

## CHAPTER 3



# Assessing Your Emotional Style

In the introduction, I presented the bare bones of the six elements, or dimensions, that constitute Emotional Style. I imagine that as I asked whether you are the kind of person who can shrug off a minor spat with your spouse, who understands her own emotional state, who can keep his attention focused, and the like, you tried to place yourself along the spectrum of each dimension of Emotional Style. Now I want to be more methodical about it, explaining each dimension in greater depth and offering a way for you to assess your own overall Emotional Style, the product of where you fall on each of the six dimensions. Some of the assessments require nothing more than being insightful and honest about your own behavior and feelings. Others do not lend themselves as readily to self-evaluation, but rather than send you to a psychology lab and a neuroimaging center, I'll offer some next-best ways for you to get a handle on where you fall in these difficult-to-assess dimensions. You can also use the assessments to determine where someone close to you falls on the dimensions; the better you know someone, the more accurate your evaluation is likely to be. Similarly, after you answer each questionnaire about yourself, ask someone close to you to answer them about you. That can serve as a reality check: If someone who knows you very well has very different answers about-to jump ahead here-how long a disagreement leaves you out of sorts, it's a tip-off that you may not be answering correctly or honestly. In each case, I'll start with

questions or descriptions about situations that arise in everyday life to get your thoughts going.

## **The Resilience Dimension**

If you have an argument with a friend, does it cast a pall on the remainder of your day? If you arrive at the airport and discover that your flight was canceled, do you sputter profanities at the gate agent, snap at your spouse, feel as if these things always happen to you-and find it impossible to regain your calm and composure for hours? If the vending machine eats your money without giving you the bag of chips, do you pound and yell at the stupid thing, fume for the rest of the day, and give it a surreptitious kick the next time you walk by? If someone close to you dies, do you experience not merely normal sadness but a prolonged and profound despair so debilitating that you are unable to function for months or years? If any or all of these apply to you, then you fall toward the Slow to Recover pole of the Resilience dimension. This part of the continuum is marked by difficulty shaking off anger, sadness, or other negative emotion after a loss, hassle, setback, or other upsetting event.

Alternatively, can you usually brush off setbacks, so when something bad happens you're able to move on? If you argue with your spouse before leaving for work, can you put it behind you with the confidence that it will get resolved? People toward this extreme are Fast to Recover, or resilient.

Either extreme of the dimension can trip you up. An extremely resilient person can lack the motivation to overcome challenges, accepting every setback with a metaphorical shrug and an attitude of "don't worry, be happy." In contrast, being Slow to Recover can prevent you from moving forward after a setback, causing you to continue to fume and obsess over something that is over and done with.

All the examples above-from minor hassles such as the larcenous vending machine to profound losses such as the death of a spouse-have what's called a normative recovery time, the average period it takes to recover. Returning to your baseline emotional state after a death obviously takes longer than regaining your emotional equilibrium after failing to get potato chips

from a machine. But no matter how great or small the specific adversity, there are big differences in how quickly people recover. Curiously, perhaps, we are not necessarily conscious of how rapidly we recover, even though the aftershocks of a setback affect our stress levels and mood. You might be irritable for a whole day after a morning argument with a coworker but not realize that your funk is the result of being Slow to Recover. (This ability to introspect and understand our own emotions is an aspect of the Self-Awareness dimension of Emotional Style, described below.)

How quickly or slowly you recover from the setbacks life deals you is in part automatic. When you are flooded with negative emotions, your brain and body immediately activate mechanisms to dampen the emotion and return you to your baseline mood. This happens with positive emotions, too: If that vending machine gives you two bags of chips, the little thrill of pleasure eventually dissipates. In fact, we can measure this recovery time in the laboratory. In a typical experiment, we show volunteers something that makes most people feel sadness, disgust, or another negative emotion, such as pictures of a widow and young children in tears at a funeral or of someone injured in a horrific car accident. Alternatively, we administer a physically painful stimulus, typically via a thermode, a wandlike device filled with very hot water that, when it touches the skin, feels like a hot plate but does not cause any damage.

We then examine what happens in what should be a "recovery period," when the negative feeling or the burning sensation dissipates. For instance, we measure the eyeblink reflex. This is a milder version of the startle reflex, in which suddenly hearing a sharp, loud noise such as a car backfiring or a gunshot can make you jump. With a milder stimulus—we use white noise that sounds like a burst of static on the radio—most people simply blink involuntarily. By measuring (with electrodes) the strength of contraction of the muscle that produces the blink, we can quantify the size of the eyeblink reflex. The blink reflex relates to recovery from an emotional setback: When someone experiences a negative emotion, such as the disgust felt upon seeing a mangled body in a car crash, and then hears the unexpected noise, the eyeblink becomes stronger.

