

# Practicing Emotional Intelligence

by Joshua Freedman



 sixseconds  
THE EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE NETWORK

# Why?

We live in a time of complexity. Stress is rising. We have incredible technology to communicate, yet people feel isolated. This combination makes people more volatile, more impatient, more likely to fight, flee, or freeze. This makes it harder to solve the real problems we face individually and collectively.

The emotional challenge is growing – around the world, at work, at home. Even children are experiencing greater distress. Maybe once-upon-a-time there was little need to actively learn the skills of emotional intelligence. In this world of growing complexity, however, we all need to develop more insight and skill to handle our own and others emotions effectively. That's where emotional intelligence comes in.

There's a growing body of research showing that the skills of emotional intelligence help people...

Achieve more effective results

Be and feel healthier

Make better decisions

Form stronger relationships

*Want evidence? See [6sec.org/case](http://6sec.org/case)*



# What?

Emotional intelligence means being smarter with feelings. Tuning in lets us use feelings as a source of data to help us take the most effective actions.

Sometimes people get too caught up in emotions and get overwhelmed. Others push emotions away, try not to feel, and miss important signals. Neither extreme is very effective. Emotional intelligence means using emotions and thinking together—it's about balance.

*More: [6sec.org/eq](http://6sec.org/eq)*

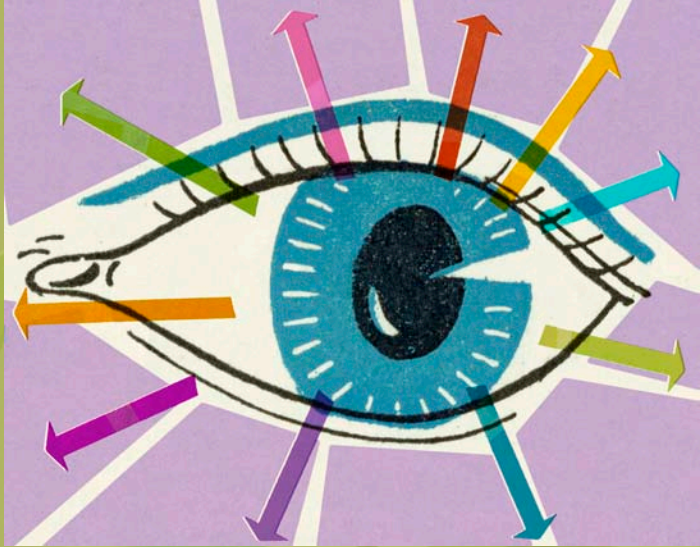
# How?

At Six Seconds we've developed a process for using emotional intelligence; for making it something practical.

At Six Seconds, our vision is a billion people practicing emotional intelligence. We believe that actively exercising emotional intelligence will help all of us create more peace, prosperity, and a better world. We hope you'll join us!

This booklet includes six ideas to get started on practicing emotional intelligence!

*For many more suggestions, see [6sec.org/start](http://6sec.org/start)*



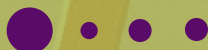
**Fact: Emotions are part of our biology**

Emotions are chemicals that are part of the way our brains and bodies work. In our brains, the chemicals of emotion are intermixed with the chemicals of thought. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio wrote,

“Emotions are enmeshed in the neural networks of reason.”

While it might be convenient to *leave emotions out of it*, in fact, our emotions and thoughts are always influencing each other. They also influence our bodies. Emotions signal the body to prepare for opportunity and threat, regulating such basic functions as heart rate, blood flow, digestion, immunity, muscle response, and even body temperature.

## Practice: Physical Feelings



When you've had years of practice ignoring feelings, it can be challenging to tune into them. Some people find it helpful to notice what's happening in their bodies: Is your jaw tight? Is your back sore? Are your fists clenched? Is your brow furrowed? Physical sensations could be clues to help you notice what you're feeling emotionally.

### *A few times each day, take a moment and tune in.*

Try the Body-Mind-Heart (BMH) scan:

What are you experiencing physically? (eg smile, frown, muscles tight or relaxed)

What kind of thinking are you doing? (eg focused, distracted, evaluating, observing)

What kind of **feelings** do you have? (eg calm, agitated, worried, joyful, bored, excited)

As you practice, you will become more skilled at noticing feelings even when they are small or subtle (and before they turn into something fierce and loud).



