

# Anger, sadness, boredom, anxiety—emotions that feel bad can be useful

February 9 2024, by Heather Lench

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Remember the sadness that came with the last time you failed miserably at something? Or the last time you were so anxious about an upcoming event that you couldn't concentrate for days?

These types of emotions are unpleasant to experience and can even feel overwhelming. People often try to avoid them, suppress them or ignore

them. In fact, in psychology experiments, people will [pay money to not feel many negative emotions](#). But recent research is revealing that emotions can be useful, and even [negative emotions](#) can bring benefits.

[In my emotion science lab](#) at Texas A&M University, we study how emotions like anger and boredom affect people, and we explore ways that these feelings can be beneficial. We share the results so people can learn how to use their emotions to build the lives they want.

Our studies and many others have shown that emotions aren't uniformly good or bad for people. Instead, different emotions can result in better outcomes in particular types of situations. Emotions seem to function like a Swiss army knife—different emotional tools are helpful in specific situations.

## **Sadness can help you recover from a failure**

Sadness occurs when people perceive that they've lost a goal or a desired outcome, and there's nothing they can do to improve the situation. It could be getting creamed in a game or failing a class or work project, or it can be losing a relationship with a family member. Once evoked, sadness is associated with what psychologists call a deactivation state of doing little, without much behavior or [physical arousal](#). Sadness also brings [thinking that is more detailed and analytical](#). It makes you stop [and think](#).

The benefit of the stopping and thinking that comes with sadness is that it [helps people recover from failure](#). When you fail, that typically means the situation you're in is not conducive to success. Instead of just charging ahead in this type of scenario, sadness prompts people to step back and [evaluate what is happening](#).

When people are sad, they process information in a deliberative,

analytical way and want to avoid risk. This mode comes with [more accurate memory](#), [judgment that is less influenced by irrelevant assumptions or information](#), and [better detection of other people lying](#). These cognitive changes can encourage people to understand past failures and possibly prevent future ones.

Sadness can function differently when there's the possibility that the failure could be avoided if other people help. In these situations, people tend to [cry and can experience increased physiological arousal](#), such as quicker heart and breathing rates. Expressing sadness, through tears or verbally, has the benefit of [potentially recruiting other people to help you](#) achieve your goals. This behavior appears to start in infants, with [tears and cries signaling caregivers to help](#).

## **Anger prepares you to overcome an obstacle**

Anger occurs when people perceive they're losing a goal or desired outcome, but that they could improve the situation by removing something that's in their way. The obstacle could be an injustice committed by another person, or it could be a computer that repeatedly crashes while you're trying to get work done. Once evoked, [anger is associated with a "readiness for action,"](#) and your [thinking focuses on the obstacle](#).

The benefit of being prepared for action and focused on what's in your way is that it motivates you to overcome what's standing between you and your goal. [When people are angry](#), they [process information and make judgments rapidly](#), want to take action, and are [physiologically aroused](#). In experiments, [anger actually increases the force of people's kicks](#), which can be helpful in physical encounters. Anger results in better outcomes in situations that involve challenges to goals, including confrontational games, [tricky puzzles](#), video games with obstacles, and responding quickly on tasks.

Expressing anger, facially or verbally, has the benefit of [prompting other people to clear the way](#). People are [more likely to concede in negotiations](#) and [give in on issues](#) when their adversary looks or says they are angry.

## **Anxiety helps you prepare for danger**

Anxiety occurs when people [perceive a potential threat](#). This could be giving a speech to a large audience where failure would put your self-esteem on the line, or it could be a physical threat to yourself or loved ones. Once evoked, anxiety is associated with being prepared to respond to danger, including increased physical arousal and [attention to threats and risk](#).

Being prepared for danger means that if trouble brews, you can respond quickly to prevent or avoid it. When anxious, people detect threats rapidly, have fast reaction times and [are on heightened alert](#). The eye-widening that often comes with fear and anxiety even [gives people a wider field of vision](#) and improves threat detection.

Anxiety prepares the body for action, which improves performance on a number of tasks that involve motivation and attention. It motivates people to prepare for upcoming events, such as devoting time to study for an exam. Anxiety also prompts protective behavior, which can help prevent the [potential threat](#) from becoming a reality.

## **Boredom can jolt you out of a rut**

There is less research on boredom than many other emotions, so it is not as well understood. Researchers debate [what it is](#) and [what it does](#).

Boredom appears to occur when someone's current situation is [not](#)

[causing any other emotional response](#). There are three situations [where this lack can occur](#): when emotions fade, such as the happiness of a new car fading to neutral; when people don't care about anything in their current situation, such as being at a large party where nothing interesting is happening; or when people have no goals. Boredom does not necessarily set in just because nothing is happening—someone with a goal of relaxation might feel quite content sitting quietly with no stimulation.

Psychology researchers think that the benefit of boredom in situations where people are not responding emotionally is that it [prompts making a change](#). If nothing in your current situation is worth responding to, the [aversive experience of boredom can motivate you](#) to seek new situations or change the way you're thinking. Boredom has been related to more risk seeking, a desire for novelty, and creative thinking. It seems to function like an emotional stick, nudging people out of their current situation to explore and create.

## Using the toolkit of emotion

People want to be happy. But research is finding that a satisfying and productive life includes a [mix of positive and negative emotions](#). Negative emotions, even though they feel bad to experience, can motivate and prepare people for failure, challenges, threats and exploration.

Pleasant or not, your emotions can help guide you toward better outcomes. Maybe understanding how they prepare you to handle various situations will help you feel better about feeling bad.

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