



Emotional Wisdom in the Christian Life

Jeffery S. Forrey



Brent & Monica



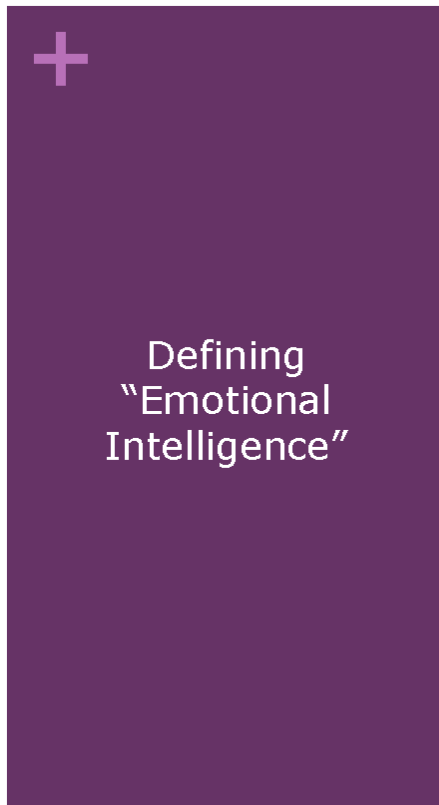
“Honey, there is something I’d like to discuss with you ...”

Brent is a seminary student who comes for counseling because of a growing concern expressed by his wife, Monica. She thinks he comes across at times as cold or insensitive. Although that is a sufficient reason to seek counseling, she presses even further. Monica argues that since he wants to be a pastor, she is concerned that his emotional cluelessness would be a stumbling block for him in that role too.

Brent, however, was not fully convinced by Monica’s reasoning. He came to me, somewhat reluctantly, with a couple of questions: What is the role of emotions in the Christian life? And should we focus on them as a necessary part of spiritual growth?

Answering questions about our emotions & their role in our lives is a complicated task. In the secular psychological literature, dealing with one’s emotions productively has often come under the label “emotional intelligence.” So another way to frame our topic for this session is to ask: Is developing emotional intelligence part of growing in spiritual maturity?

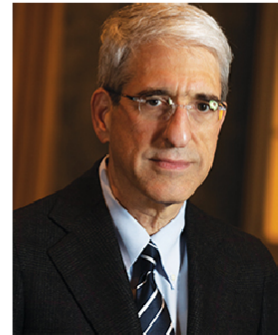
Let’s get acquainted with the concept “emotional intelligence” & assess it from a biblical perspective.



John Mayer



Peter Salovey



David Caruso



Marc Brackett

In 1990 John Mayer, a professor of psychology at University of New Hampshire & Peter Salovey, a professor of psychology at Yale University, published a article entitled "Emotional intelligence" in the academic journal *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality*. In it they proposed a set of skills they hypothesized were crucial for the accurate appraisal and expression of emotion, the effective regulation of emotion, and the use of feelings to motivate, plan, and achieve personal goals.

Some time later, they partnered with David Caruso to develop a instrument designed to test the presence of those skills associated with perceiving, understanding, using, and managing emotions well: the Mayer, Salovey, Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test.

When I decided to evaluate the effectiveness of a lay-counselor training program on trainees' levels of EI, I contacted Dr. Mayer for permission to use an earlier version of their test, and he sent me to David. David then became an advisor for me in my research.

Still later, Marc Brackett started working with Dr. Salovey at Yale, eventually becoming the founding director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence.



A Type of “Intelligence”



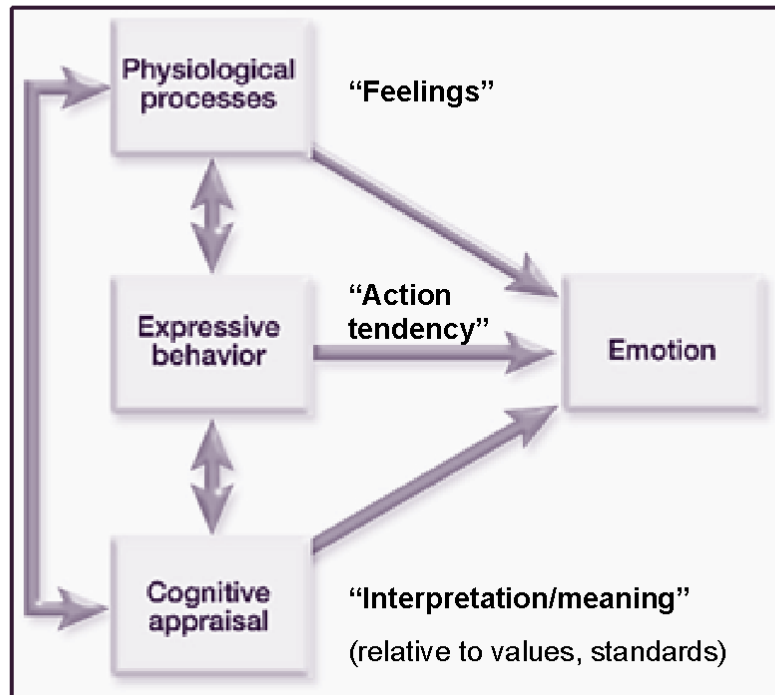
American Psychological Association:
“The ability to derive information, learn from experience, adapt to the environment and correctly utilize thought and reason.”

