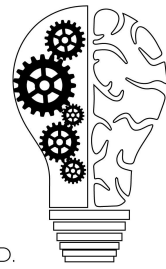


## **Episode 015: Microexpressions to Make**

### **Microconnections Part 1**

David Puder, M.D., Ariana Cunningham

This PDF is a supplement to the podcast “Psychiatry & Psychotherapy” found on [iTunes](#), [Google Play](#), [Stitcher](#), [Overcast](#), [PlayerFM](#), [PodBean](#), [TuneIn](#), [Podtail](#), [Blubrry](#), [Podfanatic](#)



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There are no conflicts of interest for this episode.

## **WHAT ARE MICROEXPRESSIONS?**

Microexpressions are brief, involuntary facial expressions that are cues to the true emotions that someone is feeling. We see microexpressions in tiny twitches of the brows, the lips and nose. They can last for as little as 1/15th of a second on the face.

Microexpressions are helpful because they send messages, both to ourselves, and to those we are trying to communicate with. Some are naturally better at sensing what someone else is feeling, but if you want a deeper clue into emotions and emotional connection, start to study microexpressions. We can even begin to understand ourselves a little better when we pay attention to them.

### **What are emotions?**

Emotions are adaptive brain networks, expressed rapidly on the face and in the body. They carry messages about our environment or thoughts, and they have a specific goal or intention.

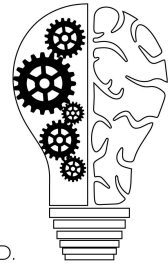
Although they appear ethereal in nature—fleeting feelings of happiness or sadness—emotions are actually grounded, measurable reactions. Each person, based on their experiences in life, will react differently to each stimuli. With each person, the reaction and meaning of the emotion lies within the lens we have.

- Emotions have a purpose.
- Emotions move us to action.
- Emotions themselves are not good or bad.
- We often do not decide to have emotions.

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Emotion is a survival mechanism that we all have. For example, the purpose of anger is to protect and reconnect. Anger surfaces when we feel threatened—when a lion tries to attack our family—it gives us the physical response we need to attack what is attacking us. Fear is helpful to trigger our body to be able to outrun that lion when we need to—our heart starts pumping, adrenaline rushes in, survival mode turns on. In modern society, we’ve tried to suppress or deny those emotions, but they’re still there, and they’re still helpful. We just have to know what they are, and what to do with them.

### WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT EMOTIONS?

Scientists have lumped all of our complex feelings into seven, basic categories.

### **HAPPINESS**



Emotion: Happy, Joy

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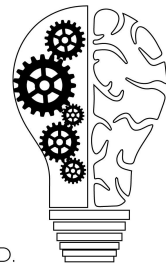
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Body Sensation: Positive warmth throughout the body, grounded feeling.

Microexpression: Mouth going up symmetrically, cheeks pulling up and change in contour, and eyes contracting (especially on the outside with classic “crows feet”).

