

# A Rational Case for Following Your Emotions

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In the popular American imagination, emotion and rationality are often mutually exclusive. One is erratic, unpredictable, and often a liability; the other, cool, collected, and absent obvious feeling. And even though research suggests that people experience emotions internally in similar ways no matter their [gender](#), many Americans still regard emotion as [uniquely feminine](#) and weak.

That myth has long ruled everything from the military to the white-collar workplace, and it has played a role in systemically excluding women from professional and cultural leadership. But dismissing the value of emotion is at odds with how human feelings actually work, both interpersonally and evolutionarily. As a society, “we believe emotional strength is not about how you manage your emotions, but about not having any,” said the psychologist Guy Winch while speaking on a panel at the Aspen Ideas Festival, co-hosted by the Aspen Institute and *The Atlantic*. “That’s science fiction, and it’s just not how we are. Emotional strength is about the management.”

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According to Jessica Tracy, a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia, people’s emotional responses are predictable across cultures. “People everywhere show anger, fear, happiness, and sadness in the same way,” she explained on the panel. Many of those same emotional responses can also be found in animals. “There’s a lot of evidence to suggest that for most emotions, we have them because we evolved to have them,” Tracy continued. “They’re functional, they’re adaptive, and essentially they help us survive and reproduce.” Being afraid, for example, isn’t irrational. It’s an instinctual response to the possibility of danger, and it may help keep you safe.