Mayer & Salovey propose that EI qualifies as a traditional “intelligence,” because it involves understanding emotions & emotion-related *data*, being able to use that data to guide *decision-making*, & *adapt to situations* in one’s life. That does indeed sound consistent with the APA’s general definition of “intelligence.” Although that might not sound like a radical idea today, in the history of Western philosophy & psychology, emotions were often viewed as chaotic forces that cloud our minds so that reasoning is impaired. For example, in the early 20th century, Stanford psychologist Lewis Terman, the developer of the widely used Stanford-Binet IQ test, said, “An individual is intelligent [to the extent that] he is able to carry on abstract thinking.” Emotionality, from this point of view, compromises intelligent thinking. And certainly anger could potentially lead to violence; sadness could potentially spiral into depression, and so on.

But are emotions inherently disruptive forces in our lives? From a Christian perspective, we’d have to say “no,” because emotions are part of God’s good design for us. Of course, as a result of the Fall, there are plenty of ways emotions can be disruptive and even dangerous, but that need not be our starting point for trying to understand them and their roles in our lives. Fortunately, emotion research in the last few decades, has given us a much more nuanced understanding of what they are.



About “Emotions”



Today, “emotions” are generally defined as responses to situations that involve some physiological process (that is, the subjective “feeling”), that is usually associated with a cognitive appraisal of the situation (based on one’s values, standards, & goals) and that prepares us to respond in typical ways (expressive behavior).

The Functions of Emotions

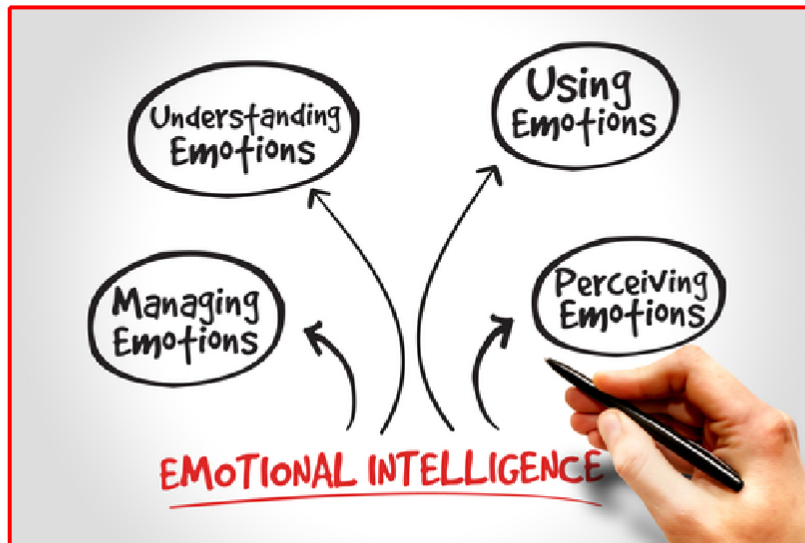


- ① They provide **information** for a response.
- ② They provide **motivation** for a response.

As sources of information emotions influence our decisions, priorities, and actions.
As sources of motivation, they can arouse, sustain & direct our behavior.

+

The Skills of “Emotional Intelligence”



<http://www.theeiinstitute.com/what-is-emotional-intelligence/4-mayer-and-salovey-model-of-emotional-intelligence.html>

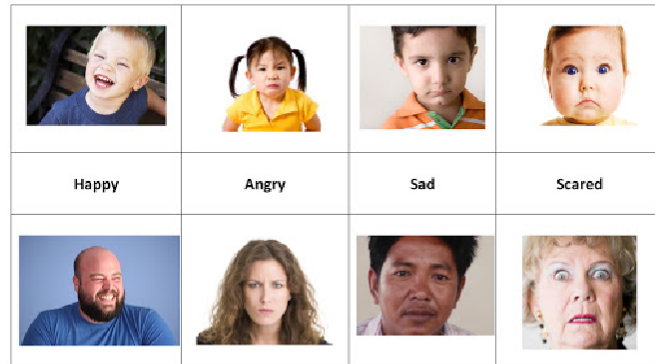
Because there is a connection between cognition, emotion, & motivation, it makes sense that there would be skills associated with perceiving, understanding, using, and managing emotions. Mayer & Salovey call these interrelated skill-sets “the branches” of EI.

Let’s briefly consider each of these branches of EI in a little more detail.



Perceiving & Expressing Emotions

Right now, I feel . . .



