

## Emotional Intelligence

Alfred C.W. Davis  
MBA, M.Div.

Daniel Goleman tells us in his book *Emotional Intelligence* that the human being has two distinctively different brains: "one that feels and one that thinks". The emotional/rational dichotomy approximates the folk distinction between "heart" and "head". These two minds operate in tight harmony intertwining their two different ways of knowing to guide us through the world. The emotional brain is made up of the amygdala and the limbic system, whereas the thinking brain consists of the cortex and the neocortex. The workings of the amygdala and its interplay with the neocortex are at the heart of emotional intelligence.

If we were all emotional brain and no neocortex, we would become overwhelmed with the sensory input and we would be unable to make wise decisions. But, if we were all neocortex and no emotional brain, we would be cold heartless computers. The key to intelligent functioning is the balance and interaction of these two brains, as opposed to the suppression of one or the other.

The way that the brain functions is that sensory data goes to the thalamus and then across a single synapse first to the amygdala, before the same signal is sent separately to the neocortex. Sometimes fight or flight is needed for protection even before the logical mind is accessed. However, if the input to the amygdala triggers an emotional memory before the thinking brain has a chance to modify the feeling, a person can become overwhelmed with emotions. Since childhood experiences are stored in the amygdala in rough, wordless blueprints for emotional life, this precognitive emotion can trigger reactions before there is full confirming evidence from the neocortex.

In most cases, the same sensory data is sent to the neocortex shortly after the amygdala has received it. The prefrontal lobes of the neocortex act as a damper switch for the amygdala. Emotional hijacking or swamping happens when the emotional response bypasses the neocortical processes that usually keep the emotional response in balance. The key "off" switch for distressing emotion seems to be the left prefrontal neocortex lobe. If the amygdala acts as an emergency trigger, the left prefrontal lobe acts as a switch for controlling disturbing emotions. The prefrontal lobes store facts, analyze information, organize actions and orchestrate reactions. In this way, the prefrontal lobes play an executive role in the managing of emotions. The thinking brain therefore guides the moment-to-moment decisions and the emotional brain informs those decisions. For example, the thinking brain recognizes the face as a cousin and the emotional brain adds that you don't really like the person.

It is important here to point out the difference between the right prefrontal lobe and the left prefrontal lobe. The right prefrontal lobe is seen as the seat of negative thinking such as fear and aggression. Another way of thinking about it is that the right prefrontal lobe is the home of the "glass half empty" thinking. It takes the negative emotion and cognitively processes it in a way that the negativity increases. On the other hand, the left



prefrontal lobe keeps emotions in check, even inhibiting the right prefrontal lobe. In short, the left prefrontal lobe seems to be part of a neural circuit that can switch off, or at least dampen down all but the strongest negative surges of emotion. The "glass half full" thinking connects with what I call the thinking of "agape love" in the left prefrontal lobe where the thinking is open, constructive, expansive and positive. Hope and positive thinking in the left prefrontal lobe help overcome overwhelming anxiety, a defeatist attitude and depression in the face of difficult challenges. While emotion is needed to be human, the left prefrontal lobe thinking enables the breakdown of a formidable task into smaller, manageable pieces so that coping is possible. Agape love involves the intellect found in the left prefrontal lobe because it is a choice of the will that manages impulses, helps control Self and maximizes relationships with others.

When it comes to managing emotions, there are two main categories: (a) arousal emotions and (b) emotions that slow down or suppress. Emotions that arouse include: anger and anxiety. These emotions need to be managed by soothing and calming. On the other hand, emotions that slow down include: depression and sadness. These emotions need activity and stimulation. It is the thinking of the left prefrontal lobe that modifies these emotions which enables the response to be emotionally intelligent.

The processes of emotional intelligence include:

- First* – the **intra-personal skills** that enable the person to form an accurate picture of oneself, access one's own feelings and draw upon the emotions to guide behavior, and
- Second* – the **inter-personal skills** that provide the ability to understand other people and to discern, respond appropriately to moods, temperaments, motivations and desires of other people.

Emotional intelligence combines the following steps:

- 1) Intra-personal abilities:
  - a) **Knowing** one's own emotions – self-awareness or recognizing a feeling as it happens.
  - b) **Controlling** one's own emotions – the capacity to control and soothe one's self so that feelings can be responded to appropriately.
  - c) **Managing** one's own emotions - the capacity to marshal emotions in the service of a goal.
- 2) Inter-personal abilities:
  - a) **Empathy** – the capacity to listen to and be attuned to another person.
  - b) **Relate** – the capacity to interact with others smoothly by co-ordinating moods and dealing effectively with the other person's emotions.



- c) **Optimism** – the capacity to live out of the creative, co-operative, positive approach of "how" to make things happen.

The intra-personal emotional intelligence is needed first before moving to the inter-personal emotional intelligence. As you will see in the following examples, the principles of agape love are integral to the practice of emotional intelligence.

