

## *This Emotional Life* Series Episode Descriptions

The Emmy Award-winning team of Vulcan Productions and the producers of NOVA have created a three-part series that explores improving our social relationships, learning to cope with depression and anxiety and becoming more positive, resilient individuals. Harvard psychologist and best-selling author of *Stumbling on Happiness*, Professor Daniel Gilbert, talks with experts about the latest science on what makes us “tick” and how we can find support for the emotional issues we all face. Each episode weaves together the compelling personal stories of ordinary people and the latest scientific research along with revealing comments from celebrities like Chevy Chase, Larry David, Alanis Morissette, Elizabeth Gilbert and Richard Gere.

### **Episode 1: Family, Friends & Lovers**

The first episode looks at the importance of relationships and why they are central to our emotional well-being. What are the cognitive and neurological processes underpinning our everyday interactions, and can they help us to understand why some relationships flourish and others fail? We meet a young boy adopted from a Russian orphanage, whose story illustrates how a lack of attachment in infancy fundamentally shapes his ability to build relationships for years to come. We meet the young parents of newborn twins; a couple in therapy for a troubled marriage; a teenager who was bullied with tragic consequences; two women grappling with the stress of workplace conflicts; and other characters — all to better understand the importance of social connections and relationships.

### **Episode 2: Facing Our Fears**

In the second episode, we look at emotions that are commonly regarded as obstacles to happiness — such as anger, fear, anxiety and despair. Why do we have these emotions and how can we best manage them? Our brains are designed for survival, and the negative emotions they create are vital to that mission. But those negative emotions can spiral out of control with debilitating effects. We meet a woman whose inability to control her temper is jeopardizing her relationships; a college student whose fear of flying is limiting her life; and a teenager who is struggling to overcome clinical depression on the eve of attending college. We also meet veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and follow their journeys to find effective treatment. Across the episode, science reminds us that we are of two minds — a rational brain that’s relatively new and an emotional brain that’s older than time. Sometimes emotion overwhelms reason, sometimes reason outwits emotion, and it is the endless struggle that makes our lives so painful, so joyous and so interesting.

### **Episode 3: Rethinking Happiness**

Finally, the last episode explores happiness. It is so critical to our well-being and, yet, it remains such an elusive goal for many of us. What is it, why is it important and how can we attain more of it? We meet individuals facing major turning points in their lives — a job loss, a cancer diagnosis, the death of a child, an accident — as well as those facing more common struggles. We learn from the latest research that we often incorrectly predict what will bring us greater happiness, leading us to look for it in the wrong places. As the study of behavior turns more toward positive emotions, we explore the latest research on the activities and qualities that foster them, such as meditation, compassion, forgiveness and altruism. We also share the remarkable stories of resilient individuals whom scientists are studying to learn more about us all, including a man who overcame an abusive childhood to become a renowned surgeon and a Vietnam veteran who survived torture, solitary confinement and seven years as a POW, yet emerged emotionally unscathed. Understanding why some people have the ability to bounce back after disaster strikes, while others do not, sheds light on how all of us can lead happier, more fulfilling lives. The film ends by coming full circle to the understanding that it is the quality of our relationships — with friends, family and the larger community — that ultimately defines our happiness.