

What Is This Feeling?

A Guide to Managing Emotions



Ascension EAP
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Everyone Has Emotions

Encouragement of emotional expression isn't something that we all grow up with. Many of us have been taught to stifle our cries, be kind and never show anger, put on a brave face, and so forth. More concerning is that some of us may have gotten the message that showing feelings was a sign of weakness.

Whatever our personal experiences, one of the outcomes of masking our feelings is a very limited feelings vocabulary. As toddlers we learn the basics; mad, sad, glad, and scared. For many of us, our feelings vocabulary may not have grown much beyond that.

Despite this reality, many of us believe that we are well versed in emotions; in fact, some research has found that people tend to overestimate their emotional intelligence. For example, you probably know the meanings of the words "disappointed," "nervous" or "joyful," but how often do you use them to describe your mood state? In addition, many of us mistakenly share thoughts as feelings. For example, if I were to say, "I feel like you're not listening to me," there is no feeling word in that sentence. "You're not listening to me" is not a feeling, it's a thought or belief. It would be more fitting to say, "I feel hurt when it seems you're not listening to me" since "hurt" is actually a feeling. Here's a rule of thumb: If someone says "I feel *like...*" or "I feel *that...*" those are cues that they are actually about to share a thought or belief rather than a feeling.



Goals for this workbook include: learning the importance of recognizing and expressing your feelings appropriately; increasing your feelings vocabulary; improving your ability to discern between a thought, a feeling, and a behavior; and increasing your emotion regulation skills.

Throughout this workbook you will get a chance to reflect on your own experiences and improve your skills by writing answers to questions. You may want to grab a notebook and a pen so you can jot notes, observations, or other ideas to help you remember and practice the things you learn here. Emotional awareness and regulation are skills that will quickly improve with intentionality and practice, but they take a lifetime to master. Are you ready?

While growing up, the emotions expressed most often in my home were (give examples):

These were messages I received about emotional expression from my family while growing up:

As a result of my upbringing, I believe that my ability to identify and express my emotions is
Poor Fair Great (Choose your response and explain why you choose it):

Emotions Are Important

Some people might be thinking, “I have gotten along this far without showing my emotions or knowing big fancy feeling words. Why should I start now?” There are great benefits to having emotional awareness and expanding your feelings vocabulary. Here are a couple of reasons:

A. Feelings are a way to connect with and understand people; feelings are universal.



If I were to show a child from India and a child from Australia the picture on the left, chances are that both children would be able to identify sadness in this woman. Being able to accurately identify emotional states of others and respond appropriately, is called emotional intelligence. Research has found that emotional intelligence is correlated more strongly with health, happiness and success than IQ! In other words, it’s very likely that your people skills matter more than your intelligence.

B. Emotional awareness improves your overall well-being. Feelings are one way our body communicates with us.

If I got a message that my bank account was overdrawn, I might feel anxious, worried, or threatened. If my card was declined while trying to pay at the store, I might feel embarrassed. Although those may not seem like feelings that improve our overall well-being, understanding your emotions--even when they are negative--will help motivate you to action. For example, if you just didn’t care that your bank account was overdrawn you probably wouldn’t do anything about it. But because you have such strong negative emotions you are motivated to resolve those feelings, so you may call the bank, transfer money, or have a conversation with your spouse about money management. Even unpleasant emotions are important to our wellbeing.

Describe a situation when your emotions spurred you to action:

Emotions Vocabulary

Ok, so now you know that there are benefits to recognizing and naming feelings. The next step is to expand your emotions vocabulary so you have the words to adequately describe your feelings and moods at any given time, and so you will be better able to identify significant changes in your moods over time.

A good first step is to practice with a feelings chart. There are many of them online. These charts are typically designed to help you identify a “base” feeling (like angry, scared, happy, etc.) and then offer related words for you to consider (like frustrated, irritated, nervous, worried, joyful or content). Check out the chart below. You can print it out for easy reference, and more dedicated individuals may want to laminate it for posterity.

On the chart below, notice that each quadrant is organized according to “high energy,” “low energy,” “negative feelings” or “positive feelings.” For example, if you are experiencing negative feelings and high energy, you probably feel agitated in addition to angry, anxious, or upset. If you have positive feelings with low energy, overall you probably feel calm. Get familiar with the words on the feelings grid. See if you can come up with a few additional words that could fit in each quadrant.