We can use this fact to track what happens in the time after someone has looked at the upsetting photos. By presenting the startling noise in the first few seconds after the person sees the photos, then again thirty seconds after,

and finally one minute after, measuring the blink reflex each time, we can track how rapidly someone recovers from the negative emotion by determining when the strength of the person's eyeblink reflex returns to what it was before exposure to the disturbing photos. The faster the recovery, the more resilient the person is in the face of adversity. It turns out that the very short time scale in the laboratory experiment is related to the much longer time scale for real-life events, so although we are measuring recovery periods in seconds, they predict the much longer recovery periods of real life, which take minutes or hours or more.

I don't recommend trying this at home; for one thing, the equipment to measure the strength of the eye-contracting muscles isn't something you can buy at the local hardware store. But to get a sense of your Resilience, the next best thing is to ask yourself the following questions. Answer each one True or False. If you are tempted to think long and hard about a question, or if you feel that there are too many nuances and exceptions, resist. The most accurate results come from making a snap judgment about whether a question is True or False about you. If you do not want to write in the book (or if you are reading this as an e-book or listening to the audio version), just grab some scrap paper, scribble "Resilience" across the top, and write the numbers 1 through 10 down the side. Write True or False for each question. I'll tell you how to score your answers at the end of the questionnaire. You can do basically the same thing for each of the other five questionnaires.

1. If I have a minor disagreement with a close friend or spouse-closer to "No, it's *your* turn to do the dishes" than "*You cheated on me?! -it typically leaves me out of sorts for hours or longer.*
2. If another driver uses the shoulder to zoom up to the front of a long line of traffic waiting to merge, I am likely to shake it off easily rather than fume about it for a long time.
3. When I have experienced profound grief, such as the death of someone close to me, it has interfered with my ability to function for many months.
4. If I make a mistake at work and get reprimanded for it, I can shrug it off and take it as a learning experience.

5. If I try a new restaurant and find that the food is awful and the service snooty, it ruins my whole evening.
6. If I'm stuck in traffic because of an accident up ahead, when I pass the bottleneck I typically floor it to vent my frustration but still seethe inside.
7. If my home's water heater breaks, it does not affect my mood very much, since I know I can just call a plumber and get it fixed.
8. If I meet a wonderful man/woman and ask if he/she would like to get together again, being told no typically puts me in a bad mood for hours or even days.
9. If I am being considered for an important professional award or promotion and it goes to someone I consider less qualified, I can usually move on quickly.
10. At a party, if I'm having a conversation with an interesting stranger and get completely tongue-tied when he/she asks me about myself, I tend to replay the conversation-this time including what I *should* have said-for hours or even days afterward.

You may have noticed that the questions cover a broad range of setbacks, from the trivial (question 5, for instance) to the profound (question 3). That's intentional. My research has consistently demonstrated that recovery from the minor challenges we administer in an experiment, such as being burned by the thermode or seeing an upsetting picture, is strongly correlated with and predictive of how someone copes with real-life adversity, particularly how quickly they recover. Resilience on the little things is therefore a good indicator of Resilience on bigger ones. While it is true that some people actually enjoy obsessing over small setbacks but can step up to the plate in a real emergency, their Resilience in each situation is likely to be the same: If they recover quickly from the little setbacks, they tend to be resilient in the face of big ones, and if they become paralyzed by or obsess over the little things, they tend to be laid low for a long time by the big things, too.

Give yourself one point for each True answer to questions 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 10; give yourself zero points for each False answer. Give yourself one point for

each False answer to questions 2, 4, 7, and 9; score zero points for each True answer. Anything above seven suggests you are Slow to Recover. If you scored below three, you are Fast to Recover and thus quite resilient.

To better understand people close to you, you might also ask yourself the above questions about them. Similarly, you can have someone who knows you well answer these questions about you. Sometimes, other people see us more clearly than we see ourselves. You may answer with an emphatic *no* the questions about whether a minor setback leaves you fuming for the rest of the day, but your significant other might disagree.

## The Outlook Dimension

We all know the type: She charges into gatherings where she doesn't know a soul and manages to connect with perfect strangers. He has never let an emotional cloud darken his sunny outlook on life. She maintains a high level of energy and engagement even in the most trying circumstances. He delights in every social encounter, rather than viewing it as a trial. She feels a sense of interconnectedness with her surroundings, both social and natural. He derives unvarnished pleasure from a life that, objectively, could easily be a source of unhappiness or anxiety. These kinds of people seem to see a silver lining in every cloud. They're the ones we sometimes want to shake, screaming, "Don't you see the world is going to hell?" Of course they don't; the way their brains work, they see the positive in everything—which can blind them to warning signs in both their personal and their professional lives. These are the people who inhabit the optimistic, Positive extreme of the Outlook dimension. They have an uncanny ability to *maintain* positive emotions. The "maintain" aspect is the key characteristic of this dimension: It measures not whether you can feel joy but how well you can keep that feeling alive.

