



Emotions - inquiry -

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This guide is intended as a starting point for conversations, to increase understanding and compassion for those who may have a different relationship with emotions than you do. The approaches to emotions mentioned in this guide can be part of an Inner Transition toward an understanding of human experience that will ideally foster deeper and more compassionate connections, for individuals, groups, and the entire world.

"Get very clear about the kind of world you would like, and then start living that way." -- Marshall Rosenberg

All emotions are important and real. It can be tempting to dismiss emotions as difficult distractions, to be borne silently, wished away, or overcome heroically. It can be completely reasonable to feel emotions like sadness, anger, or depression in response to historical oppression, social injustice, or marginalisation. An individual's socio-economic circumstance can greatly affect their emotional well-being. Rather than dismissing emotions, and people who express them, as difficult or undesirable, Transitioners will ideally stand in solidarity with those who are suffering and demand structural change to uplift everyone's well-being.

Some emotions -- like anger, joy, or anticipation -- can be a source of empowerment or galvanization; others may seem to make everything impossible. For instance, sadness or grief about any loss -- for an individual, a group, or the world -- may seem immobilizing at first. And, sharing sadness has the power to build bridges of empathy and compassion between people, and can lead to finding unexpected pathways forward.

An Inner Transition will likely involve increasing awareness about the pain caused by the impact of human systems on the ecosystem and each other. With increased awareness of pain -- due to destruction, suffering, and loss -- many difficult or challenging emotions typically arise -- like anger, grief, fear, or powerlessness. Even numbness, or not knowing what emotion to feel, can be a strategy for coping with the overwhelm that often arises when people open up to feeling the pain of what is happening in the world.

Ideally an Inner Transition will bolster the courage it takes to remain open to feeling all emotions, including challenging or painful ones, while continuing to work toward reimagining, and rebuilding, a regenerative and just future founded on well-being.

Why are Emotions Important?

Emotions affect resilience. Ideally an Inner Transition will involve increasing resilience in the face of disturbances and uncertainties, including what Dr Henry Emmons calls 'skillfully facing emotions'. Navigating uncomfortable emotions is a common and important challenge for most people. Individuals and groups can learn to cope with, attend to, and respond to emotions in ways that facilitate integrity and harmony, deepening and strengthening relationships, leading to breakthroughs rather than breakdowns.

Emotions affect choices. An emotional reaction can activate the nervous system, compelling an individual to fight or flight, freeze or faint (see Inquiry: The Nervous System). Ideally an Inner Transition will empower individuals to respond to their emotions with a greater degree of choice.

Emotions affect perception. For some, emotions are the primary way of perceiving the world. For others, emotions are like the herbs and spices of life – a little goes a long way. For many, emotions are like spectacles through which they see the world, tinted in a spectrum of colours – from rosy and cheerful to dark and menacing.

Emotions offer information. Painful or uncomfortable emotions provide informative feedback about an individual's choices, circumstances, and relationships, and may encourage a re-appraisal of a situation. Such emotions can help individuals to make different choices, or to re-frame their perceptions.

What are Emotions?

The experts have yet to agree. Charles Darwin dismissed emotions as serving no evolutionary purpose, likely because in his day emotions fuelled religious fanaticism, scientific favoritism, and rationalist debate. In 2001, Robert Plutchik theorized that emotions have deep evolutionary roots. In his view, animals and humans experience the same basic emotions in comparable ways, and emotions have evolved in various species to aid adaptation and survival.

Plutchik suggests that emotions are constructs or ideas individuals use to describe their experiences. All complex emotions are combinations of 8 basic emotions, which Plutchik pairs as polar opposites that can vary in intensity.

Joy ↔ Sadness , Fear ↔ Anger , Anticipation ↔ Surprise , Disgust ↔ Trust

Plutchik's '*Wheel of Emotions*' can be helpful for identifying and naming emotions (see Emotional Literacy below).

Emotions have both cognitive and physiological aspects. 'Cognitive Appraisal' theory, where emotions arise in the mind, refers to judgments individuals make about how circumstances meet their needs. An individual will be 'happy' if their needs are satisfied; 'sad' if their needs are unsatisfied; 'angry' if their needs are blocked. 'Physiological Perception' theory, where emotions begin in the body, refers to hormones, muscle-memories, heart-rate, and breathing. The nervous system may be 'hard-wired' to react to certain basic emotions, like fear or disgust, as a survival strategy. Emotions like guilt, rejection, or isolation may help ensure individuals stay connected to a group, a common survival strategy among social animals.