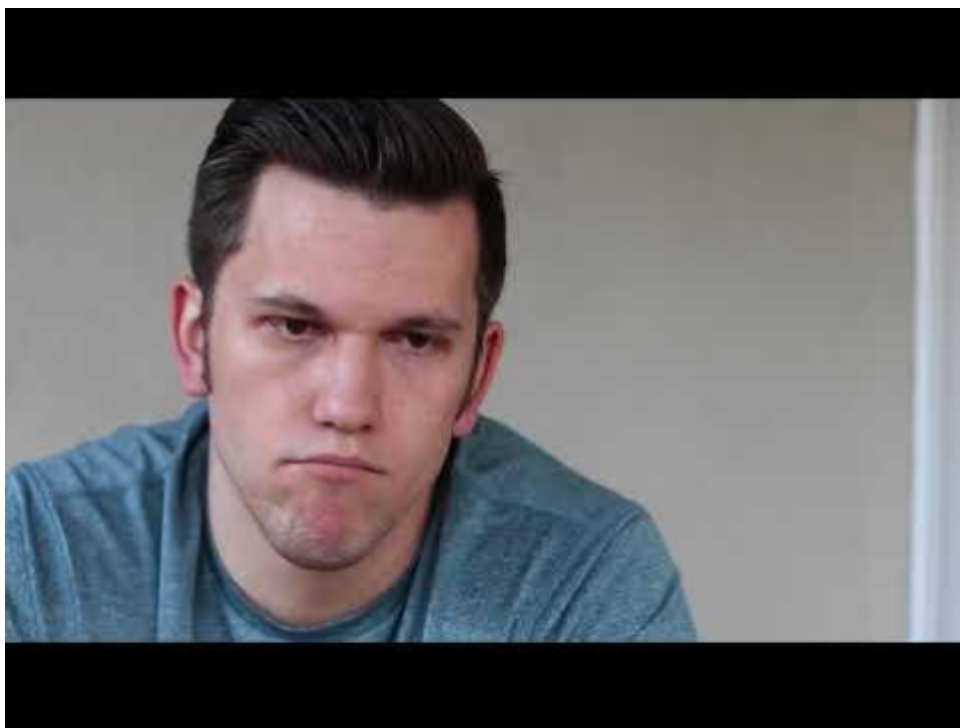
Meaning and Goal of Emotion: Heartfully rejoicing, finding pleasure and wanting more of something, noting what brings you pleasure, feeling safe connection, having mutuality with someone, moving towards a goal.



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## **SADNESS**



Emotion: Sadness

Body Sensation: Heavy feeling in chest, decreased limb activity.

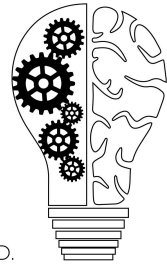
Microexpression: Inner eyebrows rising and outer eyelid drooping, pulling down of the lip corners, chin moving up, and lips showing a pout.

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Goal of Emotion: Express loss over connection, an object, or attachment, invite solace and concern.



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## **FEAR**



Emotion: Fear

Body Sensation: Weight on chest, constriction around neck, butterflies in the stomach.

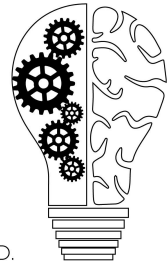
Microexpression: Upper eyelids rising high and longer than surprise, lower eyelids tensing, eyebrows drawing up and together with tension in the forehead, mouth opening horizontally.

Goal of Emotion: Preserve and maintain life, freeze to analyze danger, prepare to run or attack, puff up (to look dangerous).

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## **DISGUST**



Emotion: Disgust

Body Sensation: Queasy, feeling of wanting to vomit, gag feeling in the throat.

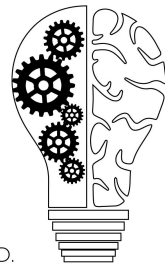
Microexpression: Wrinkling around the nose, upper lip rising, and eyebrows move down without tension (contrast this with anger where the eyebrows are pulled together and the eyelids are raised and tense).

Goal of Emotion: To move away from, avoid, reject, spit out, get away from.

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## **PRIDE/CONTEMPT**



Emotion: Pride, Smug, Contempt

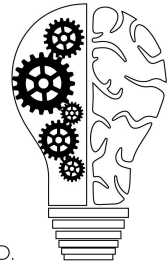
Body Sensation: Increased sensation in the chest and head of euphoria, puffed up feeling in chest

Microexpression: One side of the lips rising faster than the other, or one side coming down slower than the other.

Goal of Emotion: To take pride in another's success, proud when I succeed, feel superior, or diminish inferiority.

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### **SURPRISE**

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Emotion: Surprise

Body Sensation: Startle and jolt to the body

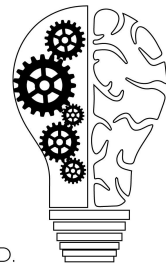
Microexpression: Rising and rounding eyebrows, co-occurring with rising upper eyelid, and sometimes mouth falling open with lips relaxing. Note: rising eyebrows can also be a conversational signal emphasizing something.

Goal of Emotion: Prepare for the next step, achieve familiarity with an object/situation so that you are better prepared when encountering a similar situation in the future.