At the other end of the spectrum are people in whom joy tends to melt away as quickly as a snowflake in the sun. These are the cynics and pessimists who, if they feel an initial jolt of happiness or pride over some encounter or accomplishment, cannot sustain it. Sometimes the inability to sustain a positive emotion is so extreme that they hardly feel it in the first place—"blink and you'll miss it." As a result, people at the extreme Negative pole of

this dimension have difficulty experiencing pleasure for any length of time and can be at risk for clinical depression or addiction. They can be described as gloomy, Negative types.

The capacity to remain upbeat and to sustain positive emotion over time is the key measure of the Outlook dimension of your Emotional Style. It can be thought of as the complement to Resilience, which reflects how quickly you recover from adversity. Outlook reflects how long and how well you can sustain positive emotions, either after something good happens to you or as a result of deliberately engaging in emotionally positive thoughts, such as thinking about someone you love. The durability of positive feelings has a strong carryover effect on your overall outlook (hence the name of this dimension): Someone whose positive mood hangs around tends to be optimistic, while someone whose moments of joy can be measured in microseconds feels chronically down and pessimistic.

In the lab, we measure Outlook by observing how long brain circuitry underlying positive emotion remains active when people are shown pictures that activate that circuitry, such as a glowing mother embracing her baby or a Good Samaritan going to the aid of someone in distress. We also measure Outlook by measuring how long facial muscles associated with smiling are activated in response to a stimulus like these. In people who fall at the Positive extreme, brain circuits associated with positive emotion stay active for much longer than they do in people who fall at the Negative end; their smile muscles also remain activated for longer. Again, this isn't something you can try at home. But you can get a sense of whether you tend toward the Positive or Negative end of the Outlook dimension by answering these questions True or False. Again, don't ponder them too long and think of all sorts of exceptions and mitigating circumstances; go with your initial impression.

1. When I am invited to meet new people, I look forward to it, thinking they might become my friends, rather than seeing it as a chore, figuring these people will never be worth knowing.
2. When evaluating a coworker, I focus on details about which areas he needs to improve rather than on his positive overall performance.
3. I believe the next ten years will be better for me than the last ten.

4. Faced with the possibility of moving to a new city, I regard it as a frightening step into the unknown.
5. When something small but unexpected and positive happens to me in the morning—for example, having a great conversation with a stranger—the positive mood fades within minutes.
6. When I go to a party and I'm having a good time at the outset, the positive feeling tends to last for the entire evening.
7. I find that beautiful scenes such as a gorgeous sunset quickly wear off and I get bored easily.
8. When I wake up in the morning I can think of a pleasant activity that I've planned, and the thought puts me in a good mood that lasts the entire day.
9. When I go to a museum or attend a concert, the first few minutes are really enjoyable, but it doesn't last.
10. I often feel that on busy days I can keep going from one event to the next without getting tired.

If the questions seem to cover your disposition about the future as well as your ability to maintain a positive feeling about an event in the past, that's intentional: The Outlook dimension of Emotional Style captures both. And as was the case with Resilience, your Outlook about trivial events is correlated with and predictive of your Outlook about momentous ones. Although individual circumstances will affect the answers—it is easier for a twentysomething single to move to a new city than it is for a fortysomething with a spouse and children who would need to adapt to new schools—the questions nevertheless capture the core of the Outlook dimension.

Give yourself one point for each True answer to questions 1, 3, 6, 8, and 10; score zero for each False answer. Give yourself one point for each False answer to 2, 4, 5, 7, and 9; score zero for each True answer. The higher your score, the closer you are to the Positive end of the Outlook style. Anything above seven is a Positive type, while a score below three is a Negative type.

## **The Social Intuition Dimension**

You've probably seen it: A man and a woman are talking, and he looks away, leans back, takes half a step away from her . . . and still she has no idea that he has absolutely no interest in her. Or maybe you have had a friend grab you as you're dashing out the door in a rush, and he begins jabbering away about a long and complicated experience he wants your advice on-while the whole time you're inching toward your car and checking your watch. And still he won't let you go. People at this extreme on the Social Intuition spectrum are **Puzzled**.

At the other extreme are **Socially Intuitive** types. They have an uncanny ability to pick up on subtle nonverbal cues, to read other people's body language, vocal intonation, and facial expressions. They can tell when someone who is grieving wants to talk about her loss and when she wants to be distracted by gossip and chitchat. They can tell when a colleague who has been reprimanded by a supervisor wants advice and consolation and when he wants to be left alone. They can tell when a child who has suffered his first romantic rejection wants advice about relationships and when he wants them to pretend they have no idea what's going on.

People differ dramatically in how attuned they are to nonverbal social cues. Extreme insensitivity to these signals is characteristic of people on the autism spectrum, who struggle to read facial expressions and other social cues, but people who fall well short of a clinical diagnosis can also be socially deaf and blind, with devastating consequences for personal and professional relationships. Conversely, acute sensitivity to the emotional state of others is central to both empathy and compassion, since being able to decode and understand social signals means we can respond to them.

