

## INSIGHTS Relationships



### EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

## Secrets of the Socially Savvy

WE'VE ALL MET mind readers, like the coworker who can gauge his boss's mood from across the office. And most of us know emotional dunces, like the book-smart classmate who rubs even her teachers the wrong way. But can emotional intelligence, the ability to perceive, understand and manage emotions, be learned? Can anyone be as socially agile as Oprah Winfrey?

Psychologists Jack Mayer and Peter Salovey introduced the concept of emotional intelligence, or EI, in the early 1990s. Since then, a cottage industry has grown up around the notion, spawning business workshops, self-help books and school programs. But even the field's originators are divided about whether EI can be taught: Salovey thinks so; Mayer thinks not.

Like cognitive intelligence, Mayer

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believes EI is primarily shaped by genes and early experiences. Salovey agrees that like musical talent, EI is partially innate but he argues, "I'm optimistic that people can learn a richer emotional vocabulary and that they can self-regulate emotions better."

Salovey, the dean of Yale College, points to high school programs that teach students social skills, impulse control and anger management. One program operated by the New Haven, Connecticut, public schools' social development department can point to lower dropout rates and a decrease in violence since its inception, over a decade ago.

Mayer and Salovey say the debate is complicated because the definition of EI has been snatched away from researchers and diluted in ways that they never intended. In the lab, EI originally meant the perception and cognitive integration of emotions. Now, with hundreds of self-help books touting the ability to increase EI, most people see the skill as involving charisma, friendliness and

basic social skills. "Raising an intelligence has a specific meaning to an intelligence researcher," argues Mayer, professor of psychology at the University of New Hampshire. "It's like raising a person's IQ score from 100 to 120."

Mayer admits that his and Salovey's views are probably not that far apart. "If we're talking about teaching skills, helping someone solve emotional problems better, we think that can be done," he says. But Mayer prefers the term "emotional knowledge" to EI. Intervention that aims to raise true emotional intelligence will probably have modest results, Mayer argues, just as intensive schooling has been shown to raise a child's cognitive IQ by only a couple of points a year.

Mayer and Salovey do agree on how to resolve the question: more research. Both men hope to see long-term studies on EI interventions. In the meantime, Salovey cautions about overhyped books and workshops. He says, "Customers should be saying, 'Show me the data.'"

—Darby Saxbe

WHEN ONE SPOUSE COMES OUT OF THE CLOSET, A THIRD OF COUPLES BREAK UP RIGHT AWAY. ANOTHER THIRD STAY TOGETHER FOR TWO OR THREE YEARS AND THEN SEPARATE. THE FINAL THIRD DECIDE THAT THEY'LL TRY TO MAKE IT WORK. HALF OF THEM ARE STILL TOGETHER AFTER THREE YEARS.

Amity Pierce Buxton, founder of the Straight Spouse Network, an organization of support groups, on the aftermath of a spouse's revelation that he or she is homosexual.



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