## Fact: Multiple Feelings

Emotion chemicals are produced throughout our bodies, and primarily in our brains. There is a little “factory” called the hypothalamus that assembles emotion chemicals. They’re made out of little strings of protein called peptides. These chemicals are released, then go coursing through our brains, and through the pituitary gland into our bloodstreams.

Emotions affect every living cell in our bodies.

And, our bodies affect our minds. Emotions are a kind of two-way communication system. At any given time, we will have multiple little “bursts” of feeling chemicals running around in our brains and bodies carrying their messages to regulate our systems and to help us cope.

It takes about six seconds for an emotion chemical to travel through the body, deliver its message to a cell, and be recycled.



## Practice: Layers of Feeling



Frequently when people express emotion, they focus on the most obvious or the loudest feeling. For example, in an argument, it's easy to notice that you're angry. There are almost always additional feelings surrounding this one. Maybe you are scared, lonely, loving, hopeful, excited... all at the same time. They don't cancel one another out, they exist together as a paradox, creating a rich (confusing) texture of feeling.

### When you are noticing feelings, ask yourself: *What else am I feeling?*

Try making a feelings quilt. Divide a paper into small squares (start with around four) and in each one, fill in color and texture to represent each of the feelings you have right now. Looking at your completed "quilt," consider how the feelings are affecting one another, and affecting you. As you practice, you'll get better at noticing the mix of feelings and, in turn, that will help you understand why you are thinking and acting the way you do.

### **Fact: Emotions are Contagious**

As social creatures, our emotions serve the purpose of signaling others in our “pack” about risks and opportunities. Emotions form a nearly-instant communication channel. We read emotions from others, for example by watching faces or hearing tone of voice, and then we use that data. We don’t have to be aware this is happening. It’s an automatic process.

There are a variety of factors that make someone more powerful as an “emotional transmitter.” Those with high status and positional authority seem to have a greater emotional influence, as do people with whom we have stronger ties.

So, in addition to affecting our own thoughts and actions, our emotions are affecting the people around us. Especially those that most look up to us and care about us.



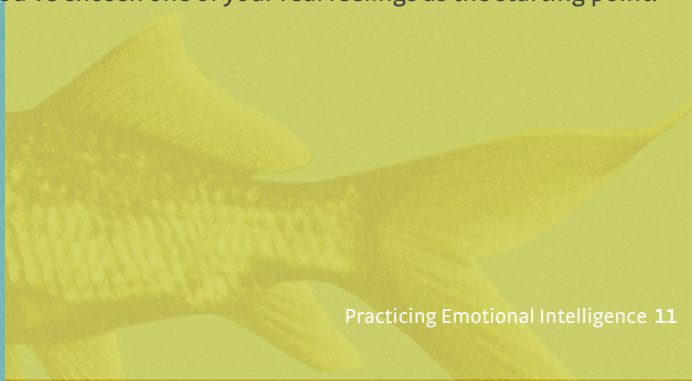
## Practice: Tune the Radio



In the previous two exercises, you became more aware of your emotions and the multiple emotions you feel. What happens when you focus your energy and attention on one of those feelings versus another? Back to the example of the argument where you're experiencing anger and fear and, at the same time, hope and concern for others. Probably in the argument, anger is the loudest emotion... but in theory, you could choose to express any of the feelings.