<http://www.famil.it.ca/blog/recognizing-and-learning-emotions/>

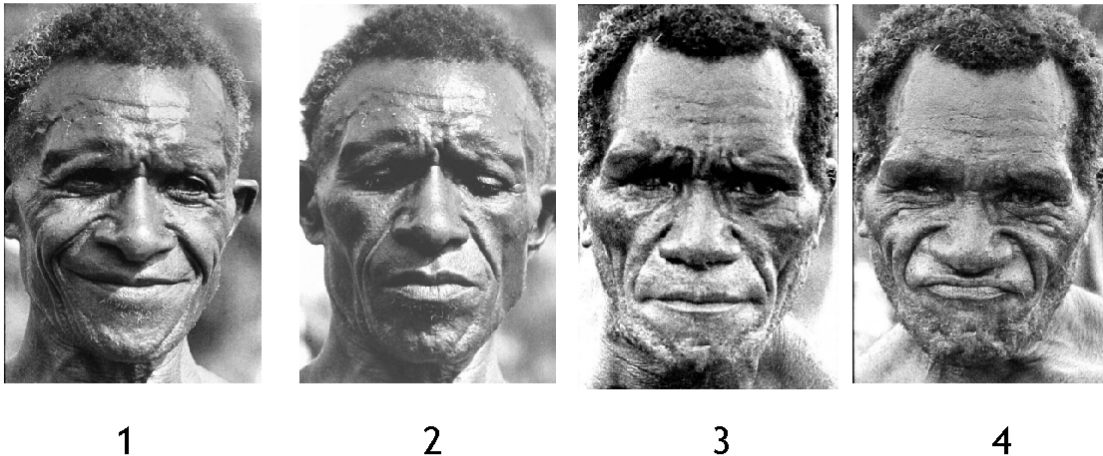
Some of the specific skills associated with this branch:

1. Being able to identify your emotions with clarity & specificity.
2. Being able to accurately perceive emotions in others in terms of: (a) people's facial expressions, (b) the pitch, rhythm, and tone of people's voices, and (c) body language."

Cross-cultural research over the past 60 years has repeatedly demonstrated that facial expressions of certain emotions can be accurately interpreted by people in a variety of cultures, even when they have been isolated from one another. This was demonstrated in the 1960s field research of Paul Ekman, who worked with a tribe in Papua New Guinea that had had very little exposure to Western culture.

Facial Expressions of Emotion

From the research by Paul Ekman:



Dr. Ekman studied the New Guineans' emotional expressions in a number of ways. For example, he showed pictures of Americans & asked the tribesmen to identify what the people in the pictures were probably feeling.

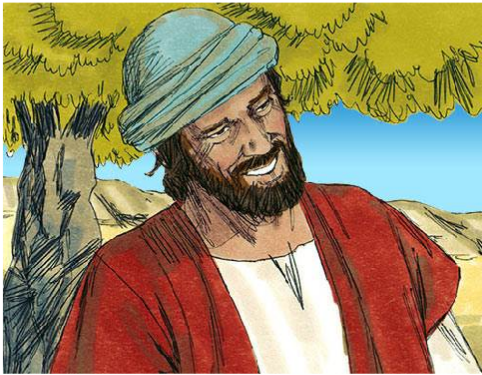
He also asked the tribesmen to give the facial expression they'd have in different scenarios. Let's see how you do identifying facial expressions of emotion from pictures of one of the tribesmen. Dr. Ekman asked a tribesman to show what his face would look in different scenarios:

1. If friends had come to visit. (Happiness)
2. If his child had just died. (Sadness)
3. If he was about to fight with someone. (Anger)
4. If he had just stepped on a dead, smelly pig. (Disgust)

There is strong evidence for the universal facial expressions of seven emotions – anger, contempt, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise. These facial expressions have been found in numerous cultures by various researchers & are considered to be innate.

Of course, some facial communication is culturally conditioned (learned), because different cultures also have “display rules”—expectations about what is considered appropriate or inappropriate ways of showing emotions.

Facial Expressions of Emotion



Proverbs 15:13

“A happy heart makes the face cheerful ...”



Genesis 4:6

“Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?’”

Of course, centuries before Ekman flew to Papua New Guinea, the face’s role in displaying emotion was acknowledged by the writers of Scripture.



Understanding Emotions



<https://theconversation.com>

The next branch of EI involves understanding the typical ways in which emotions function in our daily lives. Understanding emotions includes the following skills:

(1) Emotionally intelligent people recognize the typical causes & consequences of emotions.

Understanding Emotions

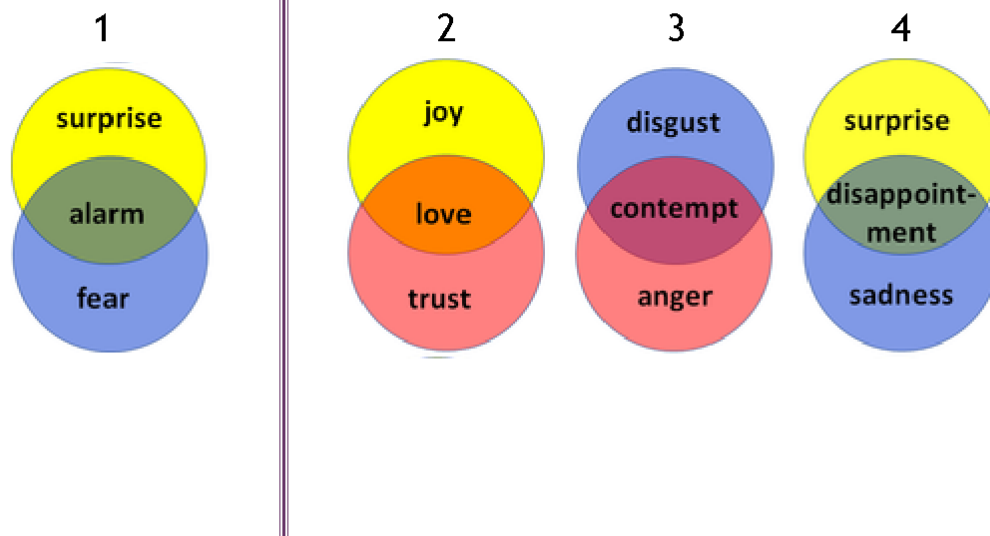
EMOTION	TRIGGER	RESPONSE
Happiness	What's valued (& present)	Celebrate
Sadness	What's valued (but absent)	Regroup
Fear	What's dangerous	Avoid; run away
Anger	What's unfair or unjust	Fight (to change what's wrong)
Disgust	What's unpalatable	Don't touch; expel; cleanse

