

What Feelings Should I Follow?

Written by Tom Asacker

“Feelings are just visitors. Let them come and go.”
— Mooji

Someone once asked me: If we have evolved to be led by our feelings, how do we know that they are trustworthy judgments? Is there a way to determine which ones are reliable guides and which ones we should simply ignore?

That’s such an important question.

First, let’s underscore the unequivocal truth of that inquiry. Indeed, our feelings are what lead us—to get us to approach or avoid things in our environment. And to live a full, exciting, and meaningful life is to know how to both evaluate and respond to those feelings.

That said, feelings are encoded in memory—in our brains and bodies, through both nature and nurture—primarily for survival purposes; survival of both our physical selves and of our social selves—our identities, relationships, and sense of self-worth.

Let’s take a look at a few examples.

Let’s say it’s Monday morning, you’re up against the clock, and you’re making a bowl of cereal. As you begin to pour milk into the bowl, you sense (smell, in this case) sourness. That “feeling” signals you to avoid consuming the milk, because it’s likely spoiled and may cause you bodily harm.

Aggravated and hungry, you leave home and drive towards work. You decide to stop at a fast-food restaurant and order a breakfast sandwich. As you pull into the drive-through lane, someone cuts you off and takes your spot in line. Your “feelings,” exacerbated by your mood, signal you to lean on your horn, roll down your window, and give that person a piece of your mind.

You finally arrive at work, late and frazzled, and your manager calls you into her office. She tells you that she has to take a few days off for a family emergency, and she wants *you* to give the departmental presentation to the executive team tomorrow afternoon. Your “feelings” tell you to lash out at the ridiculously short notice, as well as your woefully inequitable salary.

Driving home, your “feelings” kick into overdrive and create severe anxiety over the impending presentation. You walk into your house and see your children’s toys strewn all over the floor. Your “feelings” signal you to go on a tirade about how hard you work to provide for everyone, as well as the importance of orderliness and responsibility.

Okay, let’s take a quick look at those various “judgments.”

The milk judgment seems pretty straightforward and trustworthy: accept the reality of the situation and pour the milk down the drain, but do so without allowing it to affect your mood. The reason it bothers you is because it messed up your self-story. In your prototypical script, with you as the hero in a hurry, the milk is always fresh, cold and delicious.

In Aesop’s fable, “[The Fox and the Grapes](#),” the fox sees a beautiful bunch of ripe grapes hanging from a vine. But try as he may, he simply can not reach them. So, in order to relieve his cognitive dissonance—the psychological stress he experiences from desiring something that he can not have—he convinces himself that the grapes are no good (“sour grapes”).

When you live in a mindless script, anything that disrupts your imagined, self-important story is looked at as a negative, and in many cases seen as an antagonist. Since you’re the protagonist of your story, trying to control and act out your hero script, the person who cut you off at the drive-through became your enemy.

In tribal times, it may have made sense for your feelings to signal you to lash out at that driver. After all, how would he and others in the tribe (or gang, prison, etc.) know not to walk all over you? But you don’t even know that rival, fast-food hunter (plus, there’s plenty of food). So, in *that* situation, your feelings are not a reliable guide. To follow them would not only be mindless, but potentially dangerous as well.

And what of your subsequent feelings, with your “unreasonable” boss, of your “critical” presentation, and with your “disorderly” home? Are they reliable guides?

First, recognize that those types of feelings will happen. You will feel frustration and anger when life doesn't match your desires. You will feel anxiety about the future and what others think of you. You will compare yourself and your circumstances to others.

However, like rain, those feelings and thoughts are transient phenomena. They come and they go. The key is to examine them deeply, and then decide whether to let them inform and influence your life, or not.

In his book, "[The Way of Zen](#)," Alan Watts writes that "muddy water is best cleared by leaving it alone." The idea that you should think about those feelings and try to "solve" them in the moment is misguided. Instead, let the muddy water settle and then contemplate the clear, unclouded solution. The answers will reveal themselves.

In the meantime, try to be like songbirds.

Sit quietly in the bright morning sun and listen to the "[light-winged Dryad\(s\) of the trees](#)." It's as if the birds' hearts are spontaneously exploding with song. But when it rains or it's the dark of night, the birds remain silent.

When your mood is sunny, sing your song. But when your feelings become dark, anxious or controlling, catch yourself and remain silent.

Then pause and think *really* hard about whether those feelings make sense; whether or not you are living a mindful, compassionate and creative life, consciously enjoying your one wild and temporary ride. Or, if you're being a mindless, serious character in a delusional self-story of more, better, faster, and right. And with *you* as its hero, who must make everything and everybody fit *your* script.

If you acknowledge, weather, and contemplate those self-concerned feelings, over time they will slowly abate (Mooji's visitors will only show up when you really need them). You'll find yourself peacefully dancing in the rain. And you won't worry about proving yourself, having things go your way, or being right.

When you're wrong, you'll apologize. And when you're right, you'll stay silent. It's a simple change that will make a profound difference in your relationships and, as a result, in your life and the lives of those around you.

There's another type of "feeling" that you'll frequently encounter, and it's the uncertainty and discomfort associated with any new, unfamiliar experience. And so, what's the best way to evaluate those judgments?

First, consult your future self (the one on your deathbed) and ask if you'll regret allowing your fearful, status-quo-seeking feelings to dissuade you. Then ask yourself, Do I have the courage to push past those feelings and follow my curiosity?

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1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me; and
2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.

Don't go to your grave with those same regrets. Do something about them.

"In 20 years you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So explore. Dream. Discover." - Mark Twain

"If you hear a voice within you say 'you cannot paint,' then by all means paint and that voice will be silenced." - Vincent Van Gogh

"Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming 'Wow! What a ride!'" - Hunter S. Thompson