### *Deliberately select a feeling and intensify it.*

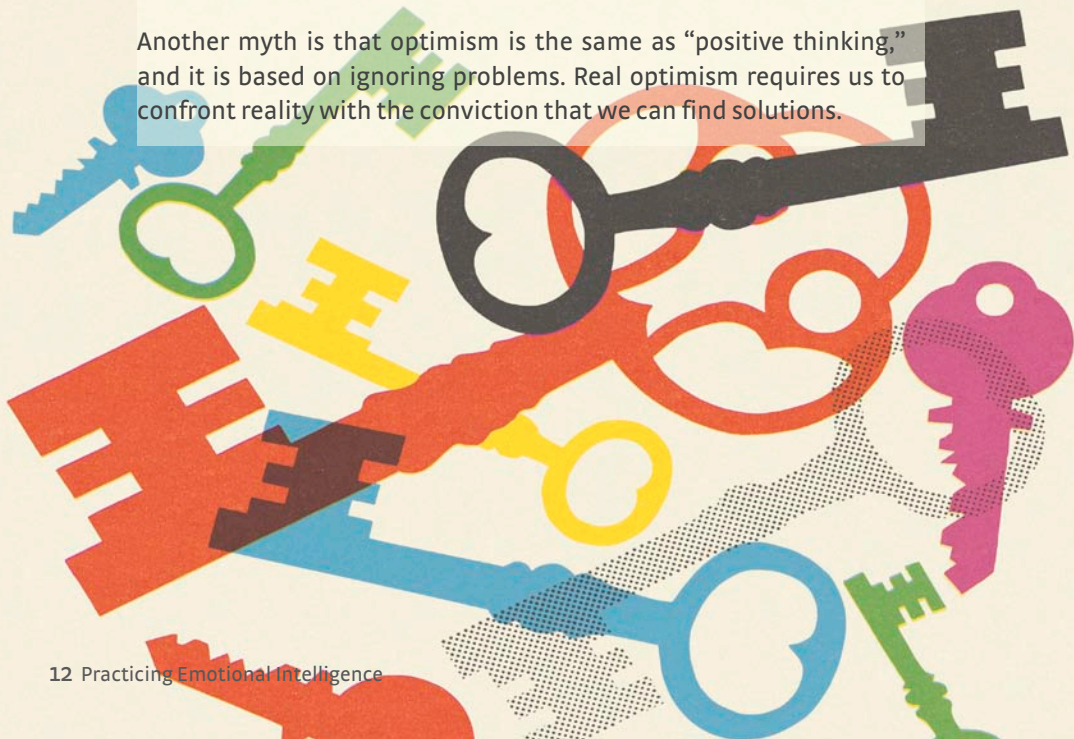
Try directing a feeling drama. Either on paper, out loud, or just in your own head, imagine yourself exhibiting the feeling you've chosen, as if you are both the director and actor of a movie. How would the actor stand and move? What might s/he say? What would we see on the actor's face and hear in the tone of voice? As you practice, you'll find yourself increasingly able to bring one or another of your feelings forward. This is not an insincere fakery: you've chosen one of your real feelings as the starting point.



## Fact: Optimism is Learned

Sometimes people describe others as, “an optimist” or “a pessimist” as if those are fixed traits. Yet research shows that optimism is actually a skill that is learned. Most likely, people are born with some predisposition to use optimism or pessimism more, and then they learn from that starting point.

Another myth is that optimism is the same as “positive thinking,” and it is based on ignoring problems. Real optimism requires us to confront reality with the conviction that we can find solutions.



## Practice: Realistic Optimism



When we're caught in pessimism, it feels as if there are no options. While sometimes it's reasonable and useful to be sad and scared, and even helpless or desperate, we're not likely to solve a problem if we stay in that state. The secret to optimism is to allow ourselves to feel those feelings that clarify the problem... and then to create new options for finding solutions.

When you're feeling stuck, add the word, *yet*, as in:  
*"I can't do this, yet."*

Sometimes people avoid considering an optimistic perspective because it seems unrealistic. One solution is to fully acknowledge the seriousness of a problem, and then to consider alternatives.

Try making a Problem-Solution chart. List all the problems and make notes about how bad and horrible they are. In the next column, write a solution that would be possible *for someone with a lot of skills and experience*. A solution that could potentially work, even if you can't implement it *yet*. Next, edit: Are both sides realistic? Then, choose one of the solutions and ask: *What do I need to learn or strengthen so I can implement this?* Are there people, books or websites that could help you build those strengths?