From a Christian standpoint, each of these emotions has a God-honoring, appropriate purpose in our lives, but each one also can be twisted into inappropriate, sinful purposes as well. For example:

- Happiness is appropriate when we recognize God's good gifts in our lives, but it is inappropriate when we are delighted by the misfortune of another person.
- Fear is appropriate when we're faced with a danger—Prov. 27:12 says "The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty." But fear responses could dishonor God, as for example when Peter denied knowing Jesus.



Emotion Blends



<https://www.psychologytoday.com/nz/blog/dealing-emotions>

(2) Emotionally intelligent people recognize the existence of “emotion blends,” which provide a rich variety of data about the relationship of people to situations in their lives.

Let’s give this a try. On this slide are some examples of emotion blends. Example #1: If you are in a situation in which you experience both surprise & fear, you would be said to be alarmed.

These examples demonstrate that “understanding emotions” can be complex, but also very useful in our lives.



Using Emotions in Reasoning



<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-couch/202007>

A third branch (or set of skills) associated with EI is using emotion-related information to guide reasoning & problem-solving. For example:

(1) Emotionally intelligent people can understand how emotions “prioritize reasoning” so that important matters receive appropriate attention. “Just as facial expressions of emotion convey such information externally to others, the feelings of emotions convey it internally to oneself.” Although it might not be wise to instantly react to these feelings, it’s always worthwhile considering what those feelings reveal about what’s important to you in that moment.

Using Emotions to Facilitate Thinking

Positive Moods ...



for Brainstorming

Somber Moods ...



for Safety

(2) Emotionally intelligent people can recognize that different moods can facilitate different types of reasoning. Happier (more optimistic) moods facilitate expansive, creative thinking that can be important in problem solving because we tend to be open to new possibilities.

And yet "... negative emotions are also important because more somber (that is, serious) moods facilitate slower thinking, with greater attention to details & to possible errors. I took advantage of this when my kids were very young: I would grab their hands and sternly remind them of the potential dangers of crossing the Wal-Mart parking lot on Saturday afternoon! If a child takes the warning seriously, there is a greater chance of the child spotting dangers to avoid rather than suffer the consequences of blithely walking into them.

Using Emotions to Facilitate Thinking

Remembering Personal Experiences ...



to foster sensitivity
(empathy)

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”

(3) Emotionally intelligent people can bring up in themselves what others are feeling and thus can respond with considerable sensitivity to them. Paul makes this point in 2 Cor. 1:3-4.

More succinctly, in Rom. 12:15, Paul writes: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.”

This an important skill in ministering to people, because it helps them connect with you & thus be more open to any counsel you might have.



Managing Emotions



<https://www.forbes.com/>



<https://bosonbuddies-az.org/>

“... emotions are by no means always helpful. They can hurt us as well as help us. They do so when they are the wrong type, when they come at the wrong time, or when they occur at the wrong intensity level.”

“... emotional management is neither suppressing one’s feelings nor venting them. Effective emotion management is not a question of whether we should strive to control our feelings but how we can intelligently engage and disengage from them.”

Regulation might involve decreasing, maintaining, or increasing one or more aspects of an emotional experience. Therefore:

- (1) Emotionally intelligent people are open to their emotions—both pleasant and unpleasant—in order to learn about themselves.
- (2) Emotionally intelligent people are able to monitor, reflect on, or detach from an emotional state.
- (3) Emotionally intelligent people can exercise control over their expression of emotion for constructive outcomes (mood maintenance and mood repair).
- (4) Emotionally intelligent people can help others manage their emotions.



Don's Concern



“Carol has flipped out! I don’t know what to do!”

I was sitting at home on a Saturday talking with my parents, who were visiting from out of state. The phone rang, and I was shocked to hear the reason for the call. On the other end of the phone was a man from church, whom I’ll call “Don.” He was at a complete loss for how to respond to his wife whom I’ll call “Carol.”

“Jeff, it’s Don. Carol has flipped out. I don’t know what to do.”

“Don, what do you mean by ‘flipped out’? What is happening?”

“We were having a disagreement over how to handle Eric’s disrespectful attitude, and she just started yelling at me and then crying hysterically. She says she can’t take it anymore—that she is done trying ... Wait.”

“Don? Are you there?”

“Eric just said he was talking to his mom. She told him she took an overdose of pills.”
“Don, call an ambulance and get her to the hospital. Call me from there.”

Sometime later, Don called to let me know that the doctors successfully pumped Carol’s stomach and that she was waiting for a psychiatric consultation. I met him at

the ER about twenty minutes later. I was able to talk to Carol (she was still waiting for the psychiatrist to stop by). She was calm and visibly exhausted. We talked briefly about what had happened earlier in the day. As we talked, she confessed to overreacting to her disagreement with Don. Their history of loud arguing and her (overly) protective attitude toward her son had culminated in her meltdown.

