

Feelings as the Primary Drivers of Human Experience

Human experience is often misunderstood because it is described from the wrong starting point. We are taught to believe that thoughts shape our emotions, that decisions arise from rational evaluation, and that life outcomes are the product of conscious choice. Yet lived experience, clinical observation, and modern neuroscience converge on a different reality: **what primarily drives thoughts, emotions, behavior, and ultimately the quality of one's life is what is felt within.**

At the most fundamental level, human beings are feeling organisms before they are thinking ones. Long before a thought appears, the body is already in a state. There may be contraction or openness, agitation or calm, pressure or ease, heaviness or lightness. These internal sensations — often subtle, sometimes overwhelming — form the background against which all mental activity unfolds. They are not abstract ideas; they are concrete, lived states.

Thoughts do not arise in a vacuum. They arise *in response* to what is being felt. A body organized around safety gives rise to different thoughts than a body organized around threat. A system bathed in calm generates meanings, expectations, and decisions that are fundamentally different from those generated by a system saturated with fear, pain, or stress. In this sense, thoughts are not initiators but **interpretive companions** to feeling states.

What we commonly call emotions emerge when the mind organizes and gives meaning to these internal sensations in a given context. Feelings are the raw, biological signals; emotions are the lived experiences constructed from them. When disturbing feelings persist — fear, anxiety, grief, shame, pain — the emotional landscape becomes correspondingly narrow, rigid, and distressing. The world is perceived through the lens of the body's internal state, not through detached reasoning.

Behavior follows naturally. An organism organized around threat will move toward avoidance, control, hypervigilance, or collapse — not because it chooses to, but because this is what makes sense from within that state. Conversely, when the internal environment is calm and regulated, behavior becomes more flexible, adaptive, and creative. What appears from the outside as “irrational behavior” is often the most coherent response available to a nervous system living in distress.

This is why attempts to improve life by correcting thoughts alone so often fall short. One cannot reason the body out of fear while it remains in a state of alarm. One cannot think oneself into serenity while internal sensations signal danger or pain. Words may temporarily redirect attention, but they cannot override the biological reality of what is being felt.

From a therapeutic perspective, this understanding is transformative. It shifts the focus away from fighting the mind and toward **listening to lived experience**. Healing does not come from eliminating thoughts, but from changing the internal conditions that give rise to them. As feelings soften, thoughts reorganize spontaneously. As the body finds safety, the mind regains clarity. As internal states shift, life itself feels different — not conceptually, but tangibly.

Ultimately, the quality of a life is not determined by the ideas that pass through the mind, but by the internal states in which those ideas arise. Serenity, happiness, fear, anxiety, pain, and relief are not philosophical constructs; they are **felt realities**. They are the medium through which life is experienced.

To attend to feelings, therefore, is not to ignore thinking — it is to address its source. When what is lived within changes, everything else follows.

Resources supporting the above claims:

PubMed – Physiological feelings & interoception: Reviews how internal bodily signals (interoception) contribute to emotional experience, integrating peripheral and central nervous system inputs.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0149763418308674?via%3Dihub>

Wikipedia – Somatic Marker Hypothesis: Proposes that bodily “somatic markers” influence decision-making and emotional responses by signaling value outcomes and biasing behavior.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somatic_marker_hypothesis?utm_source=chatgpt.com

PubMed – Role of somatosensory system in feeling emotions: Neuroimaging and stimulation studies show that bodily and somatosensory brain regions contribute to emotional experience, supporting embodied models of emotion.
https://academic.oup.com/scan/article/19/1/nsae062/7756920?utm_source=chatgpt.com&login=false

Lisa Feldman Barrett – *How Emotions Are Made*: A widely cited book elaborating the theory of constructed emotion and interoception’s role in emotional experience.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_constructed_emotion?utm_source=chatgpt.com