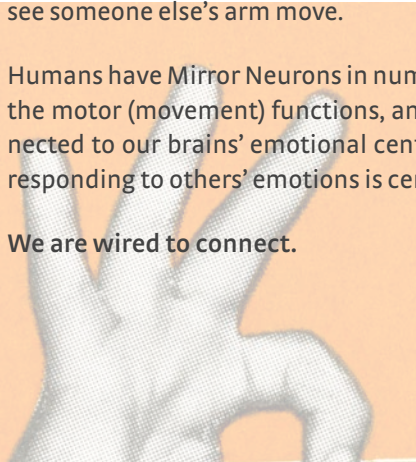
Practicing this process will help you exercise optimism and strengthen your growth mindset. In time, you'll find it easier to simultaneously acknowledge the seriousness of problems and create solutions.

## Fact: Our Brains are Wired for Empathy

Just as emotions serve as a feedback loop inside us, they form a feedback loop between us. Earlier we talked about emotional contagion. One reason this happens is a system of brain cells called Mirror Neurons. Your brain has cells that cause your arm muscles to move; alongside those cells are Mirror Neurons that fire when you see someone else's arm move.

Humans have Mirror Neurons in numerous brain areas in addition to the motor (movement) functions, and we have Mirror Neurons connected to our brains' emotional centers. It means that noticing and responding to others' emotions is central to our brain's architecture.

