

Can Emotional Intelligence Be Learned?

Until recently, scientists considered the brain unable to develop new connections by the time we reached adulthood. Now we know the brain is able to build new connections (neural pathways) throughout our adult life.

Although some people are naturally more emotionally intelligent than others, Emotional Intelligence isn't set at birth. To a great extent, Emotional Intelligence skills are a result of mental habits and learned responses that we can improve with effort. Learning is lifelong, and you can improve any of the skills that make up Emotional Intelligence at any point.

Cognitive Learning: Involves fitting new bits of information into existing frameworks of understanding.

Emotional Learning: Demands a more profound change at the neurological level – weakening the existing habit and replacing it with a better one. In fact, emotional learning requires modification of the circuitry in the emotional parts of the brain. Changing habits is more challenging than simply adding new information to old.

From the time we experience an event until we react, the following process takes place in the brain:

1. Information from the world around us is taken in through our senses.
2. Sensations enter the brain at the back.
3. Signals entering the back of the brain must travel to the front of the brain, where complex, rational thinking takes place.
4. The two areas of the brain communicate back and forth constantly.
5. We experience the emotional response to an event before it even reaches the part of the brain that thinks rationally to react to the emotion.

As we learn more productive responses to emotional situations, the brain actually forms new pathways that more effectively connect emotional experiences with reasoning ability.

For example, if you usually start screaming when you get angry, you have to consciously choose an alternative reaction and practice it many times before it consistently replaces the screaming response.

Emotional Intelligence can be learned and developed by self-evaluation, feedback, and practice if a person is open to learning. However, emotional learning involves a long and sometimes difficult process requiring much practice and support.

How to Measure Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence tests are useful because it is difficult to know exactly how we come across to other people. All of us can benefit from an objective evaluation of our behavior.

Most of us have some idea of how we are perceived by others, but it is difficult for anyone to rate his/her behavior with pinpoint accuracy. Some of us overestimate ourselves, and some of us underestimate ourselves. Very few of us can accurately rate our own behavior.

The best measure of our EQ is our behavior on a daily basis. The most accurate description comes from those who know us best and who work with us and interact regularly with us.

Improving Emotional Intelligence requires us to shift our behavior. The key to changing any behavior is to “own it” and take full responsibility for what you say and do. Or, as Dr. Phil McGraw would say, “You’ve got to name it to claim it.”

For further information on Emotional Intelligence testing, training, coaching, and team building, see “Services Offered by Melba W. Benson, Ph.D., in Developing Emotional Intelligence” at <http://www.melbabenson.com/articles.html>, or contact Melba at:

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