Emotions also have social and cultural aspects, and may be defined differently depending on cultural background. For example, in many western societies, which highlight individuality and autonomy, emotions are often viewed as personal events internal to an individual. By contrast, in many east Asian societies, which highlight mutuality and interdependence, emotions are often viewed as social and moral processes relevant to more than one individual.

Emotions as Normal

Most individuals experience emotions; they are a natural part of being human. Within a range of cultural variations, individuals are taught how to express and cope with emotions, usually first as children, and later as adults. While what is considered 'normal and appropriate' may vary by culture, the full spectrum of emotions is an integral part of human perception and navigating life.

Normalising emotions, especially challenging or uncomfortable ones, can be an important part of an Inner Transition. In situations of disturbance, distress, urgency, or uncertainty, uncomfortable emotions are likely to arise. Individuals and groups can learn to embrace, allow, and make time for such emotions.

If people have backgrounds where emotions were not normalised in this way, this can feel like a big Inner Transition. As with all Inner Transitions, normalising emotions can feel awkward or uncomfortable at first. Try to forgive those who may 'get it wrong', including ourselves. It gets easier with practice, kindness, patience, and compassion often help.

Emotions as Guidance

Moshe Ratson refers to emotions as part of a human 'guidance system' which helps in navigating life. After an individual experiences challenging emotions -- like anger, grief, shame, or fear -- and some time has passed, individuals can learn by reflecting on the situation. The emotions may have arisen after they made a choice, or prioritized one thing over another, or reacted to someone else's behaviour. Individuals are likely to make future choices with their experience of those emotions in mind. (see Emotional Intelligence below).

Emotional Well-Being

An Inner Transition will ideally involve prioritising emotional well-being along with all other kinds of well-being. There are several benefits clearly associated with emotional well-being, according to psychologist Kristin Neff. Emotional well-being:

| Reduces | Increases |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| anxiety | curiosity |
| depression | optimism |
| ruminating (chewing over) | gratitude |
| shame | connectedness |
| stress | desire to learn and grow |
| negative body image | self-confidence |
| perfectionism | satisfaction |

Emotional well-being has been linked to:

- **Motivation.** The intrinsic drive to accomplish things, for oneself, for others, and for the world.
- **Persistence.** The ability to cope with feelings of frustration or disappointment, and to try again after failure.
- **Resilience.** The ability to cope with disturbing or challenging emotions or situations, and to regain balance and calm afterward.

Emotional Diversity

(Marsh & Zakrzewski 2015)

Research now shows that 'emotional diversity' is important for mental and emotional well-being. All emotions, even the uncomfortable and challenging ones many people prefer to avoid, can be viewed as valuable and serving a purpose. Such emotions can provide insight into individuals' inner landscapes, their outer environments, connecting with others, avoiding danger, or recovering from loss. A variety of emotions may provide more information about a situation, leading to behavioural choices that increase well-being and happiness.

The research of June Gruber and Iris Mauss challenges the 'happy-all-the-time' attitude that has become widespread, suggesting that an overfocus on happiness can be counterproductive. An aggressive 'Pursuit of Happiness' can contribute to overly binary thinking, and the preference of emotions labelled as 'positive,' to the near-exclusion of those labelled as 'negative.' Someone who strives to meet very high standards of happiness may be disappointed when they cannot meet them all the time. Happiness can also be tinged with a variety of emotions, including sadness.

Sadness -- which can help individuals to connect deeply with others — is actually a vital component of happiness. Empathic understanding of sadness can help someone recover from disappointment or loss; whereas an attempt to put a positive spin on it may not. Sadness can elicit compassion from family, friends, or colleagues, helping individuals to feel more connected, and transforming a potentially awful situation into one with deep meaning and significance.

While all emotions are valuable, it can help emotional well-being to deliberately schedule plenty of time for enjoyable experiences. This is a preventive strategy related to emotional self-care (see below), which does not mean avoiding or denying uncomfortable emotions, or the situations in which they arise. It may involve actively exercising emotional 'muscles' to strengthen them, and ensuring an individual has a solid foundation of what they perceive as 'positive' emotions. This can increase the capacity for uncomfortable emotions when they arise.

