional.

Disclaimer:

The content of this article is for informational and educational purposes only. It is not psychotherapy. Nothing found in this writing is intended to be a substitute for professional psychological, psychiatric or medical consultation, assessment, diagnosis, advice or treatment.

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Author | Psychologist | Psychotherapist | Board-Approved Supervisor
PCC (Professional Certified Coach) | Leadership-Executive Coach, Facilitator & Advisor
Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia

