

Integrating Emotional Intelligence Principles into Extension Programming

Abstract

Emotional intelligence is a learned ability that can bridge emotions and decision making to help improve Extension program participant outcomes. Because decision making is not based on information and facts alone, emotional intelligence has the power to transform the way individuals think about, plan, and execute behavior changes as well as make informed decisions. We introduce and discuss the applicability of a five-step emotional intelligence framework for Extension programming as a means for integrating emotional intelligence into programs to enhance program participant decision making.

Keywords: [emotional intelligence](#), [emotions](#), [Extension](#), [decisions](#), [decision making](#)

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Introduction

Extension has a long tradition of offering education and outreach designed to improve the quality of life for individuals, families, and communities across the country. Effective translation of research into programs that promote positive behavior change is at the core of all Extension education (Robinson, 2013). Recognizing that emotions influence how choices are perceived and understood as well as how decisions are made (Kahneman & Egan, 2011; Rick & Loewenstein, 2008), Extension has identified emotional intelligence as a competency and core component in leadership training and professional development programs (Argabright, King, Cochran, & Chen, 2013). However, the need and opportunity remain to incorporate emotional intelligence as a competency and core component for participants in Extension programming. Coupling the knowledge and skills gained from Extension programs with emotional intelligence principles may help encourage positive behavior change and enhance decision making among participants. The purpose of this article is to introduce and discuss the applicability of a five-step emotional intelligence integration framework for Extension programming. We argue that the practical application of emotional intelligence competencies, skills, and behaviors may serve as a means for improving program participant outcomes.

Emotional Intelligence

Significant research about emotional intelligence has occurred over the past three decades. Inspired by positive psychology—the scientific, strengths-focused approach to studying human thought, feeling, and behavior (Peterson, 2006)—emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage personal emotions in order to achieve goals (Goleman, 1995). The term *emotional intelligence* was initially developed by Michael Beldoch in 1964 (Goleman, 1995), expounded on by Salovey and Mayer (1990), and later popularized by Goleman (1995). These researchers suggest that emotional intelligence, a learned ability, is comprised of internal skills that support managing one's emotions, discerning and labeling feelings appropriately, motivating oneself in the face of frustrations, controlling one's impulses, delaying gratification, regulating one's moods, and using emotional information to guide thinking and behavior (Pierson, 2016).

Emotions influence how decisions are made (Rick & Loewenstein, 2008); in fact, the average adult makes about 35,000 remotely conscious decisions daily (Sahakian & LaBuzetta, 2013). Running the gamut, from anger and fear to happiness and surprise, emotions play a critical role in the ability to make informed decisions. According to Hess and Bacigalupo (2011), understanding and managing emotions is important to the decision-making process.

Addressing the role of emotional intelligence in decision making, Sevdalis, Petrides, and Harvey (2007) concluded that when people make decisions, they often think about the emotions that outcomes are likely to trigger. These inputs are filtered through past experiences and habits (Engelberg & Sjöberg, 2006), providing an opportunity for emotional intelligence to help individuals effectively reason and react (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008). Mellers, Schwartz, and Ritov (1999) concluded that emotions people expect to experience or have experienced as a result of their decisions are important determinants of their current and future behaviors. Salovey and Mayer (1990) purported that emotions may enhance rationality and that individuals would be better off working with their emotions, or, in other words, *leaning into* their emotions. For these reasons, it is important for Extension professionals to help program participants acknowledge the role of emotions, consider how emotions have guided past decisions, and determine the extent to which emotions can help or hinder current decision making (Coleman, 2008). In doing so, Extension professionals can create a path for participants to effectively examine their emotions and think more objectively before making decisions.

Strategies for Improving Participant Decision Making

Regardless of the discipline, Extension education and outreach is designed to arm participants with sufficient information to make informed decisions. Emotional intelligence principles can help build inspiration and support for decision making. Informed by an extensive review of literature and associated national conference presentation and discussion along with our collective Extension programming experiences, we developed a five-step emotional intelligence framework for Extension programming. This framework has varied implications and applications to support participant decision making.

As Extension educators plan for implementation of local programs and lessons, they can use knowledge of emotional intelligence to help participants more deeply engage during a program and promote growth following the program. Because emotions drive behaviors and actions, it is important to assist program participants in learning how to manage their emotions, especially during times of stress and pressure. Recognizing that emotions are the first response the body has to any situation, a proactive educator might

intentionally provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on specific emotions and their effects. By starting with an acknowledgment of typical emotions and how these emotions have guided past decisions, participants can consider which emotional triggers help and hinder progress toward their goals. Relevant and appropriate examples can be infused in Extension programming; likewise, educators can develop questions or use case studies to help participants think through various scenarios before they occur. This exercise can help program participants be more proactive by developing strategies in advance.