Emotional Suppression

In traditional Chinese medicine, energy, or qi, naturally flows through the body. The movement of energy is considered healthy, and the stuckness of energy unhealthy. Traditional practices aim to facilitate movement and allow the release of stuck energy. Emotions can be considered a type of "energy in motion" which can similarly benefit from 'expression' - movement rather than stuckness.

'Emotional suppression' happens when emotions are not allowed to move or release. There are many reasons why emotions may be suppressed. Typically, these are based on a personal history where expressing emotions was not encouraged, resulting in beliefs like:

- people in general do not deserve or need to express emotions, so neither does any specific individual.
- there will be bad consequences for expressing emotions.
- suppressing emotions is somehow valuable or praiseworthy.
- relationships based on expressing emotions are somehow wrong or unimportant.
- expressing emotions involves transactions that are too expensive.
- due to culture or context, expressing emotions would feel shameful or wrong.
- expressing emotions is either wrong or best kept to a minimum.

Suppressed emotions can cause long-term harm in several ways, they can become toxic and increase the risk of illness or disease. Suppressed emotions can leak out inappropriately and have unintended effects. When suppressed emotions are released, it can feel like there is no choice but to express them, like a volcano erupting – a rare event that is enormous when it happens, or 'big and seldom.' Risking this kind of eruption is not a good way to prevent harm. Learning to mindfully embrace emotions (see below) allows more choices.

Emotional Hygiene

Preventive medicine emphasizes the importance of good hygiene, regular practices which, when done 'little and often,' contribute to health and well-being -- like washing your hands or cleaning your teeth. 'Emotional hygiene,' a term credited to the Dalai Lama, relies on such preventive measures. They contribute to emotional well-being, increased resilience, and speedier recovery from disturbances.

Like physical hygiene, emotional hygiene watches for indicators like pain, wounding, and toxicity.

- **Emotional pain.** Pain is an alert that something is wrong and needs urgent attention. Ideally pain will receive active responses that reduce the pain quickly. Such responses include any kind of self-soothing, or simply being witnessed with compassion and empathy. Ignoring pain can increase the risk of severe harm or complication.
- **Emotional wounding.** Experiences of failure, rejection, shaming, or loss can be quite common -- potentially multiple times a day. Emotional wounds can heal with proper treatment -- and the sooner measures are taken, the sooner healing can begin. Ideally a 'first aid' treatment will be enough, rather than an 'emergency room' intervention. Ignoring wounding can increase the risk of infection, complication, and worsening.
- **Emotional toxicity.** One of the roles of the physical immune system is to flush, excrete, and eliminate toxins from the body, to prevent them from building up and causing harm. Suppressed emotions, like shame, anxiety, depression, or anger, can similarly become toxic if allowed to build up over time. Detoxification is a process that can take some time and attention - the sooner measures are taken, the sooner it can begin. Ignoring toxic build-up can increase the risk of illness and disease.

Maintaining good emotional hygiene combines several regular practices:

- Allowing emotions to move, flow, and release - 'little and often.'
- Tending and treating emotional pain and wounding sooner rather than later.
- Expressing, excreting, and eliminating emotions before they become toxic.

Emotional Self-Care

Emotional self-care involves regular practices that help maintain good emotional hygiene. For some specific suggestions, see the separate activity **Self-Care: Emotional**. Like other forms of preventive care, emotional self-care benefits from regular routines -- daily, weekly, or monthly -- that are done 'little and often.' Emotional 'cleansing' can result from having a good laugh or a good cry. Physical activity -- like moving anger or shaking out fear -- can release such emotions before they build up and become toxic.

For those unused to it, emotional self-care can feel awkward at first, as can any change in habits or behaviours. It can be easier to start with 'small' things for shorter amounts of time, and gradually introduce 'bigger' things and longer times. For instance, try laughing out loud for 10 minutes once a week, maybe by listening to a comedian you enjoy. If you experience benefits, see if you can find time more often, up to once a day.