**We are wired to connect.**



## Practice: There's More to the Story

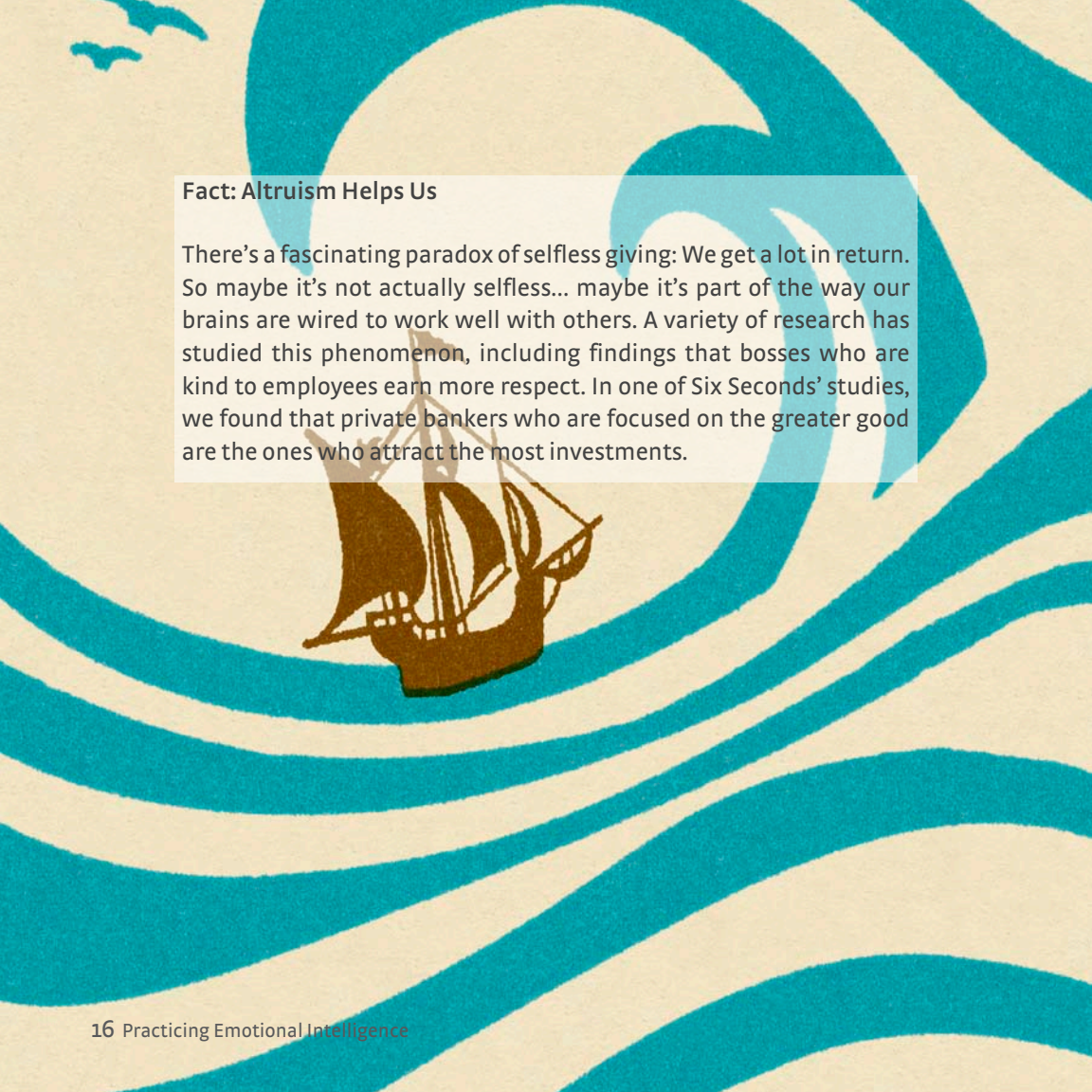


Many of us have grown our brains for learning and processing factual data. We spent years learning to focus on the data we need to analyze for school or work – which means we've become skilled at ignoring other data, such as emotional data about relationships. From our culture and this experience, many of us are highly focused on “being right.” In relationships, it could be that's not the most important criteria.

### *Ask yourself: Is this a factual issue, or a relationship issue?*

When you're peeved at someone, try Radical Respect. This practice means looking at another person and making a concerted effort to believe that their views are just as important as are yours, they are as worthy as you, have as much right to dignity as you, and could be just as right as you are.

The “Radical” part means doing this whole-heartedly, noticing even small ways you might be holding yourself above others, and choosing to stand as equals. When you do this, you'll begin to see that their perspective is meaningful and important – you'll learn from them. When they feel the strength of your respect, they will open up to you, and you'll build empathy together.



### Fact: Altruism Helps Us

There's a fascinating paradox of selfless giving: We get a lot in return. So maybe it's not actually selfless... maybe it's part of the way our brains are wired to work well with others. A variety of research has studied this phenomenon, including findings that bosses who are kind to employees earn more respect. In one of Six Seconds' studies, we found that private bankers who are focused on the greater good are the ones who attract the most investments.



## Practice: Greatest Good



You've probably heard the idea, "don't sweat the small stuff." Yet when we're in stress, it's very hard to see what's actually important.

With so many demands on our time and resources, it's easy to get overwhelmed by all the competing needs. Sometimes this pushes people to withdraw, others to become martyrs. In the face of so much demand, others just become short-term focused and seek instant gratification. All these might be motivated by a desire to feel better... but in time, any of these options leave us more emotionally fragile. More isolated. More lost. On the other hand, when we can find ways to live purposefully, we feel better now, and in the long-term.

**When you're feeling uncertain, ask yourself:  
*What will create the most value for all of us?***

Try creating a Five Year Flashback. Imagine you're looking back on this moment from five years in the future. What are the options your future-self can see? Which of those options will contribute to something that still matters in five years?

By practicing this reflection, you'll build the muscle of taking perspective. You'll find that you're better able to recognize "the small stuff" and let it go. This will give you space to focus your energy and attention on what's most important to you – and to our shared future.

## Everywhere, All the Time!

One of the beautiful aspects of emotional intelligence is that you can practice easily. This doesn't require special equipment or a big investment to prepare. You don't need to travel anywhere, you don't need a team. You have opportunities to practice every day. How will you spend the next 10 minutes? How will you handle the inevitable traffic or interruptions or challenges that may come your way in a few hours?

How will you start your day tomorrow?



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## Six Seconds

Six Seconds is a global not-for-profit organization working to raise emotional intelligence. We research about emotions, learning, and performance and translate the science into practical tools that create value at work, at school, and at home.

If you'd like more ideas on practicing emotional intelligence, we publish several free eLearning courses, host free webinars each month, and have free EQ Café events in over 50 cities around the world. In addition, Six Seconds offers books, assessments, training tools, and in-depth certification training.

Please join us on [www.6seconds.org](http://www.6seconds.org)

### *About the Author*

Joshua Freedman is the CEO of Six Seconds, and author of four books, seven psychometric assessment tools and dozens of articles, training programs, and tools to teach emotional intelligence.



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