Indeed, Social Intuition is the hallmark of some of our greatest teachers, therapists, and others in the caring professions. The Dalai Lama has it in abundance. A few years ago he was visiting a meditation center in western Massachusetts. Everyone there was abuzz with excitement, especially the cofounder-who, a week before, had broken her leg and had to get around on crutches. While more than a hundred people stood outside the main building waiting to greet the Dalai Lama as he arrived, she stood all the way at the back of the crowd. She had never met him and was feeling very disappointed, thinking her leg would keep her from doing so. When the Dalai Lama emerged from

the car, he looked at the crowd and somehow noticed the woman way in back. Deploying his social antennae, he politely weaved his way through the clusters of people directly to her and asked, "What happened? Are you okay?" And with that, he made her feel that she was, at least at that moment, the center of his universe.

I have often been the fortunate beneficiary of the Dalai Lama's Social Intuition. In 2010, at the end of a meeting he had held for scientists and Buddhist scholars, he turned to me to say good-bye and suddenly grabbed me in a bear hug. "I know that we were together in a former life," he said—the highest praise one could imagine from the spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhism. A few months before, when the Dalai Lama attended the inauguration of the University of Wisconsin's Center for Investigating Healthy Minds, which I direct, a number of dignitaries had been invited to attend a lunch hosted by the university chancellor. We thought the Dalai Lama would be more comfortable having a lunch of Tibetan food with Buddhist monks he was traveling with, but when he saw the small group he asked, "Where is everyone else?" Learning that the chancellor's bash was a few buildings away, he told Tenzin Takla, his chief of staff, "I'd like to go there." Now, for the Dalai Lama to go anywhere in the United States is no simple thing, especially when it deviates from an agreed-upon plan. As he strode toward the exit, intent on going to the chancellor's, all of the intimidating-looking guys with earpieces—that would be the Secret Service protection that the U.S. government always provides—looked like they were going to have heart attacks. They barked orders into their headsets, repositioned the FBI snipers on surrounding rooftops, and off we went. When the Dalai Lama got to the chancellor's, where I tried to usher him to a quiet table and get waiters to bring him lunch, he would have none of it. Maroon robe swirling, he walked up to the buffet table, took a plate, and waited in line to serve himself like everyone else—attracting no small number of stares but even more smiles of appreciation that this Nobel laureate, head of the Tibetan government in exile, best-selling author, and spiritual leader was waiting his turn for poached salmon, rice pilaf, and a Weight Watchers nightmare of desserts like everyone else. Social Intuition, indeed.

In the lab, we assess Social Intuition through measurements of both brain function and behavior. When we show someone a picture of a face, for instance, we use special laser eye-tracking devices to measure where his eyes are

actually looking. Someone who looks at the eye region of the face tends to have stronger Social Intuition than someone who looks at the mouth, and someone who looks away tends to have poor Social Intuition. If we use the laser device when someone is having her brain scanned by fMRI, we can measure brain activity simultaneously. We look for activation in the fusiform gyrus, which is part of the visual cortex, and the amygdalae, key structures in a circuit known to be important for social cognition. (The brain has two amygdalae, little almond-shaped bodies buried within the temporal lobes on each side of the brain. From now on, I will use the singular, amygdala, to refer to the pair.) These regions are typically activated when you process another person's face and especially when you look at the person's eyes, which convey a significant amount of emotional information.

To gauge where you fall on the spectrum of Social Intuition, answer these questions True or False:

1. When I'm talking with people, I often notice subtle social cues about their emotions—discomfort, say, or anger—before they acknowledge those feelings in themselves.
2. I often find myself noting facial expressions and body language.
3. I find it does not really matter if I talk with people on the phone or in person, since I rarely get any additional information from seeing whom I'm speaking with.
4. I often feel as though I know more about people's true feelings than they do themselves.
5. I am often taken by surprise when someone I'm talking with gets angry or upset at something I said, for no apparent reason.
6. At a restaurant, I prefer to sit next to someone I'm speaking with so I don't have to see his or her full face.
7. I often find myself responding to another person's discomfort or distress on the basis of an intuitive feel rather than an explicit discussion.
8. When I am in public places with time to kill, I like to observe people around me.

9. I find it uncomfortable when someone I barely know looks directly into my eyes during a conversation.
10. I can often tell when something is bothering another person just by looking at him or her.

Give yourself one point for each True answer for questions 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, and 10; score one point for each False answer for questions 3, 5, 6, and 9. Score zero for each False answer to 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, and 10, and for each True answer to 3, 5, 6, and 9. The higher your score (eight or above), the more Socially Intuitive you are; a lower score (three or below) means you are closer to Puzzled.

## **The Self-Awareness Dimension**

Do you have friends for whom introspection seems as foreign as Urdu? Do you yourself act and react without knowing why, as if your inner self is opaque to your consciousness, an utter mystery? Do those closest to you ask why you seem anxious, jealous, angry, or impatient—and now that it's been called to your attention, are you surprised that you do feel that way? We have all known people who are completely blind and deaf to their own emotions. They're not in denial; they are honestly unaware of emotional cues that arise within their own bodies. In part, that reflects differences in the strength of such signals. But it also reflects differences in the ability to recognize and interpret those signals, as well as sensitivity to them (that is, how strong the signals must be in order for you to perceive them). Some people have a very hard time "feeling" their feelings: It may take them days to recognize that they're angry, sad, jealous, or afraid. At this extreme of the Self-Awareness dimension are people who are Self-Opaque.

