

FM-PTS-05

SESSION 5

EMOTIONS, FEELINGS, AND YOUR BRAIN

12 Weeks to a Stronger You | Post Traumatic Strength

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EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS: NOT THE SAME THING

An emotion is a biological response. It begins in the brain and body — it is chemical, neurological, and largely automatic. Emotions arise before you are even fully conscious of them. They are signals, not choices.

A feeling is what you do with that signal — it is the subjective, conscious experience and interpretation of the emotion. Feelings are shaped by your history, your beliefs, your thoughts, and the story you are telling yourself about what is happening.

The practical difference: you cannot always choose your emotions. They show up whether you want them to or not. But you have far more influence over your feelings — and that is where emotional intelligence lives.

THE EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE

There are six core emotions that most researchers agree are universal across cultures: sadness, joy, anger, love, fear, and peace. Each emotion generates a cluster of feelings, and understanding the difference between them helps you identify what is actually happening inside you.

- Sadness → feelings like unlovable, lonely, guilty, incapable, glum. Sadness signals loss or disappointment. The feelings it generates can make you withdraw.
- Joy → feelings like lovable, confident, secure, self-accepting, strong, delighted. Joy signals connection, achievement, or appreciation. The feelings it generates are energizing.
- Anger → feelings like jealous, dissatisfied, intolerant, resentful, disgusted. Anger signals a perceived violation or injustice. The feelings it generates can drive action — constructive or destructive.
- Love → feelings like satisfied, tolerant, kind, grateful, humble, generous. Love signals connection and safety. The feelings it generates open you up.

THE EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE (CONTINUED)

- Fear → feelings like worried, nervous, stressed, indecisive, confused, impatient, rigid. Fear signals threat. The feelings it generates narrow your focus.
- Peace → feelings like relaxed, calm, productive, stable, committed, patient, flexible. Peace signals safety and sufficiency. The feelings it generates expand your capacity.

Notice that every emotion on this list — including the difficult ones like fear and anger — has a useful function. Emotions are not the enemy. They are information. Learning to read them accurately is the core of emotional intelligence.

YOUR BRAIN: TWO SYSTEMS IN CONVERSATION

To understand why emotions sometimes feel like they hijack you, you need to know a bit about how your brain is built.

The limbic system is the emotional center of the brain. It processes emotional stimuli rapidly and automatically. When something triggers a fear response, the limbic system fires before you are conscious of what happened. This is the system that kept your ancestors alive — fast, reactive, protective. For veterans, the limbic system has often been trained to fire at a very low threshold, because in combat, that calibration kept you alive.

The cerebral cortex — specifically the prefrontal cortex — is where rational thought lives. This is where you reason, plan, reflect, weigh options, and consider consequences. It is slower than the limbic system, because careful thought takes more time than a threat response.

When the limbic system fires a strong emotional response, it can temporarily reduce access to the cortex. You have experienced this: the moment when you were so angry, afraid, or overwhelmed that you literally could not think straight. That is not a character flaw. That is neurobiology.

ENGAGING YOUR RATIONAL BRAIN

The goal is not to silence the limbic system. It has a job to do. The goal is to build a faster bridge between the emotion and your rational response — so that you can feel what you feel without being entirely driven by it.

This is what the EQ skills are building. Self-awareness gives you the ability to notice the emotion before it fully takes over. Self-management gives you tools to regulate the response. Together, they create space between the trigger and your reaction — and in that space, you have a choice.

The practices in this program — grounding, meditation, physical activity, journaling, the three-times-a-day emotional check-in — are all training the prefrontal cortex to stay online longer under pressure. They are literally changing the wiring.

Every time you pause and notice your emotion rather than reacting automatically to it, you are strengthening the connection between your limbic system and your cortex. That pause is where growth happens.

LOOKING AHEAD

LOOKING AHEAD — SESSION 6

Next session we go deeper into two powerful concepts: interoception — your internal sense system — and self-regulation. We will also identify your signature negative emotion and what that tells you about where to focus your work.

Before next session, use the emotion and feeling framework. When you feel something strong, name the emotion first, then identify the feeling beneath it. Just observe — no judgment.