The capacity for strong emotions -- 'emotional fitness' -- is like a muscle that can be strengthened with regular exercise, similar to physical fitness. With an awareness of preventing harm, emotional self-care aims to strengthen emotional 'muscles,' and increase the capacity to cope with emotions like anger, grief, or fear. There are also exercises for strengthening self-esteem, which is the basis of treating self and others with respect. Emotional fitness and good self-esteem contribute to resilience and courage in the face of disturbance.

And, it is possible to overdo it. Emotional self-care aims to avoid over-indulgence in emotions and 'emotional fatigue.' There is a 'sweet spot' – not too little or too much, but 'just right' – for emotional self-care.

Introverts and extroverts can both benefit from emotional self-care. Extroverts, although stereotypically more comfortable with emotional expression, do not necessarily have an easier time with emotional self-care. Expressing emotions need not be a dramatic display for others; and such displays are not necessarily the same as emotional self-care. Aside from preventing harm, there is no 'better' or 'worse' way to express emotions. Introverts, who stereotypically conceal their emotions, may find they are naturally drawn to certain kinds of emotional self-care. Many kinds of emotional self-care are effective when done quietly or away from other people.

Emotional Literacy

"Our ability to distinguish our own feelings and needs and to empathize with them can free us." -- Marshall Rosenberg

What about emotions that are difficult to describe or talk about? Talking about emotions can be troublesome or difficult for many reasons; having words to describe emotions is a good way to start. Literacy involves increasing both vocabulary and comprehension. 'Emotional literacy' focuses on learning to identify, distinguish, and understand both basic and complex emotions. Emotional vocabulary, knowing the names of various emotions, may be a new idea for some people, especially those who may not have seen emotions as a priority before.

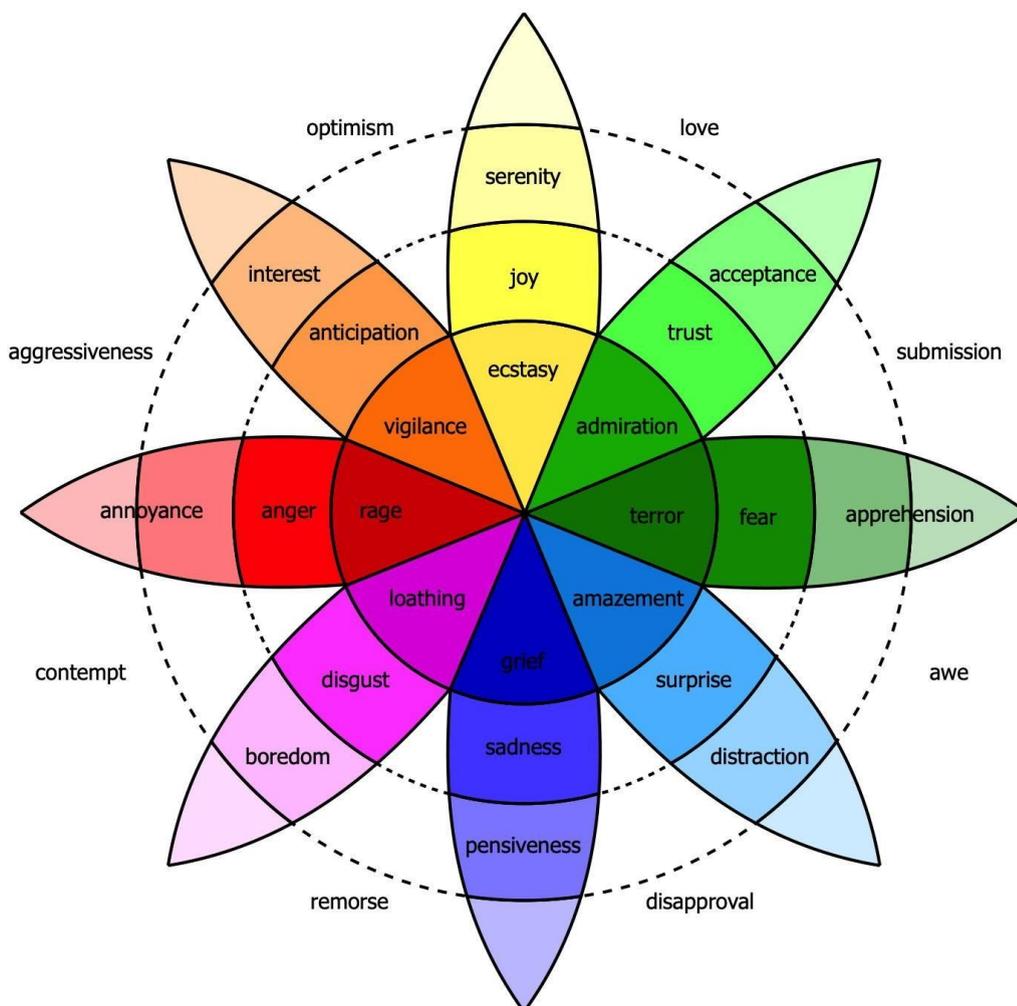
For some, it can be helpful to talk with another person, usually someone they respect and trust, about naming their emotions. Another person's perspective or experience can be illuminating, connective, and can lead to more meaningful relationships. For anyone who has not had much practice, this may feel uncomfortable or awkward. As with all Inner Transitions, increasing emotional literacy is much easier when accompanied by kindness, patience, and compassion.