At the other end are Self-Aware people, who are acutely conscious of their thoughts and feelings and attuned to the messages their body sends them. They know that the real reason they're yelling at the kids is not that refusing to eat kale is so heinous, but that a monster traffic jam on the way home put them an hour behind schedule for the evening, ratcheting up their stress level to TILT. They can be supersensitive to the messages their body transmits, experiencing the physical aspects of their emotional states with heightened,

sometimes crippling intensity. This heightened sensitivity can be beneficial in several ways. It appears to play a crucial role in empathy, the ability to feel what others are feeling, and by allowing you to understand your own emotional state it can help you avoid misunderstandings during arguments with a significant other: If you grasp that you are upset about something that happened before you got home, then you are more likely to understand that the explosive anger you are suddenly feeling is not really because dinner isn't on the table yet.

High Self-Awareness can also exact a cost, however. Someone with very sensitive emotional antennae for his own feelings who observes the pain of another will feel that person's anxiety or sadness in both mind and body—experiencing a surge of the stress hormone cortisol, for instance, as well as elevated heart rate and blood pressure. Such extreme sensitivity is likely a factor in the burnout that nurses, counselors, therapists, and social workers suffer.

In the lab, one way we measure people's sensitivity to their internal physiological signals is by how well they can detect their own heartbeat. First, we measure a person's heart rate while she is resting comfortably. Then we use a computer to construct a series of ten tones perfectly in sync with her heartbeat; each tone occurs precisely when the heart beats. We then construct a second sequence, shifted a bit, so that the tones sound a little before or after each heartbeat. To assess how sensitive the person is to her internal signals, we play (through headphones) two sequences of ten tones; her task is to choose which one is in sync with her heartbeat. We run the in-sync and out-of-sync sequences a hundred or so times each, alternating them randomly. Self-Aware people score in the top 25 percent of performance on this test.

Assessing your sensitivity to your body's signals doesn't lend itself to the kind of questionnaire we've developed for the other five dimensions of Emotional Style, so I've included both questions and a simple exercise you can try. The latter should be done with a partner.

1. Often, when someone asks me why I am so angry or sad, I respond (or think to myself), "But I'm not!"
2. When those closest to me ask why I treated someone brusquely or meanly, I often disagree that I did any such thing.

3. I frequently-more than a couple of times a month-find that my heart is racing or my pulse is pounding, and I have no idea why.
4. When I observe someone in pain, I feel the pain myself both emotionally and physically.
5. I am usually sure enough about how I am feeling that I can put my emotions into words.
6. I sometimes notice aches and pains and have no idea where they came from.
7. I like to spend time being quiet and relaxed, just feeling what is going on inside me.
8. I believe I very much inhabit my body and feel at home and comfortable with my body.
9. I am strongly oriented to the external world and rarely take note of what's happening in my body.
10. When I exercise, I am very sensitive to the changes it produces in my body.

Give yourself one point for each True response to questions 4, 5, 7, 8, and 10; score one point for each False response to questions 1, 2, 3, 6, and 9. Score zero for each False response to 4, 5, 7, 8, and 10, and for each True response to 1, 2, 3, 6, and 9. A score of eight or higher means you are Self-Aware; a score below three means you are Self-Opaque.

For the exercise, have a partner take your pulse for thirty seconds while you direct your attention internally and try to detect your own heartbeat. Focus your awareness on your internal bodily sensations, and do your best (without touching your wrist or anyplace else to feel a pulse) to sense your heartbeat and count the number of beats. Do this three more times-that is, four thirty-second trials. Compare your counts to those of your partner. The closer the match, the greater your Self-Awareness.

## **The Sensitivity to Context Dimension**

Have you ever told your boss the same dirty joke you told your friends at the sports bar the night before? Have you ever been at a funeral and been appalled to see someone playing *Angry Birds* on his iPhone? How about being at a wedding where another guest regales the table with an account of her long-ago affair with the groom? Are you baffled when people tell you that your behavior is inappropriate?

Most of us know when conversations with a particular emotional tinge have no place in a given circumstance. People who are especially aware of the social surround are at the Tuned In pole of the Sensitivity to Context spectrum. People who are oblivious to the social surround fall at the Tuned Out extreme: They're oblivious to the implicit rules that govern social interactions and that make a behavior that would be perfectly acceptable in one context offensive in another. Because sensitivity to context is largely intuitive rather than something we consciously regulate, and because both social context and our own behavior frequently have emotional subtexts (wedding: happy, decorous; affair with groom: tawdry), I consider it an important component of Emotional Style.

