

EmpowerMe™

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A WHITE PAPER

From Passions to Emotions

What the History of a Word Teaches Us About Riding Our Feelings

How the two hundred year old invention of “emotion” as a category, and the EmpowerMe™ model of emotional intelligence, point to the same skill: learning to surf what moves through us, rather than suppress it or be swept away by it.

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Executive Summary

We tend to assume that “emotion” names something ancient and fixed, a permanent feature of the human psyche, present since the beginning and unchanged since. It doesn’t, and it wasn’t. The word itself is a relatively recent invention, and the very idea of “the emotions” as one unified category of experience is barely two centuries old. Before that, what we now lump together as emotion was divided among appetites, passions, affections, and sentiments, each with its own moral weight and its own rules.

That history is not a trivia footnote. It reveals something the EmpowerMe™ model has built its entire architecture around: emotions were never meant to be judged, ranked, or moralized. They were repackaged, in the nineteenth century, as something closer to weather: bodily, observable, and largely amoral. Understanding that shift gives today’s clients, founders, and leaders permission to relate to their emotions differently, not as verdicts on their character, but as information and energy moving through them.

This paper traces where the word “emotion” came from, when and how it became a scientific category, and what that history offers the practice of emotional intelligence. It closes with the metaphor at the center of this work: emotional intelligence is not about controlling the ocean. It is about learning to surf it.

PART ONE

The Origins of “Emotion”

A Word About Movement

The word “emotion” descends from the French *émotion*, itself rooted in the Latin *emovere*: e- (“out”) plus *movere* (“to move”). Literally, to move out, to stir up, to agitate. When the word entered English in the seventeenth century, it did not refer to feelings at all. It referred to physical disturbance: a commotion in a crowd, an agitation in the air, a disruption in the body. The metaphorical leap to inner, mental experience came later.

From Passions to a Single Category

For most of Western history, what we would now call emotions were not treated as one thing. Strong states like anger, grief, or desire were “passions of the soul,” morally significant, tied to virtue and vice, subject to being right or wrong, well or ill directed. Milder states were “affections” or “sentiments.” Each label carried its own theological and philosophical baggage; none of them were interchangeable, and none of them were neutral.

The word “emotion” only came to name a single, unified psychological category in the nineteenth century, largely through the work of two Scottish philosopher physicians, Thomas Brown and Charles Bell, and later cemented by Charles Darwin and William James. Historian

Thomas Dixon, whose research is the definitive account of this shift, makes the point plainly: until roughly two hundred years ago, “the emotions,” as a single collective noun covering fear, joy, anger, love, and grief alike, simply did not exist as a concept. It replaced a much more fragmented, and much more morally loaded, vocabulary.

Why the New Category Mattered

The shift from “passions” to “emotions” was not cosmetic. Passions and affections were judged: a passion could be virtuous or sinful, an affection well placed or misplaced. “Emotion,” by contrast, was framed as a largely amoral, bodily category, something that happened to a person, observable and even measurable, rather than something that indicted their character. By 1884, “emotion” had become a foundational term in the emerging science of psychology, and it has held that position ever since.

PART TWO

A Working Definition

Contemporary psychology defines an emotion as a relatively brief, multi component response to a stimulus, real or imagined, involving four elements: a subjective feeling, physiological arousal, a cognitive appraisal of what the stimulus means, and an action tendency or expressive behavior. This is distinct from a mood, which lasts longer and is not tied to a specific trigger, and from a feeling, which is only the conscious, subjective slice of the larger emotional response.

This componential definition matters because it treats emotion as data plus energy: a signal about something, paired with a pull toward some kind of movement or action. That is precisely the raw material emotional intelligence works with, and it is precisely why Salovey and Mayer's foundational EQ model frames emotional intelligence as the capacity to perceive, understand, use, and manage that information, rather than the capacity to eliminate or override it.

PART THREE

Tying the History to the EmpowerMe™ Model

The EmpowerMe™ model organizes more than twenty evidence based therapeutic approaches into four sequential phases, built on the Salovey and Mayer emotional intelligence framework. Each phase depends on the historical insight above, whether or not a client ever hears the word “etymology.”