Carol's meltdown is a classic example of the inability to manage extreme, unproductive emotional experiences. One element of her counseling was helping her to learn better emotion management (regulation).



Emotion Management (Regulation)

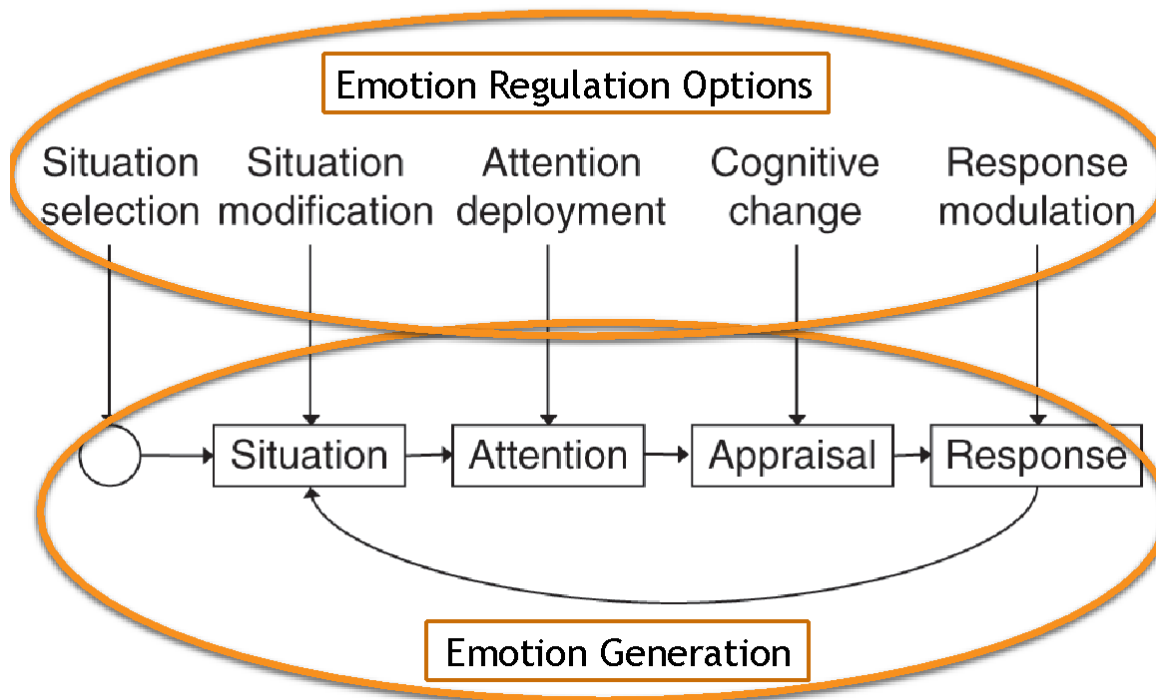


<https://spl.stanford.edu/james-gross-phd-0>

James Gross

The primary researcher who has led the way in this area of research is James Gross, Professor of Psychology at Stanford University.

Emotion Regulation

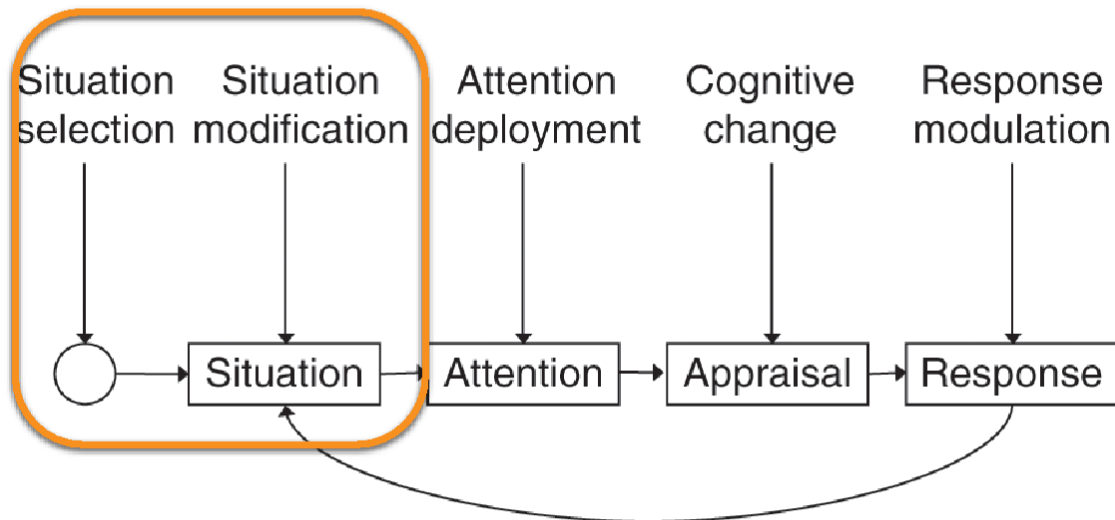


<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/heart-to-heart>

James Gross suggests that emotion regulation can occur at key points in the generation of an emotional experience—a process that consists of (1) a situation which grabs (2) our attention, leading to (3) an appraisal of what's going on relative your perceived needs & goals, which in turn, prompts (4) a response.

More specifically, he identifies 5 families of emotion regulation strategies that might be employed at different points in the emotion-generation process. Let's consider a few examples.