Marshall Rosenberg, founder of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), proposed that there are many benefits to learning to discern between emotions, thoughts, and judgments. Most NVC courses include learning to more precisely describe emotions.

Some benefits include:

- reducing negative self-talk, and negative language in general;
- increasing empathy for self and others;
- increasing the capability to respond to emotions rather than react to them.

According to Robert Plutchik, complex emotions tend to be combinations of 8 basic emotions. In the enclosed diagram, Plutchik arranges these 8 basic emotions in a wheel of paired opposites. Three levels of intensity are indicated: higher toward the center, and lower toward the edges. The outermost ring indicates 8 mixtures of the two neighbouring emotions.



Robert Plutchik's 2001 'Wheel of Emotions.'

As with any map or framework, this diagram is a starting point, an approximation, not a prescription. If your experience is different, there are many other resources available about emotional literacy, including lists of words, exercises, guides, audio and video recordings.

Emotional Intelligence

In 1995, Daniel Goleman wrote the book *Emotional Intelligence*, and others have expanded on his ideas since. Emotional intelligence typically increases over time, leading to emotional maturity. Goleman's five core ideas are:

1. **Self-Awareness:** identifying your own emotions and recognizing how your emotions affect others. Emotional maturity shows: self-confidence, ability to laugh at yourself, ability to read others' reactions and interpret their perceptions of you.
2. **Self-Regulation:** controlling quick reactions, reflecting before responding, and learning 'appropriate' emotional expression. Emotional maturity shows: taking personal responsibility, adaptability to change, responding to complaints or rudeness without escalating, ability to not take personally others' expressions of anger or strong emotion.
3. **Internal Motivation:** interest in learning and self-improvement, rather than wealth or status. Emotional maturity shows: initiative, task completion, perseverance in the face of adversity.
4. **Empathy:** understanding another's emotional reaction, based on self-awareness. Emotional maturity shows: interest in others' emotions and concerns, anticipation of others' needs and responding appropriately, ability to navigate emotionally charged social situations.
5. **Social Skills:** identifying social cues to manage relationships and build networks. Emotional maturity shows: listening and responding appropriately to others, influence and leadership in guiding and inspiring others, using persuasion and negotiation to diffuse emotional conflicts with others.

Marshall Rosenberg's ideas about emotions, needs, and communication are part of the larger topic of Communication covered in a number of separate Inner Transition guides (**Physical & Sensory, Nature, Mental, Emotional, Social & Worldview**). Rosenberg has suggested strong emotions are often linked to 'needs,' or beliefs about well-being and self-care. Individuals develop strategies for meeting their needs, including how they respond to their emotions, which relates to their emotional intelligence.

For example, an individual may develop various strategies to cope with their anger. When they are younger they may be less emotionally mature, and use dramatic displays of anger to express their needs, which may change a situation temporarily but not effectively. As they get older, they may become more emotionally intelligent, attuned to what is considered appropriate in their context, and what consequences ensue when they display their anger. As they mature, they may choose less dramatic displays of anger, to express their needs and change situations more effectively.

Many people learn to categorize their emotions into a spectrum or scale, from most to least desirable, 'positive' to 'negative.' Individuals can learn to adjust their emotions, by nudging them in a 'more positive' direction. It can be difficult to adjust to an emotion that is 'too far away' on the scale; it is generally easier to make incremental small adjustments. For instance, going from worry to hope may be easier than going from worry to joy. This is why a simple Cognitive Reappraisal technique (like *'don't worry, be happy'*) can seem insensitive or inappropriate to someone who is experiencing more intense or challenging emotions like grief, depression, or anger.