PHASE ONE See Yourself	PHASE TWO Be Yourself	PHASE THREE See Others	PHASE FOUR Be With Others
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See Yourself

Before a person can perceive an emotion accurately, they need permission to treat it as information rather than as an accusation. The pre nineteenth century inheritance, passions as sins, affections as failures of discipline, is still alive in how most people talk to themselves internally. See Yourself begins by dismantling that inherited moral verdict and replacing it with the more modern, more accurate frame: emotion as movement, as a bodily and cognitive signal, not as a character flaw.

Be Yourself

Once an emotion is correctly identified as information plus energy, the work becomes learning to use and regulate that energy rather than suppress or be ruled by it. This is the phase where the historical shift from “passion” (something that happens to you, that must be mastered or

confessed) to “emotion” (something you can observe, name, and direct) becomes a practical, daily skill.

See Others

The same amoral, information based frame extends outward. Recognizing that another person’s anger or withdrawal is data and energy, not a verdict on the relationship or an attack to be met in kind, is what allows accurate empathy rather than reactive mirroring.

Be With Others

Relationship durability depends on two or more people treating each other’s emotional weather as legitimate signal rather than moral failing to be managed, punished, or fixed. This is where the individual skill of riding one’s own emotional energy becomes a shared, relational competency.

PART FOUR

The Value of Knowing What Emotions Actually Are

Naming this history in a coaching or clinical setting does real work. Clients who believe emotion is a judgment on their worth spend most of their energy on suppression, shame management, or performance, trying to look regulated rather than becoming regulated. Clients who understand that “emotion” was invented, less than two hundred years ago, specifically to strip out that moral judgment are given something concrete: permission to feel without a verdict attached.

- It separates identity from experience. An emotion is something that moves through a person, not something that defines them.
- It reframes intensity as information rather than danger. A large wave is still just a wave.
- It replaces the old binary of suppress or explode with a third option: observe, understand, and direct.
- It gives founders, leaders, and clients a shared, non clinical vocabulary for what is happening in their bodies and their teams in real time.

PART FIVE

Riding the Wave: The Emotional Surfer

Return to the word’s root for a moment: emovere, to move out. Emotion was never meant to be a stationary object. It was named for motion. That single fact suggests the most useful posture toward it is not a wall and not a floodgate, but a surfboard.

A surfer does not create the wave, does not own the ocean, and cannot cancel a swell because it is inconvenient. A surfer also does not fight the wave head on, and does not simply let it crash over them without response. A surfer reads the water, positions early, finds their center of gravity, and rides the energy of something larger than themselves toward the shore. The wave is not the enemy. The wave is the medium.

Emotional intelligence, understood through this history, works the same way:

- The wave forms before you choose it. An emotion arises from a stimulus and an appraisal, largely outside conscious control. Fighting its arrival wastes energy better spent on the ride itself.
- Reading the water is the skill of perception: noticing the rise of an emotion early, in the body, before it crests into behavior.
- Positioning is the skill of appraisal: asking what this wave is actually made of, and what it is trying to tell you, before you decide how to move with it.

- The ride itself is regulation in action: neither rigid suppression (paddling away from every wave) nor being wiped out (letting every wave dictate your behavior), but a dynamic, responsive balance.
- Getting back on the board is resilience: every surfer wipes out; the practice is paddling back out, not swearing off the ocean.

This is the practical payoff of the history recounted above. Once a person stops treating emotion as a passion to be confessed or a threat to be walled off, and starts treating it as energy in motion, exactly what the word etymologically always meant, they can learn to surf it. That is the shift EmpowerMe™ is built to produce.

The Four Phases as Four Stages of the Ride

EmpowerMe™ Phase	What It Builds	Surfer Equivalent
See Yourself	Accurate perception of one's own emotional signal	Reading the water before paddling out
Be Yourself	Regulation and authentic use of emotional energy	Positioning on the board and finding balance
See Others	Accurate perception of others' emotional signals	Reading someone else's wave without flinching
Be With Others	Shared regulation within relationships	Surfing alongside someone without colliding

CONCLUSION

Where This Leaves Us

The history of the word “emotion” is, in miniature, the history of a culture learning, slowly, and not yet completely, to stop moralizing what it feels and start understanding it. Emotional intelligence, and the EmpowerMe™ model specifically, continues that work at the individual level: replacing inherited judgment with accurate perception, and replacing suppression or collapse with the steadier, more skillful posture of the surfer.

Success is not empowerment if it costs you yourself. Learning to ride what moves through you, rather than drown in it or dam it up, is how a person gets to keep both: the wave, and themselves.

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