

**THE EMOTIONAL LIFE OF YOUR BRAIN:
HOW ITS UNIQUE PATTERNS AFFECT THE
WAY YOU THINK, FEEL, AND LIVE--AND
HOW YOU CAN CHANGE THEM BY RICHA**

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**How Its Unique Patterns Affect the Way You Think,
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**Richard J. Davidson, Ph.D.
and Sharon Begley**

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Review

"Whether he is measuring neural activity in the laboratory or climbing the Himalayas to meet the Dalai Lama, Davidson is an inveterate explorer who has spent a lifetime probing the deep mystery of human feeling. Don't miss this smart and lively book by the world's foremost expert on emotion and the brain."—Daniel Gilbert, Ph.D., author of *Stumbling on Happiness*

"The Emotional Life of Your Brain is an eye-opener, replete with breakthrough research that will change the way you see yourself and everyone you know. Richard Davidson and Sharon Begley make a star team: cutting-edge findings formulated in a delightful, can't-put-it-down read. I loved this book."—Daniel Goleman, Ph.D., bestselling author of *Emotional Intelligence*

"What a gift from the world's leading neuroscientist who works on what makes life worth living. This is a must-read for everyone who is interested in positive psychology."—Martin E. P. Seligman, Ph.D., author of *Learned Optimism*

About the Author

Richard J. Davidson is a professor and director of the W. M. Keck Laboratory for Functional Brain Imaging and Behavior and the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

Sharon Begley is the senior health and science correspondent at Reuters. She is the bestselling author of *Train Your Mind, Change Your Brain*.

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What is your emotional fingerprint?

Why are some people so quick to recover from setbacks? Why are some so attuned to others that they seem psychic? Why are some people always up and others always down? In his thirty-year quest to answer these questions, pioneering neuroscientist Richard J. Davidson discovered that each of us has an Emotional Style, composed of Resilience, Outlook, Social Intuition, Self-Awareness, Sensitivity to Context, and Attention. Where we fall on these six continuums determines our own “emotional fingerprint.”

Sharing Dr. Davidson’s fascinating case histories and experiments, *The Emotional Life of Your Brain* offers a new model for treating conditions like autism and depression as it empowers us all to better understand ourselves—and live more meaningful lives.

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Review

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A unique book by a pioneer in the field

By MW

The author is a prominent researcher in neuroscience, specifically what has become "affective neuroscience." That is, the study of the neurological basis of emotions. Here, you will read about 6 distinctive brain patterns, or circuits, that underlie how people react to the world, in particular how people regulate their emotions. You won't read about the difference between brain patterns representing Joy vs. Pride vs. Amusement, or Sadness vs. Shame vs. Envy. Presumably these are higher level categorizations which don't have such clear brain signatures (yet?). Instead, the author describes these 6 brain circuits as the underpinnings of what he calls Emotional Style which govern the context and duration of emotions for different people, and which ultimately give rise to moods and personality.

The 6 categories of Emotional Style are:

- Resilience: How slowly or quickly you recover from adversity.
- Outlook: How long you are able to sustain positive emotion.
- Social Intuition: How adept you are at picking up social signals from the people around you.
- Self-Awareness: How well you perceive bodily feelings that reflect emotions.
- Sensitivity to Context: How good you are at regulating your emotional responses to take into account the context you find yourself in.
- Attention: How sharp and clear your focus is.

At first I was wary of this approach, as there are numerous classification systems for emotions that strike me as somewhat arbitrary. After a while though, it sunk in and I realized how fundamentally these functions affect the contours (ups and downs) and contexts of our emotional states, and how we perceive and react to our social world. It is also extremely interesting to understand the basis for these characteristics in terms of brain function, something which is rarely tackled in a satisfactory way. Sometimes he seems to paint with too broad of a brush, probably a reflection of how much has yet to be learned, but overall it is very illuminating stuff.

In addition to helping readers understand the workings of the brain, readers are encouraged by the author to evaluate their own particular Emotional Style and consider how they might change it. He discusses many ways that the extreme ends of certain emotional style categories give rise to serious difficulties in life for

some people (depression, anxiety, OCD, ADHD, social ineptitude, etc). The plasticity of the brain is emphasized, and the author gives very specific suggestions of ways to change if the reader so desires. I don't want to give the impression that this is merely a "self-help" type of book, as that would seriously underestimate the content here.

A very significant contribution the author makes is his evaluation of the effects of meditation on the brain. Richard Davidson is perhaps the foremost researcher in the world investigating the connection between meditation and brain function, and has worked closely with the Dalai Lama to recruit experienced monk meditators for brain scans (fMRI & EEG), in addition to studying how novice meditators' brains change over shorter periods of time. I have read other books on meditation and the brain (Buddha's Brain, The Blissful Brain) and this book has the strongest scientific basis by far.

In the course of the book, the author describes numerous experiments throughout his career that gave rise to these findings. It was interesting to learn how these discoveries came about, and to consider the efficacy of his methods. In fact, a good deal of time is spent on the narrative of the author's career and research methods. This might be off-putting for some people, but I found it to be a good framework to understand the methods used for this research, and to learn of the author's personal trajectory towards studying positive emotion, the brain, and meditation, though sometimes the author seems to take a tad too much credit (or perhaps he really is that important).

I have no doubt there is a great deal more we don't know about emotion regulation, but the neural circuits described here will inevitably play a foundational role for what is discovered in the future.

126 of 131 people found the following review helpful.

Extremely Well Done and Helpful

By Book Fanatic

This is just a really good book. I recently read Quirk: Brain Science Makes Sense of Your Peculiar Personality and the two of them together provide an excellent view of emotions and your brain. They are very different though. Quirk is kind of quirky and all about mice and (wo)men. This book has a much more professional and serious tone. They both are valuable and useful.