Depending on whom we are interacting with and in what circumstances, there are different rules and expectations—for interactions with close friends, people you know only slightly, family members, coworkers, or superiors. Nothing good can come of treating your boss like a child, or of treating the cop who just pulled you over like a drinking buddy, let alone treating a coworker like a lover. Sensitivity to the rules of social engagement and the capacity to regulate our emotions and behavior accordingly varies enormously among people. You can think of the Sensitivity to Context dimension of Emotional Style as the outer-directed version of the Self-Awareness style: Just as the latter reflects how attuned you are to your own physiological and emotional cues, so Sensitivity to Context reflects how attuned you are to the social environment.

In the lab, we measure this dimension by determining how emotional behavior varies with social context. For example, toddlers tend to be wary in unfamiliar circumstances such as a lab but not in a familiar environment. A toddler who seems perpetually wary at home is therefore probably insensitive to context. For adults, we test Sensitivity to Context by conducting the first

round of tests in one room and then a second round in a different room. By determining to what extent emotional responses vary by the environment in which testing occurs, we can infer how keenly someone perceives and feels the effects of context. We also make brain measurements: The hippocampus appears to play an especially important role in apprehending context, so we measure hippocampal function and structure with MRI.

To get a sense of where you fall on the Sensitivity to Context spectrum, answer True or False to these questions:

1. I have been told by someone close to me that I am unusually sensitive to other people's feelings.
2. I have occasionally been told that I behaved in a socially inappropriate way, which surprised me.
3. I have sometimes suffered a setback at work or had a falling-out with a friend because I was too chummy with a superior or too jovial when a good friend was distraught.
4. When I speak with people, they sometimes move back to increase the distance between us.
5. I often find myself censoring what I was about to say because I've sensed something in the situation that would make it inappropriate (e.g., before I respond to, "Honey, do these jeans make me look fat?").
6. When I am in a public setting like a restaurant, I am especially aware of modulating how loudly I speak.
7. I have frequently been reminded when in public to avoid mentioning the names of people who might be around.
8. I am almost always aware of whether I have been someplace before, even if it is a highway that I last drove many years ago.
9. I notice when someone is acting in a way that seems out of place, such as behaving too casually at work.
10. I've been told by those close to me that I show good manners with strangers and in new situations.

Give yourself one point for each True answer to questions 1, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10; score one point for each False answer to questions 2, 3, 4, and 7. Score zero for each False answer to 1, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10, and for each True answer to 2, 3, 4,

and 7. If you scored below three, you fall at the Tuned Out end of the spectrum, while a score of eight or above indicates you are very Tuned In to context.

## **The Attention Dimension**

Can you screen out emotional distractions and stay focused? Or do your thoughts flit from the task at hand to the fight you had with your spouse that morning, the anxiety you feel about an upcoming presentation for work, or the follow-up medical appointment you have tomorrow? If you're rushing to meet a deadline and your boss appears at your elbow every half hour to see how you're doing, does it take you several minutes after she leaves to regain your train of thought? How about after your teenager calls about his latest college-application crisis? (A school that won't accept the common-application essay?!)

It may seem odd to include attention as a dimension of Emotional Style, since the ability to focus attention is usually thought of as a component of cognitive ability. The reason I include it is that while plain old sights and sounds are distracting enough, when they come with an emotional overlay they can be even more so. In a noisy restaurant, for instance, if we hear shouting a few tables away, or perhaps a loud and agitated voice followed by the sound of glass shattering, it is more difficult to remain focused on our conversation than when the surrounding voices are less emotionally laden.

Emotional cues are not only ubiquitous in our lives and environment, they are also strong distractions, often interfering with our ability to both accomplish tasks and maintain equanimity. It turns out that the ability to screen out emotional distractions is correlated with the ability to screen out sensory distractions. A Focused person can zoom in on a single conversation at a noisy party, while an Unfocused one is constantly shifting her attention and her eyes to the most attention-grabbing stimulus. Some people can plug away despite being in the throes of emotional turmoil; they fall at the Focused extreme of the Attention spectrum. Others are constantly distracted by emotional impulses that have nothing to do with the task at hand; they fall at the Unfocused extreme. Focused people can concentrate despite emotion-laden intrusions, filtering out the anxiety supercharging the air around them, while the Unfocused cannot. In short, attention and emotion are intimate partners. Since emotional stimuli command an untoward share of our attention, maintaining a

stable internal compass that allows us to calmly focus and resist distractions is an aspect of Emotional Style.

In many ways, being able to screen out emotional distractions provides the building blocks for other aspects of our emotional life, in that focused attention plays a role in other dimensions of Emotional Style: Self-Awareness, for instance, requires paying attention to signals from your body, and Social Intuition requires focusing on social cues.

