

Primary Emotions

Before we talk about primary emotions, let's review a regular emotional experience:

1. You have different parts that think, feel, and decide. Often these respond or activate simultaneously.
2. You can express these multiple parts/emotions without completely committing to feeling just one way.
3. One part/emotion may be more dominant and easier to express than another.

An example of having multiple self parts:

Ellie has been working towards a promotion. A coworker she is fond of gets offered the promotion over her. Part of her is frustrated with her boss, a part is jealous of her coworker, a part wants to congratulate her coworker, a part is disappointed, a part is afraid of telling the news to her partner, etc.

An example of one part/emotion dominating or concealing another:

She tells her friend John about the missed opportunity for a promotion. He is empathetic at first, but adds in a jab from a recent disagreement. "Ellie, that really sucks. I know you've wanted that promotion. You've been working hard, but maybe you shouldn't have taken time off during the last project. I warned you about staying ahead of schedule on your deliverables."

Ellie is angry at John's comment but responds with shame, "I know I could have done more for it. Sometimes I wonder if I'm good enough for this job."

She is ashamed and has a hard time expressing her anger at John's insensitive reply. Furthermore, Ellie isn't tuning into her disappointment and sadness.

So, Ellie is ashamed *and* angered *and* hurt. However, she has only expresses shame—her feeling lousy about herself.

What is happening for Ellie?

She feels angry and disappointed/sad in response to John's reply, but her shame is the dominating emotion. It takes precedence over the anger and hurt.

If you look at the right figure, this shows the different emotions Ellie is feeling. Because Ellie values John's opinion, his words are meaningful. John says something insensitive and Ellie is suffering. She is angry that John let her down. She is ashamed that she lost her job and that John is disappointed in her.

Her *primary emotion* is sadness and hurt.

The *secondary emotion* (or reactive emotion) is anger.

The *tertiary emotion* is shame.

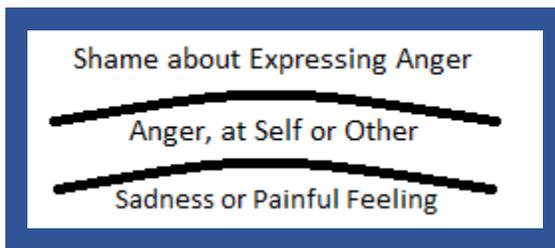


Shame is meant to shut you down (think about when you feel embarrassed in a social situation, you usually freeze for a few seconds before making a joke or slipping away). Thus, it makes a great tertiary emotion. It dominates your experience and you don't feel underlying emotions.

Almost always when we are angry, it's a reaction to another emotion. When someone cuts us off on the highway, we feel disrespected and disregarded so we react with anger. Or someone we love is in the car and we feel protective.

Often, underneath our anger, is our primary emotion— hurt. When someone we love criticizes us, we may feel angry. We may resent them and feel vindictive. Underneath that anger is our hurt. That person really matters to us, like John matters to Ellie.

Another example:



Because I want to be a compassionate person and treat others with respect, I am sometimes critical of myself when I get angry. I feel ashamed that another person has triggered me.

My self-criticism & shame acts as a laminating layer that cuts me off from my anger. Similarly, anger covers over my painful feeling.

If I can be mindful (aware of and accepting toward) of my shame and anger, usually I find that there is a painful feeling underlying them. Then, I can acknowledge my shame, anger, and sadness within myself or with the person that triggered me.

In this case, someone said something that brought up my suffering and I became angry— someone triggered me. And my own anger triggered shame— I triggered myself.

Shame is the tertiary emotion, a reactive emotion to anger. **Anger is the secondary emotion**, a reactive emotion to pain. **Sadness is the primary emotion**. In Ellie's case shame is connected to an external source— she feels lousy about herself because she didn't get the promotion. In my case shame is reactive because it comes from my desire to squelch my anger.

In many cases you may only have two emotions, one primary and one secondary/reactive emotion. In other cases you may have a series of interconnected emotions that aren't a linear stack of one on top of the other.

When a lot is coming up for you, you may feel anxious, angry, disappointed, unjustly wronged, and disempowered, all at the same time. It's important to notice and accept all of these as important. They are part of your experience. Treat it like an inner council meeting where every part of you has a say.

Sometimes we may know why they are here, perhaps something or someone from our past has a bearing on why we are getting triggered in this moment. Therapy is a great place to explore this and gain insight into why you feel the way that you do. However, the most important thing is that you are mindful of these different parts and emotions.