Emotion Regulation

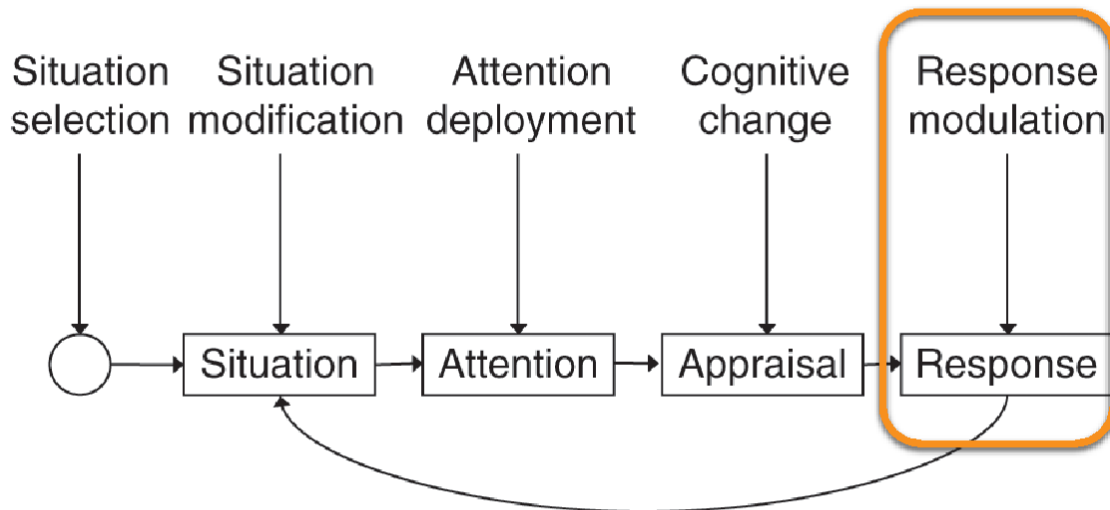


<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/heart-to-heart>

Certainly, one possible way for Carol to control emotions is to alter the situations she is in—or avoid some situations altogether—so that she might not be tempted to react in inappropriate ways. For example, if she finds that she is easily annoyed by an abrasive co-worker, she might try to avoid interactions with that person as much as possible. Such a strategy wouldn't be wise for dealing with her family members, however.

Carol could try another situation-related strategy with family members: She could avoid having a conflict-related conversation when she or her family members are really tired, hungry, or dealing with other significant stressors in their lives. That can help keep the emotion level dialed down & allow for a more productive conversation.

Emotion Regulation



<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/heart-to-heart>

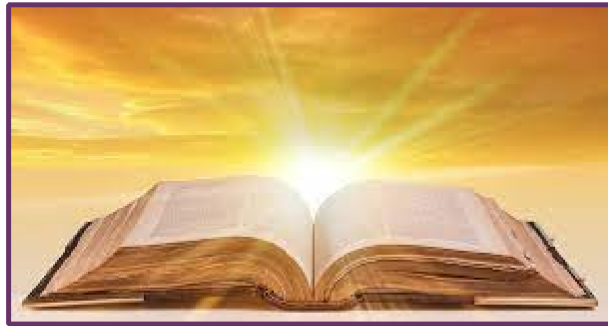
Try as she may, Carol might not be able to make adjustments early enough to prevent all troubling emotional experiences. But even if this is the case, she can still potentially short-circuit experiences of negative emotions that have started.

Carol might take a prayerful time-out. She could let Don or Eric [his stepson] know she is getting frustrated enough to be concerned about how she might react. Then she can suggest that they resume the conversation at a future time. (I recommend that she offer a specified time so the others are not tempted to doubt her sincerity.) In the interim, she can pray for God's guidance; she can think about any contribution to the conflict for which she must own responsibility; she can rehearse how she will state her complaint *in an edifying way*, giving grace to those who hear her. She will also be helped if she takes a walk or engages in some other physical activity, as this helps to use up some of the energy that gets stirred up with frustration.

And that concludes our overview of EI; let's now turn to evaluating it biblically.



Evaluating “Emotional Intelligence”



In 1995 Daniel Goleman’s book, *Emotional Intelligence*, was published. In it he sought to share the potential value of EI with a broad audience. Later that year, *Time*, ran a cover story on “EQ,” suggesting that it “may be the best predictor of success in life, redefining what it means to be smart.” These efforts did make EI part of our collective mindset, even though some of the claims of EI’s value did outpace the research at that time.

While the ability model of EI still awaits much research on its value, since then, researchers have confirmed EI’s value in a number of areas.



The Proposed Value of Emotional Intelligence



Marc Brackett

“Individuals who score higher on emotional intelligence tests tend to report better relationships with friends, parents, and romantic partners.”

Marc Brackett, *Permission to Feel* (New York: Celadon Books, 2019), chap. 3, loc. 975 [Kindle ed.].

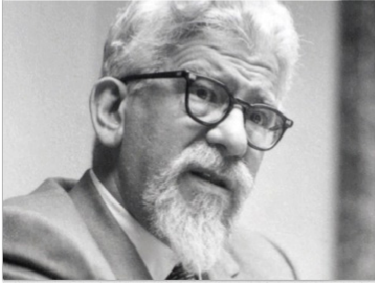
Brackett provides some reasons why emotionally intelligent people's relationships fare better than others: “They are more likely to accurately interpret nonverbal cues, understand someone else's feelings, and know which strategies could support another person to feel something more or less.”

