

The Historical Evolution of "Feeling": from its sensory roots to emotional confluence

The word "feeling" has undergone a remarkable transformation over time, evolving from a term denoting pure sensory experience to one encompassing complex emotional states, often used interchangeably with "emotion" in contemporary discourse. While its biological and medical meaning—tied to physical sensation—has remained relatively stable, the psychological meaning has experienced a dramatic shift, reflecting changes in cultural, philosophical, and scientific understandings of human experience. By exploring the etymology, historical transitions, and modern usage of "feeling," we can understand its psychological convergence with "emotion" and its relevance to holistic healing today.

Etymological Origins: Feeling as Sensory Experience

The word "feeling" derives from the Old English *fēlan*, meaning "to touch or perceive through the senses," rooted in the Proto-Germanic *foljan* ("to feel, touch") and the Proto-Indo-European *pal-/pel- ("to touch, shake"). In its earliest usage (8th–12th centuries), "feeling" strictly referred to physical sensations, such as touching a surface, sensing pain, or perceiving temperature. Old English texts, like *Beowulf*, use *fēlan* to describe tactile experiences, such as feeling a sword's edge or the warmth of a fire. In Middle English (12th–15th centuries), "feeling" continued to denote physical perceptions, as seen in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387), where it described bodily sensations like pain or texture without emotional connotations (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2023).

In biological and medical contexts, this sensory meaning has remained largely unchanged. Medieval medical texts, such as those by Galen (2nd century CE), defined "feeling" as the body's sensory response to stimuli, a definition still reflected in modern medical terminology where "feeling" refers to tactile or proprioceptive sensations (e.g., "loss of feeling" in neurology for numbness) (*Textbook of Natural Medicine*, 2012). This stability contrasts with the psychological shift, as emotions were historically described using terms like *mōd* (Old English for "mind" or "spirit") or *affectus* (Latin for passions), maintaining a clear distinction from sensory "feeling."

Renaissance and Enlightenment: The Emergence of Emotional Feeling

The transition of "feeling" toward emotional connotations began during the Renaissance (14th–17th centuries), driven by humanism's focus on individual experience. Philosophers like Montaigne in his *Essays* (1580) explored internal

states, blending sensory and emotional experiences. "Feeling" started to encompass subjective sensations, such as the "feeling of joy" or "feeling of sorrow," as seen in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600), where "feeling" describes both physical pain and emotional grief. This marked the emergence of "emotional feeling" as a bridge between bodily sensation and mental state (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2023).

The Enlightenment (17th–18th centuries) accelerated this shift, particularly in psychology. Descartes' dualism (*Meditations on First Philosophy*, 1641) separated bodily sensations from mental passions, but empiricists like John Locke (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690) argued that all knowledge, including emotions, stems from sensory experience. Locke's view that emotions arise from bodily sensations expanded the psychological meaning of "feeling" to include emotional states, as in "a feeling of love." The term "sentiment," borrowed from French *sentir* ("to feel"), further blurred the line, as seen in 18th-century literature like Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) (*Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, 2023).

In medical contexts, however, "feeling" retained its sensory focus, used in anatomical texts to describe nerve-mediated sensations (e.g., tactile response) without emotional implications. This divergence highlights the psychological shift, as "feeling" began to encompass the subjective experience of emotions, while its biological meaning remained tied to sensory input (*Psychosomatic Medicine*, 2010).

19th–20th Centuries: Psychological Convergence with Emotion

The 19th and 20th centuries saw the psychological meaning of "feeling" undergo its most dramatic shift, converging with "emotion" driven by various ideological and commercial interests. The term "emotion" (from Latin *emovere*, "to move out") historically referred to mental passions, as in Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739). However, psychologists like William James (*Principles of Psychology*, 1890) proposed the James-Lange theory, suggesting that emotions arise from bodily sensations (e.g., a racing heart precedes fear). This theory redefined "feeling" as the conscious perception of these sensations, aligning with my Somatic Hypnotherapy view of feelings and emotional feelings as bodily sensory experiences or energy clusters.

Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung further expanded the psychological meaning, using "feeling" to describe both conscious sensations and unconscious emotional states. Jung's concept of "feeling" as a psychological function (1921) emphasized its role

in subjective emotional experience, distinct from thought (*Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 2014). This shift was cemented by neuroscientific advances, notably Antonio Damasio's Somatic Markers Hypothesis (1994, *Descartes' Error*), which posits that emotions are rooted in bodily sensations (somatic markers) processed by the limbic system (e.g., amygdala, insula). For example, a "feeling of fear" is a bodily sensation (e.g., tightness in the chest) interpreted as an emotion (*Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 2018). This aligns with my approach, where feelings like grief or love are clusters of energy induced by the heart's EMF (60 to 5,000 times stronger than that of the brain), felt and engraved in the body as emotional feelings (*Psychosomatic Medicine*, 2010).

Heart rate variability (HRV) research further validated this convergence, showing that coherent heart rhythms reflect positive emotional states (e.g., joy), while incoherent rhythms signal negative feelings like grief or anger (*HeartMath Institute*, 1995; *Psychophysiology*, 2007). In contrast, the medical and biological meaning of "feeling" remained stable, referring to sensory nerve responses (e.g., tactile sensation in neurological assessments), with no significant emotional connotation (*Textbook of Natural Medicine*, 2012).

Modern Usage: Conflation with Emotion

In the 21st century, the psychological meaning of "feeling" has converged with "emotion" to the point of near interchangeability in everyday English. Dictionaries like *Merriam-Webster* (2023) define "feeling" as both a sensory perception and an emotional state, reflected in phrases like "I feel sad" or "I have a bad feeling." This conflation stems from the recognition that emotions are embodied experiences, as supported by Ekman's work (1970s) on universal facial expressions tied to bodily sensations (*Psychological Bulletin*, 2014). In my Somatic Hypnotherapy practice, emotional feelings are treated as energy clusters perceived as sensory experiences that persist until healed - akin to limping from an unhealed wound. My therapy uses heart-centered hypnosis to release these sensations, promoting HRV coherence, healing, and well-being (*Journal of Neuroscience*, 2015).

The psychological shift has led to confusion, as "feeling" encompasses sensory (e.g., touch), emotional (e.g., sadness), and intuitive (e.g., "gut feeling") experiences, while "emotion" denotes specific states like joy or fear. Neuroscience clarifies this: emotions involve coordinated (coherent) somatic, cognitive, and physiological responses, but feelings are the conscious sensory component (*Psychosomatic Medicine*, 2010). My practice leverages this by targeting the

feelings (the somatic experiences) as energy clusters - rather than a cognitive reframing targeted by cognitive approaches.

In contrast, the biological and medical meaning of "feeling" remains constant, referring to sensory nerve responses (e.g., "feeling a pinprick" in neurological tests) with, or without emotional implications. The evolution of the psychological meaning of the terms 'feeling' and 'emotional feeling' is due to the recognition of the essential role of the body in emotional perception and recognition, which is consistent with my heart-centered approach where the EMF (electromagnetic field) of the heart bridges sensory and emotional experiences (HeartMath Institute, 1995).