The five-step emotional intelligence framework for Extension programming can be used to generate discussion and define behaviors that program participants may want to exhibit when facing emotional triggers. Table 1 describes the framework and offers program-specific examples. It is our hope that these examples will help Extension educators consider ways to integrate emotional intelligence principles into Extension education and outreach programs.

Table 1.
Five-Step Emotional Intelligence Integration Framework for Extension Programming

Process step	Description	Examples		
		Parenting program	Farm stress program	Nutrition program
Experience your emotions	Emotions are useful and natural. In a judgment-free way, educators can help participants recognize and <i>lean into</i> their emotionsâ "positive or negative. It is important to help participants acknowledge that their emotions are valid yet may not require a response.	Participants are taught to experience their emotions and recognize their triggers before responding to an emotionally charged discussion with their children.	Participants are asked to identify and label emotions that may have developed as a result of family stress and economic or other business challenges. They learn to experience their emotions rather than judge their feelings as a way to develop a better response.	Participants learn to experience their emotions and recognize their triggers and stressors relative to their eating patterns and nutritional decisions.
Stop and breathe	To move from an emotional response to a rational response, participants need to learn to take a moment to gather and center themselves, perhaps by counting to 10 or taking deep breaths, among other strategies. Taking time to understand, react, and respond can be critically	Participants may count to 10 (or 20) as a stop-and-breathe strategy for calming down and reducing an immediate and less than ideal response based on negative emotions, such as frustration and	Participants imagine a place where they feel comfortable and safe to have tough yet important discussions with their family members. They stop and breathe, allowing time to relax. Next, they focus on creating a safe space,	A stop-and-breathe strategy for participants could be to pause and evaluate their emotional reaction and how the response to make an imprudent food choice may affect their goals.

	important when faced with urgent and important decisions.	anger.	envisioning how it looks, smells, feels, and sounds.	
Think clearly	Rather than rely on gut instincts or be influenced by emotions, creating a temporary pause allows participants time to think about a situation objectively. This is important as higher order thought is slower and more deliberate. With clarity and objectivity, participants can focus on their goals and intended outcomes.	By being self-aware and allowing room for pause, participants are better able to think clearly. Gathering and assessing information can position parents to respond more appropriately and on the basis of the situation rather than their emotions.	As a way to think clearly, farm families identify positive strategies and environments that can allow the brain time to clear and refocus on problem solving toward goals and outcomes. This process can help participants identify the source of an emotion and develop intentional coping strategies.	Pausing to think clearly helps participants regain control and objectivity. To help themselves pause, participants learn to consider distractions such as watching a silly video or taking a quick walk to help them refocus and gain clarity.
Challenge autopilot	Decisions are influenced by emotions and framing as well as history, experiences, and habits. Although immediate responses may be useful in some instances, participants can be taught to continuously challenge immediate reactions, openly and quickly admit to mistakes, and find ways to intentionally change actions.	Rather than responding as they always have, for example in a yelling match, parents can challenge their autopilot and try taking a "timeout" with a plan to revisit the situation at a time when tempers have cooled and calmed.	Rather than responding to stress by isolating themselves from family, participants challenge their autopilot and push through anger or frustration by changing their environment or activity. This could include talking to a trusted ally about their feelings.	Rather than responding to stress with a favorite treat, participants learn how to challenge their autopilot and develop alternatives, such as drinking a glass of water and then waiting to see if they are responding to hunger or stress.
Evaluate options and consequences	Considering other options as well as consequences of those options is another important step. Participants can practice thinking of other perspectives as well as a worse-case scenario and how the risk can be managed or mitigated. It is also good to have participants assess how the	Parents learn how to evaluate options and consequences such as gathering information on the situation, setting rules for the discussion (and a process for de-escalation), and talking with a	Participants are encouraged to make a list of resources and evaluate options and consequences available to address each stressor. They consider the decision-making processes from an economic and day-to-day farm management	Participants learn to develop, prepare, and evaluate options and consequences, such as having snack options prepared and handy, reviewing menus before going out, and

decision-making process	trusted ally or	perspective and the	removing cookie
and decision may be viewed	unbiased family	effects on the farm	jars from the
in retrospect.	member for an	family and business.	kitchen to reduce
	alternative		temptation.
	perspective.		

Conclusion

Emotional intelligence serves as a pair of glasses to help participants see through the emotional fog they may face. Our five-step framework can help participants acknowledge and use emotions appropriately, consider how emotions have previously guided decisions, and determine how emotions can be used to help or hinder decision making. Participants may want to identify typical or familiar challenges they face and develop strategies for each phase of the framework. The practical application of emotional intelligence can enhance the decision-making process and help improve program participant outcomes. By using this framework, program participants may be able to develop new strategies that support informed decisions. We assert that with this framework, Extension professionals can empower program participants, help foster positive behavior change, and enhance education and outreach in programming.

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