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## **ANGER**



Emotion: Anger, Frustration

Body Sensation: Tight chest, tension in neck and back, knots or burning in stomach.

Microexpression: A short tightening of the eyelids, eyebrows moving down and together, and sometimes lips pressing together. Rarely, showing of teeth. The tightening of eyelids and eyebrows for an extended period of time can also be seen when a person is concentrating or focusing, so context is important.

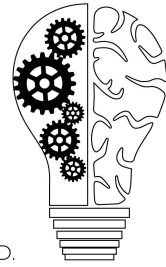
Meaning and Goal of Emotion: Overcome obstacle to move towards a particular goal (desire to reconnect with a loved one). Protect self or significant others—set up boundaries, have a voice, or be assertive. Attack when you feel no escape is possible either physically or psychologically.



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#### **Why should you learn about microexpressions?**

Learning about microexpressions is helpful for emotional connection. Connection is largely based on empathy, and when we know what someone else is feeling, studies show we experience more empathy.

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It can help raise the level of connection in personal life, in work, and even for people who have disorders that can cause emotional disconnection, such as schizophrenia.

Therapists and mental health workers, when tested, demonstrated they were no better at reading microexpressions than the average person. Another study also showed that therapists and mental health professionals overestimate how good they are at reading microexpressions. We believe microexpression training would benefit therapists, and help them build a therapeutic alliance with their patients.

One study of 21,000 patients, showed that those who were under the care of doctors who demonstrated higher empathy, had 40% less life-threatening instances related with their diabetes. Higher empathy = better health outcomes. In another study about psychotherapists, the overall therapeutic connection impacted how well someone responded to both the placebo and the active medication.

Learning about microexpressions will help therapists be able to diagnose or identify depression, anxiety, and find underlying emotional responses to a story a patient is telling.

#### **How do you learn about microexpressions?**

Anyone can learn how to read microexpressions, and studies show that it really does help us feel more connected to people, and it helps us develop empathy.

Even when we lean in, and specifically pay attention to someone else's emotions, we are better able to empathize with that person and connect. That's a simple way to feel closer to someone, but to really go deeper into the science of emotional connection, you have to study microexpressions.

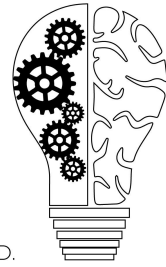
The most effective way to learn microexpressions is through a training program. I built a [Microexpression Training Program](#) that can help. This program has over a hundred

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recorded videos of real facial expression responses. After the video plays, it will prompt you to guess the emotion the person expressed. Once you respond, you will be given immediate feedback on the correct answer, along with what facial movements are involved in each emotion. Repetition is key in learning microexpressions.



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### **The positive effects of microexpression training**

There are incredible benefits to microexpression training, whether you are a healthcare professional or just someone who is interested in emotional connection.

#### **It develops psychological safety.**

When we read a microexpression, it shows we are demonstrating an appreciation for the person you are listening to. You are giving time and attention to their feelings. Often, when we recognize a microexpression, we tend to mimic it on our own faces. When someone is sad, we are sad with them. When someone shows anger, we shake our head and demonstrate anger with them. When they feel heard and understood, they feel psychologically safe to give you accurate feedback.

#### **It normalizes emotions.**

When we cognitively understand that we are feeling anger or disgust, and not just living in the feeling, it allows us to begin to breakdown the why behind it. When we dig that deep, we can process responses that are out of context. Emotions should happen in the appropriate time, in an appropriate amount. Checking the why can help us untangle complex situations from our past, and help us deal with emotions in healthier ways in the future.

Also, rather than judging emotions, when we learn microexpressions, it brings our brains into the equation, so our responses are rarely trigger-happy. We are able to be curious about the why behind it, which is much more helpful in the long run.

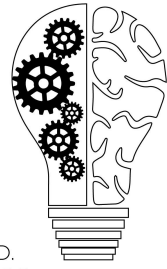
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If you'd like to keep learning about microexpressions, download a PDF with more detailed notes from this episode with all citations:

<https://psychiatrypodcast.com/resource-page/>



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If you're interested in learning more, consider looking into our [Microexpression Training Program](#).