This book traces the author's history in psychological and neuroscience research. At first that bugged me as it seemed to be all about him. Most of the research in this book is his own and/or that of his students. However, in the end I think that turned out to be a good thing both because he quite obviously is a preeminent expert in the field and he goes pretty deep into the implications of his own findings. In other words he knows what he is talking about and not just speculating about the meaning of someone else's work. In any case you see the history and the evidence in favor of the author's ideas build over time and he does an excellent job putting it all together. He definitely believes you can alter to some degree your emotional profile and he ends the book with suggestions for exercises on how do to that for any of the six dimensions he describes.

You will come away from reading this book with a much deeper understanding of the dimensions of your emotional style and their underlying neural correlates. This book is definitely for the general reader and while it is densely packed with information it is not overly technical or academic.

I highly recommend this to readers who are curious about the brain in general or emotions in particular.

I'm disappointed that this book does not have Amazon's "Search Inside" feature so I will include the contents below and hope that helps you get a better feel for its contents:

Introduction: A Scientific Quest

Chapter 1: One Brain Does Not Fit All

Chapter 2: The Discovery of Emotional Style

Chapter 3: Assessing Your Emotional Style

Chapter 4: The Brain Basis of Emotional Style

Chapter 5: How Emotional Style Develops

Chapter 6: The Mind-Brain-Body Connection, or How Emotional Style Influences Health

Chapter 7: Normal and Abnormal, and When "Different" Becomes Pathological

Chapter 8: The Plastic Brain

Chapter 9: Coming Out of the Closet

Chapter 10: The Monk in the Machine

Chapter 11: Rewired, or Neurally Inspired Exercises to Change Your Emotional Style

242 of 258 people found the following review helpful.

Recommended Overall, but Have Some Issues

By Bill Gallagher

Let me start off by saying that overall I liked this book and felt I got some valuable insights on issues related to emotional psychology, brain science, and a wee bit on meditation. So I'm glad I bought and read this book. But the insights felt more subtle than big "aha"s and the supposed heart of the book--understanding our/the six core emotional styles--fell a bit flat for me.

Maybe looking for "ahas" is a lot to ask of any book--and certainly I don't expect that of everything I read--but there wasn't enough payback in the overall reading pleasure of *The Emotional Life of Your Brain* to overcome some awkwardness and unrewarding parts to call this "must reading"--at least not for a general audience (for those interested in research on our emotions and the brain, you will definitely find it worthwhile).

Information Gained

I think the heart of my issues with this book were with the research of the six emotional styles. It's not that doubted the validity of what Davidson discovered, but the discoveries didn't feel that exactly translated into actionable behaviors. In small part, my problem was I didn't truly get the distinction of the difference between some of the styles. That is, we're told there are six emotional components that are crucial (or at least measurable) to how we react emotionally: Resilience, Outlook, Self-Awareness, Social Intuition, Context Sensitivity, and Attention. The differences between Resilience and Outlook seem pretty subtle and especially so for Social Intuition and Context Sensitivity (which is about relating to people in an appropriate way given the context). Yes, Davidson shows us the brain mechanisms for each of these are different--and one of the book's strengths is the clear way they explain what happens in the brain--but the effect and "remedies" to correct for emotional style deficiency weren't that different from one another.

The overall effect of the self-help sections of this book relating to emotional styles felt a bit lame. It was almost as if they didn't feel confident enough in the reader to trust the inherent interest in what Davidson's emotional research and felt compelled to try and add a self-help elements as a marketing tool.

The strongest parts of the book were the science writing and discoveries explained. Some of it I'd heard before, but Davidson's been a pioneer in the area of grounding the study of emotions in hard science and there are lots of good information on that account. Most important are the way he's proven emotions are critical to our brain's proper functioning and how he establishes a continuum of functioning to bring greater nuance and remedies to disorders such as autism, depression, and ADHD. This is where the book shines and is worthy of being considered important.

Writing Style

Call me nitpicky, but for a decent amount of the book I didn't enjoy the writing so much. I wonder if part of the problem is that it was a team effort and the ghost writer wasn't clearly in charge. Richard Davidson has written a number of books and is a clear writer, but he's doesn't have the je-ne-c'est-quoi of a top-notch magazine-quality writer that knows how to really draw you in. I presume Sharon Begley does (I haven't read her other work). And there are sections of the book that read really smoothly and are totally absorbing. But especially toward the beginning, the book is a bit clunky and in several places Davidson reveals a pride in his accomplishments that I found slightly embarrassing. For example on page 68 Davidson writes: "Wisconsin has a winning strategy for recruiting faculty, recruiting those whose star is still rising rather than going after full blown supernovas as a place like Harvard typically does." Davidson was recruited and taught at Wisconsin and a bit earlier had told us he was later recruited by Harvard; in other words, he let us know he is a supernova professor. It's not that he isn't a superstar professor/researcher and I truly believe humanity is better off for the valuable research he's done, but combined with some other horn-touting sprinkled through out the book, it was a bit distracting from the content. This was a minor issue and more toward the beginning. In the acknowledgments at the end of the book, it sounds like Davidson struggled to get this book done and his agent got Begley onboard, making me wonder (after I finished it) if that might have accounted for the unevenness. Perhaps I'm just spoiled by the plethora of exquisitely written science books I've read in recent years.

Summing Up

Please don't take the criticism above as discouragement from reading *The Emotional Life of the Brain*; it does have value and if I hadn't read a lot on the topic, including other books that have cited Davidson's work elsewhere, I probably would have enjoyed it even more. Maybe my expectations were too high. My main discouragement would be around expectations for the self-help aspect of the book which didn't work for me, but if you're happy to read it for the science, then I think you'll be rewarded.

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