One approach that may be helpful is called 'Mindfully Embracing' your emotions. This relies on allowing rather than suppressing emotions, and responding rather than reacting to them. A mindful person aims to avoid getting stuck in an emotional reaction by kindly observing the emotion, without judging it as right or wrong, creating space to choose an appropriate response. (Marsh & Zakrzewski 2015) This is related to a number of other mindfulness techniques covered in a separate Inner Transition guide.

Mindfully embracing can be a process of getting interested and curious in an uncomfortable emotion; getting to know it better, reframing it, and getting more comfortable with it when it arises. An Inner Transition ideally will involve learning to mindfully embrace uncomfortable emotions, and use them in a good way to benefit self, others, and the world.

An important aspect of emotional intelligence is responding instead of reacting. While strong emotions are linked to the activation of the nervous system (see [Inquiry: The Nervous System](#)), and emotional reactions may be part of a survival strategy, in most modern situations the more emotionally mature strategy is to pause, reflect, and then choose how best to respond appropriately to the situation.

Most people, given time, are able to increase their emotional intelligence and learn how to respond appropriately. And this is not always easy. A large number of factors are typically involved in discerning what an 'appropriate response' may be to any given situation or context. And there may be significant cultural variation in what is considered an 'appropriate response.'

Emotions and Culture

Ideally an Inner Transition will shift away from the binary framing of emotions as 'positive' or 'negative,' 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate.' Situations of uncertainty and disturbance, and the emotions that arise from them, are likely to be complex, so a 'one-size-fits-all' approach can be unhelpful. Someone's cultural background, perception, and present-day context are all important factors in how they 'respond appropriately' to any situation. This is part of a larger topic of Culture Change covered in a number of separate Inner Transition guides.

Different cultures view emotions differently. People from different cultural backgrounds are likely to have differing beliefs about how to respond 'appropriately' to emotions. Radek Trnka and his colleagues have proposed five main cultural components of emotions:

1. **Emotion language** – how to talk about emotions appropriately within a culture,
2. **Conceptual knowledge about emotions** – how a culture understands and fits emotions into its cultural worldview,
3. **Emotion-related values** – cultural preferences for the experience, intensity, avoidance, or regulation of emotions in certain situations,
4. **Feelings rules** - norms for internal subjective experience of emotions, what is culturally expected and appropriate for individuals,
5. **Display rules** - norms for emotional expression, what is culturally expected and appropriate interpersonally or socially.

Other cultural preferences include:

- **Avoiding uncertainty.** Some cultures have a strong preference for avoiding uncertainty, and others less so.
- **Experiencing 'opposite' emotions at the same time.** Some cultures have normalised this (e.g. feeling both happy and sad upon the death of a loved one), and others less so.
- **How tightly or loosely cultural norms are enforced.** Some cultures are more loose about enforcing norms, and others less so.

Emotional Fit with Culture

Sinhae Cho and her colleagues add that 'emotional fit with culture' is another important factor. They see emotions as social and interpersonal processes embedded in cultural contexts. Individuals may try to conform their emotions to cultural norms, either within their own culture or in response to a dominant culture.

In a multicultural society, individual well-being is affected by both (a) experiencing similar patterns of emotions to others within the same culture, and (b) the degree of similarity between an individual's own emotional patterns and those of any others (of the same or different culture) in the same environment.

As social animals, humans have greater individual well-being when they fit in with the group. Sharing emotions in a shared cultural context, where everyone has similar preferences and expectations, can reinforce identity and self-respect. By contrast, if there are differences in 'emotional fit,' an individual may feel a loss of identity or reduced self-respect.

Collective well-being -- viewing one's group identity positively -- is also affected by one's experience of shared emotions and 'emotional fit' with group members. This may have a greater impact on members of more interdependent cultures (e.g. east Asian), than of more independent cultures (e.g. western).

Related Inner Transition Resources

Inquiry: The Human Nervous System

Self Care guides:

Physical & Sensory

Nature

Mental

Emotional

Social

Worldview

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