In the lab, we measure Attention in several ways—because, it turns out, there are several distinct forms of attention. One is selective attention. This is the ability to be immersed in the constant sea of stimuli that surrounds us and yet, miraculously, pay attention to only one thing. I say "miraculously" because the amount of information we're exposed to at any moment is staggering. Even as you read these words, your peripheral vision is taking in your hands as they hold the book. Your ears are taking in sounds; if you think you're in a silent room, stop reading and focus on what you can hear. Your feet are pushing against the floor, and your bottom is pushing against a seat; again, stop reading and focus on what your body feels—see what I mean? If you weren't paying attention to any of these things until now, congratulations on a commendable feat of focus. Yet despite all these stimuli competing for our attention, we (often) manage to focus on only one and ignore the others. If we couldn't, we would be hopelessly tossed about in the vast ocean of our sensory world. We manage this focus in two ways: by enhancing the input in the "channel" we want to pay attention to (the words of this sentence) and by inhibiting the input in the ignored channels (what your bottom is feeling, etc.).

Another form of attention is open, nonjudgmental awareness. This is the capacity to remain receptive to whatever might pass into your thoughts, view, hearing, or feeling and to do so in a noncritical way. For instance, if you are aware of a mild pain in your lower back but are able to simply notice it without your thoughts getting hijacked by it, then you are practicing open, nonjudgmental awareness. If you feel a pang of worry about being late for a meeting because the elevator is broken, and you simply tell yourself, "Hmm, I feel myself getting stressed out," but do not panic as you look around for the stairs, then you are practicing open, nonjudgmental awareness. Someone who is skilled at this often seems to have a kind of inner magnet that keeps his focus where he intends and does not let it get pulled hither and yon by events.

This is the kind of awareness that many forms of meditation cultivate, as I'll explain in chapter 9. It generates a sense of contentment and emotional balance (another reason attention is part of Emotional Style); people who fall at the Focused end of the Attention spectrum tend to be unflappable, not pushed and pulled by constant emotional ups and downs. Open, nonjudgmental awareness is also critical for being tuned in to our surroundings as well as our own thoughts and emotions, and as such plays an important role in Self-Awareness and Social Intuition. Without a capacity for open, nonjudgmental awareness, we can miss both subtle cues arising from within our own body and mind and the nuanced cues in our social environment.

To measure open, nonjudgmental awareness in the lab, we start with the fact that if one stimulus hijacks our attention, we won't notice other stimuli that occur just a fraction of a second later. This blindness (or deafness) to subsequent stimuli is called the attentional blink, and there is a simple test that measures it. In one version, you watch as a barrage of letters flashes onto a screen, one after another, ten per second: C, P, Q, D, K, L, T, B, X, V, etc. But every now and then a number appears, as in C, P, Q, D, 3, K, L, 7, T, B, X, V. The task is to indicate when a number interrupts the stream of letters. If the second number follows the first within about half a second or less, most people notice the first number (the 3) but literally do not see the second (the 7). Their attention has blinked. The reason seems to be that, because the numbers appear rarely and because they're your quarry, when one does show up you feel a frisson of excitement; it takes time for the brain to return to a state in which it can perceive its quarry. The longer your attentional blink—that is, the more time you need before you can perceive the next number amid the barrage of letters—the longer it takes your brain to be able to attend to the next stimulus, and the more information you miss in the world around you.

Attentional blinks last even longer when there is an emotional component to what you are supposed to be noticing. In this version of the experiment, instead of watching a series of letters interrupted by an occasional number, volunteers watch for, say, a picture of a crying child amid a stream of outdoor scenes. In this case, the time needed before we are able to perceive another image of a crying child is greater than with letters and numbers, a hint that attention has an emotional component or, more precisely, that emotions affect attention.

Some people, however, have almost no attentional blink. They have a kind

of nonreactive awareness that can perceive stimuli with such equanimity that the little thrill the rest of us feel when we perceive a number among the letters is/either absent entirely or, if present, doesn't cause their attention to blink. As a result, they tend to miss fewer of the stimuli than the rest of us. The extent to which people blink, particularly with emotional stimuli, reflects a quality of emotional balance and equanimity.

In the lab, we assess open, nonjudgmental awareness through the attentional blink test, using either the letters-and-numbers version or the variation with emotionally laden or nature scenes. We measure focused attention by presenting simple tones of different pitch, typically one high and one low, through earphones. A participant is first asked to pay attention to only the high-pitched tone and to press a button each time she hears it, but not to press when she hears the low-pitched tone. To make the task more difficult, we pipe in the tones separately to either the right or left ear, about once a second, alternating between ears. The participant's score-how many tones she correctly pressed the button for, minus incorrect presses-is a measure of her capacity for focused attention. To ratchet up the difficulty further, we sometimes tell participants to press the button only if they hear the high tone in the left ear, or the low tone in the right ear, or any such combination. Often what happens is that when the high-pitched tone sounds in the unattended ear (the one the person is supposed to ignore), the participant will press the button in error, an indication that his attention is too broad and insufficiently focused. And sometimes he simply misses the presentation of the high-pitched tone. In all these cases, we simultaneously take brain readings with either fMRI or EEG, depending on whether we want to focus on the timing of brain activity (in which case EEG is better) or the location (in which case we use fMRI).