Although there are some empirical data to support the value of EI, for us as Christians, evaluating EI has to go beyond the more pragmatic concerns of secular researchers.



Evaluating Emotional Intelligence *Biblically*

frasesdepensadores.com.br



“It has seemed puzzling to me how greatly attached to the Bible you [Christian theologians] seem to be and yet how much like pagans you handle it. The great challenge to those of us who wish to take the Bible seriously is to let it teach us its own essential categories; and then for us to think *with* them, instead of just *about* them.”

Quoted in J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 33.

I want us to take Rabbi Abraham Heschel’s challenge seriously. And to get us started with our consideration of biblical categories for evaluating EI, let go to Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman.



Emotional Intelligence & “Wisdom”



“The book, *Emotional Intelligence*, never once mentions the Bible or the book of Proverbs. But when the author,

Daniel Goleman, describes the concept of emotional intelligence, it sounds very similar to the concept of **wisdom** in the book of Proverbs.”

Tremper Longman, III, *How to Read Proverbs* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), 15.

Although Daniel Goleman’s conceptualization of EI is much more expansive than that of Mayer & Salovey, Longman’s point is still valid. I say that because of the way wisdom is described in the Bible:



“Wisdom entails the ability to avoid problems, and the skill to handle them when they present themselves. ...
“Wisdom is a skill, a ‘knowing how’; it is not raw intellect, a ‘knowing that.’”

Tremper Longman, III, *How to Read Proverbs* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), 14-16.

This conclusion about wisdom clearly overlaps with the skills that Mayer & Salovey propose for EI.

And it's this clear similarity between the constructs of EI and biblical wisdom that prompted Ken Sande to include aspects of EI in his model of relational wisdom.

Relational Wisdom



From the rw360 website: “Relational wisdom may be defined as your ability to discern emotions, interests and abilities in yourself and others, to interpret this information in the light of God’s Word, and to use these insights to manage your responses and relationships successfully.”

We see the correspondence between relational wisdom & the branches of EI especially in his READ acronym.

But what advances relational wisdom beyond the secular construct of EI is wrapped up in the comment: “interpret this [emotion-related] information *in the light of God’s Word*.” It takes us back to our Creator, which is critical because in the Bible wisdom is an outgrowth of an intimate relationship with God.



Emotional Intelligence & the “Heart”

Proverbs 4:23

“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”



Matthew 6:21

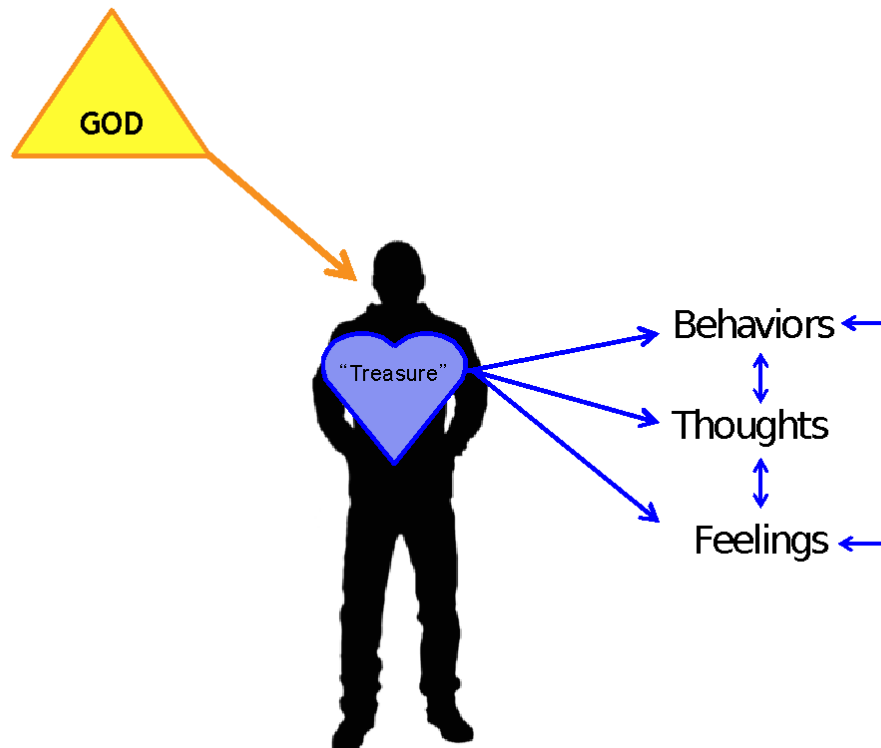
“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”



Another key biblical concept that needs to inform our understanding of emotions & their role in our lives is the “heart.”

In Proverbs 4:23 the “heart” represents your standards & values, your desires, motives, & goals; therefore, it is the source for your lifestyle choices. The “heart” is your moral & motivational control center. The condition or contents of the heart dictate how you *think about life experiences* and how you *respond to life experiences*.

Later, Jesus uses the term “heart” in the same way; e.g., in Matthew 6:21: Jesus uses “treasure” to refer to what’s most important to you, what you will strive to attain or accomplish.



