Emotions, Moods, and Personality Traits

By Rafael Mendez

The terms *emotions* and *feelings* are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same. Human beings are sentient, meaning we can feel and also be aware of what we feel. We have the capacity not only to experience sensations such as pleasure, pain, or arousal, but we can also reflect on those experiences as they occur. We can be *self-aware*. What we feel at this basic level is physiological. Physiological sensations are bodily feelings that arise from physical processes in our nervous system, muscles, organs, and hormones. They are the sensations you notice in your body as it responds to internal states and external events.

These sensations can include a pounding heart, blood racing, tightness in the chest, butterflies or heaviness in the stomach, muscle tension, sweating or flushing, shallow or rapid breathing, warmth or chills, dry mouth, and changes in energy or fatigue. Although physiological sensations accompany emotions, they should not be confused with emotions themselves. In fact, very different emotions can feel identical at the physiological level. Imagine you and your friend are about to go bungee jumping. You feel thrilled, your heart is pounding, and your blood is racing with anticipation. Your friend standing next to you is terrified, their heart is pounding, and their blood is racing with fear. Physiologically, excitement and fear feel the same. It is how we perceive and interpret the situation that determines our emotions.

When talking about emotions, we need to distinguish them from moods, temperament, and personality traits. People often use these terms interchangeably, but they mean very different things. Understanding the difference helps us make sense of each in everyday social interactions.

First, a paradigm shift. A paradigm is a frame of reference that shapes our understanding of a concept. For example, it was once believed that the Earth was the center of the universe. Then came a paradigm shift, a radically new way of understanding the universe. The paradigm shift presented here concerns how we understand emotions. Human life is irreducibly social: we are always acting among others who see the world differently. Even when we are seemingly alone, we remain embedded in a social world. Therefore, human emotions are fundamentally social. Moreover, emotions are not something you have; they are

activities you do. You do not possess anger as if it were an object; you engage in the activity of being angry. Emotions, in my view, are *social activities*.

Emotions give shape and direction to what we do. They are expressed primarily through facial expressions and the movements of our body, as well as through speech. Facial expressions and bodily postures are not accidental reactions; they are actions we perform to communicate our emotions and intentions. An angry face and a threatening stance, for example, warn others to back off. Sadness draws care and attention. Fear signals vulnerability or alerts others to danger. We understand others' emotions less by what they say than by how they express themselves. These emotional exchanges are fundamentally *social interactions*.

Emotions are short-lived, biologically based responses to specific events. They show up in the body and face almost immediately. For example, fear prepares us to escape danger, anger signals a boundary violation, and sadness attracts attention, care, and support from others. These emotional expressions communicate what we are experiencing and often what we are about to do. *Emotions are social, not private activities.* There are basic, primary emotions (distress, pleasure, fear, anger) that afford infants the ability to communicate long before they can speak. And there are an innumerable number of complex social emotions we develop as we mature. Note in the following examples the social character of these complex emotions:

Guilt – feeling distress over having harmed someone or violated one's values.
Shame – painful awareness of oneself as flawed or exposed in the eyes of others.
Pride – satisfaction tied to achievement and social recognition.
Jealousy – fear of losing a valued relationship mixed with anger and insecurity.
Envy – resentment or longing directed at someone else's advantage.
Gratitude – appreciation that includes recognition of another's intention.
Ambivalence – holding conflicting emotions at the same time.
Bitterness – lingering anger mixed with disappointment and hurt.
Compassion – concern for another's suffering combined with motivation to help.
Resentment – sustained anger tied to perceived injustice.
Regret – sadness and self-blame about past choices.
Loneliness – sadness combined with social longing and disconnection.

Emotions are distinct from Moods. Moods last much longer, sometimes hours, sometimes days. Moods often don't have an apparent cause. You might wake up

feeling irritable or down without knowing exactly why. Unlike emotions, moods don't push us toward immediate action. Instead, they shape how we interpret events. Moods shape our perception and experience. When you're in a bad mood, neutral events feel more negative, and emotions like anger or sadness are triggered more easily. Emotions are immediate and specific. Moods are slow and diffuse. Moods act like a filter through which emotions pass.
One can be in a cheerful, calm, optimistic, irritable, pessimistic, tense, or bored mood.

Temperament refers to biologically based emotional reactivity that appears early in life and remains. Some people are naturally more reactive, more cautious, or more emotionally intense, while others are paced and slower to respond. Temperament doesn't determine what emotion you feel in a given moment; rather, temperament influences how easily emotions are triggered and how strong. Since your temperament comes from birth, it shapes how your personality develops.

Temperament is distinct from moods. A mood is a temporary emotional state that can last hours or even days. Moods are often shaped by situations, experiences, sleep, stress, or the surrounding environment. For example, feeling irritable today or gloomy for a few days. Temperament, by contrast, refers to a person's underlying emotional style. It remains relatively stable over time and shapes how strongly and how quickly someone tends to react emotionally. For example, someone can be generally easygoing, or highly reactive, cautious, sensitive, or slow to warm up. In short, mood reflects *how* you are feeling right now, while temperament is your baseline emotional pattern. Temperament influences how easily moods are triggered and how long they last, even though moods themselves can change without altering one's temperament.

Personality traits develop as we mature and remain relatively stable along five dimensions. The five dimensions are on a spectrum from one pole to the other. They are: *Extraversion* vs *Introversion*, *Openness* vs *Closedness* to experience, *Agreeableness* vs *Disagreeableness*, and Conscientiousness vs Unconscientiousness, *Neuroticism* (emotional instability vs. stability).
From an emotional standpoint, *Neuroticism is especially important*. People with a high level of neuroticism are people who tend to experience negative emotions like anxiety, anger, or sadness, more frequently and more intensely than others.

Low-level neuroticism (often called emotional stability) means one's emotional reactions are less reactive and more easily regulated. Personality traits describe patterns of being over time. Emotions describe what's happening right now

For example, someone who is high in neuroticism isn't always anxious or upset, but they are more prone to experiencing those emotions across many situations. Personality traits tell us how often and how easily emotions emerge, not which emotion someone is feeling in the moment.

These distinctions matter. When emotions, moods, temperament, and personality traits are blurred together, understanding breaks down, and confusion follows. You can't study the biology of fear by measuring neuroticism, just as you can't identify someone's personality by reading their facial expression. Facial expressions reveal emotions, not personality traits. Similarly, emotion regulation works differently depending on whether you're managing a quick emotional spike or a long-lasting mood.

In brief, emotions are quick emotional reactions. Moods are longer emotional states (hours to days). Temperament is totally different; it biologically based emotional reactivity. It's how we're biased to respond. Personality traits are enduring life patterns that shape how we experience emotions and behave. Personality traits, especially neuroticism, shape how frequently emotions occur and how intense they tend to be expressed. They are not emotions themselves. Understanding these distinctions gives us a clearer picture of emotional life and helps explain why people can experience the same situation so differently.