Absent all this equipment, you can assess your Attention style by answering True or False to these statements:

1. I can concentrate in a noisy environment.
2. When I am in a situation in which a lot is going on and there is a great deal of sensory stimulation, such as at a party or in a crowd at an airport, I can keep myself from getting lost in a train of thought about any particular thing I see.
3. If I decide to focus my attention on a particular task, I find that I am mostly able to keep it there.

4. If I am at home and trying to work, the noises of a television or other people make me very distracted.
5. I find that if I sit quietly for even a few moments, a flood of thoughts rush into my mind and I find myself following multiple strands of thought, often without knowing how each one began.
6. If I am distracted by some unexpected event, I can refocus my attention on what I had been doing.
7. During periods of relative quiet, such as when I'm sitting on a train or a bus or waiting in line at a store, I notice a lot of the things around me.
8. When an important solo project requires my full and focused attention, I try to work in the quietest place I can find.
9. My attention tends to get captured by stimuli and events in the environment, and it is difficult for me to disengage once this happens.
10. It is easy for me to talk with another person in a crowded situation like a cocktail party or a cubicle in an office; I can tune out others in such an environment even when, with concentration, I can make out what they are saying.

Give yourself one point for each True answer to questions 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 10; score one point for each False answer to questions 4, 5, 8, and 9. Score zero for each False answer to 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 10, and for each True answer to 4, 5, 8, and 9. A score of eight or above means you fall at the Focused end of the Attention dimension, while a score of three or below means you tend to be Unfocused.

Now that you have assessed where you fall on each of the six dimensions of Emotional Style, get a piece of paper and draw six horizontal lines, evenly spaced from top to bottom:

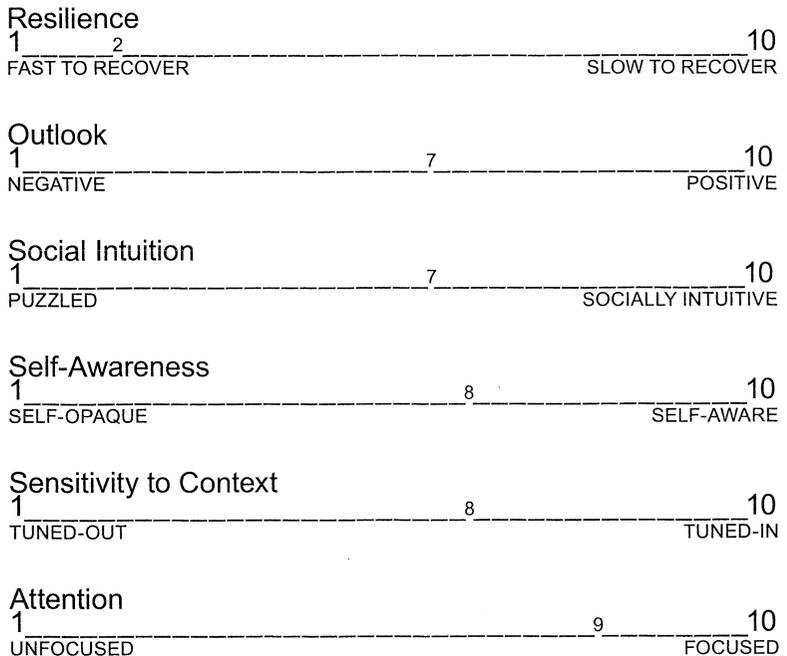
- Label the first line Resilience, and continue through Outlook, Social Intuition, Self-Awareness, Sensitivity to Context, and Attention.
- Label each extreme of each dimension, from left to right. For Resilience, the ends are Fast to Recover and Slow to Recover. For

Outlook, Negative and Positive. For Social Intuition, Puzzled and Socially Intuitive. For Self-Awareness, Self-Opaque and Self-Aware. For Sensitivity to Context, Tuned Out and Tuned In. For Attention, Unfocused and Focused.

- Now, depending on what you scored on each of the six questionnaires, make a mark on each line.

You can see at a glance your overall Emotional Style. Maybe you are a sort of Positive person who is Fast to Recover, Socially Intuitive, Self-Opaque, Tuned In, and Focused. Maybe you are Negative but Fast to Recover, Puzzled about the social surround, Self-Opaque, and Unfocused. Whatever your Emotional Style, knowing it is the first step toward understanding how it affects your health and your relationships, and the first step toward deciding if you would like to move it toward the right or the left on any of the six dimensions.

Here is my own Emotional Style diagram:



*Davidson's scores on the questionnaires assessing Emotional Style.*

I explained in the introduction that my focus on the six dimensions of Emotional Style rather than on the better-known types of personality reflects the fact that these six have a solid foundation in patterns of brain activity. In the next chapter, I will explain how we discovered that, what the patterns are, and why they are crucial both to understanding Emotional Style and to contemplating ways to shift it along one or more of the six dimensions.