Everything that we have described as part of one's emotional experience is said to come "out of the heart" in Scripture. There are 3 significant implications to this fact:

First: The heart always functions with respect to God, either in submission to him ("heart of flesh") or in rebellion against him ("heart of stone" or that interesting state James refers to as "double-mindedness").

People might not always be aware that they are reacting to God's clear presence, but they are. According to Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge." But God's revelation of his presence is not merely out there; it's *in us* too: In Romans 2:14-15 Paul says: "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them."

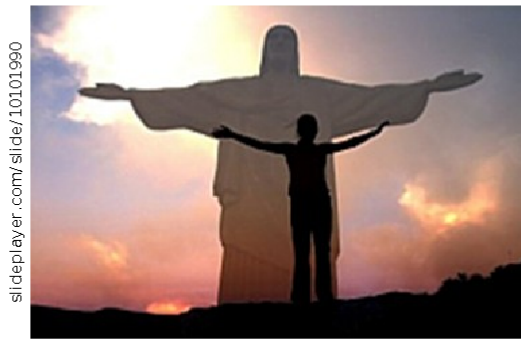
Second: The heart is the basis of God's evaluation of us. That means emotional patterns are significant pointers to how we are relating to God as we go through life in His world.

That explains one huge difference between the way emotional experiences & expressions are described in secular psychological literature & the way they are presented in the Bible. In the secular psychological research the focus is on their adaptability—whether they are useful or not useful to a person. But in the Bible emotional experiences & expressions are subjected to another level of analysis: their morality. Therefore, although we might say that *in principle* emotions are neither “good or bad” / “right or wrong,” *in actual experience*, coming out of the heart as they do, they need to be assessed in terms of “good/bad,” “right/wrong.” wise/unwise.

Third: Because behaviors, thoughts, and feelings all arise from the heart, they are interactive. That implies that change in one can facilitate change in the others. For that reason we are accountable to God to make changes to our emotions so they reflect his purposes for us.



Emotional Intelligence & “Imaging God”



Ephesians 4:22, 24

“... to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its desires of deceit ... and to put on the new self, created to be like God in righteousness and holiness of the truth.”

Finally, emotional intelligence—or more accurately emotional wisdom—is also part of what it means to image God.

Ephesians 4:22-24: You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its desires of deceit ... and to put on the new self, created to be like God in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

And we know what the “new self” looks like if we look at Jesus, because according to the apostle Paul:

Colossians 1:15, 19: The Son is *the* image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ... For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him. AND IN

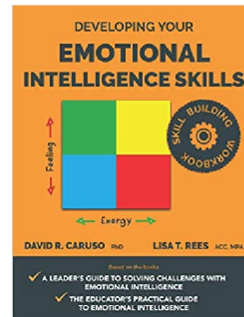
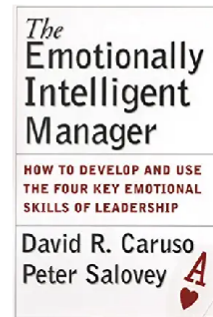
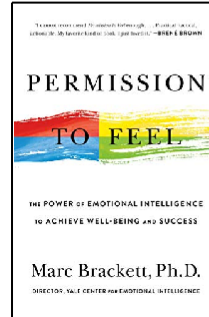
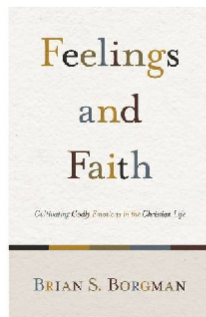
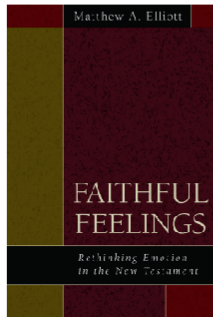
Col. 2:9-10: For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. AND IN

Rom. 8:29: For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

Thus, Paul describes his ministry to the Colossians in these terms: In **Colossians 1:28:** He [Christ] is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature [complete] in Christ.

And in the model of Jesus, we see a man with passions appropriate to one who is filled with the Spirit. Think of Jesus’ indignation as he entered the temple court & saw the moneychangers there, or his tears as he looked over Jerusalem & reflected on the obstinacy of the Jews, or his disappointment over how slow the apostles were to grasp the truths he was communicating to them, or his apprehension & sorrow as prayed to his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. Think of how he went to the cross, despising the shame associated with it, but motivated because of the joy set before him in fulfilling the will of his Father. If our hearts are attuned to his, we will see our lives transformed from inside out, emotions and all, so that we too can image our Father in Heaven.

Resources



Faithful Feelings is a more technical analysis of emotionality, surveying recent psychological research and comparing it to the New Testament's portrayal of emotions. *Feelings & Faith* is written for a wider Christian audience.

The other three books are secular books about how more recent EI research might be applied in practical ways in a variety of settings.

Here are a few more titles about (secular) research on different aspects of EI:

Lisa Feldman Barrett, Peter Salovey, eds., *The Wisdom in Feeling: Psychological Processes in Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Guilford Press, 2002).

Joseph Ciarrochi, Joseph P. Forgas, John D. Mayer, eds., *Emotional Intelligence in Everyday Life* (New York: Psychology Press, 2006).

Joseph Ciarrochi, John D. Mayer, eds., *Applying Emotional Intelligence: A Practitioner's Guide* (New York: Psychology Press, 2007).