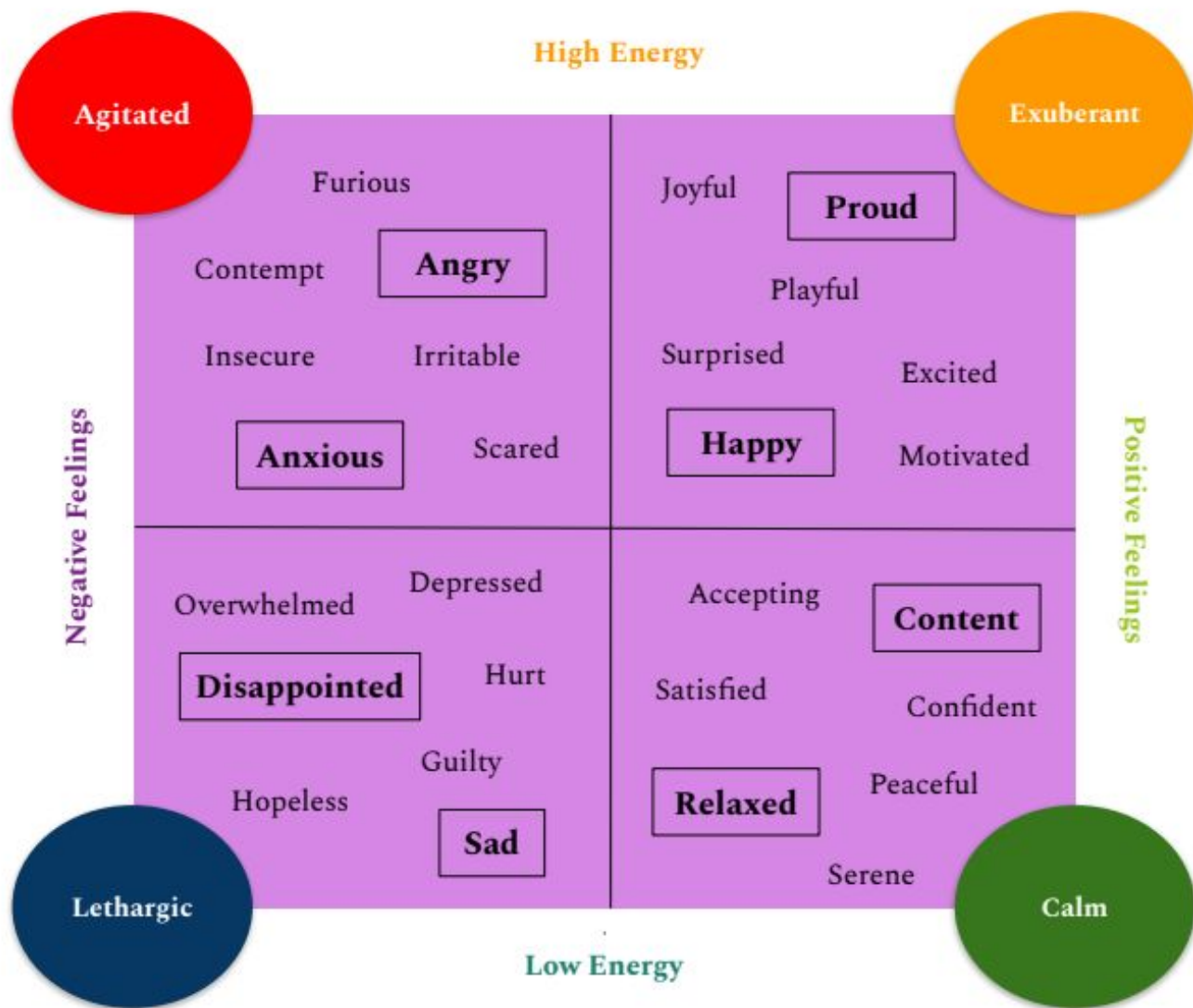
Other words to describe high energy, negative feelings:

Other words to describe high energy, positive feelings:

Other words to describe low energy, negative feelings:

Other words to describe low energy, positive feelings:

How Do I Feel?



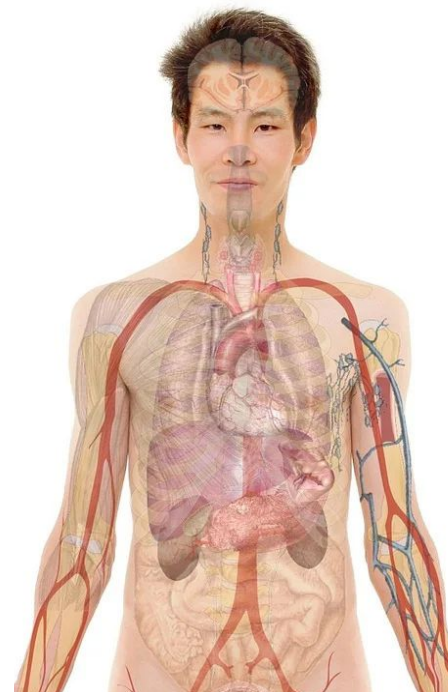
Noticing Emotions

Now that you've worked on increasing your feelings vocabulary, let's talk about recognizing emotions when they arise. What are some ways that you can determine how you're feeling?

One way to become aware of your feelings is to carve out time to intentionally notice them. Emotions are often intangible or instinctive, sometimes described as "mood states." Many people don't realize when emotions shift throughout the day, or that emotions often have a physical component as well. For example, many people describe grief as heaviness in their chest, or excitement as springs in their legs. Awareness of the sensations in our physical body can give us clues to our emotional state.

Let's try it now. Take some deep breaths, and ask yourself the following questions:

- What am I feeling (physically and emotionally)?
- Where am I feeling it?
- Where are these feelings coming from? (Memories, circumstances, people, thoughts, etc.)
- Based on these feelings and sensations, how am I reacting? (Thoughts, behavior, etc.)



When we make time to become aware of and recognize our feelings, we are better able to understand and manage them. We can recognize how we are being impacted by circumstances, people, or environment, and as a result, can increase our ability to think critically and resolve issues rather than mindlessly reacting to them.

Times throughout the day when I will be intentional about recognizing my feelings is: *(Example: Waking up, eating meals, going to bed, etc.)*

Other sensations or situations that will remind me to check in on my feelings may include: *(Example: Noticing stress or tightness in my chest, transitions between work and home, etc.)*

Emotions Exploration

Here is a worksheet to help you intentionally notice and explore emotions throughout your day.

What am I feeling (physically and emotionally), and where am I feeling it?

Where are these feelings coming from? (Memories, circumstances, people, thoughts, etc.)

Based on these feelings and sensations, how am I reacting? (Thoughts, behavior, etc.)

When have I felt this way before?

Does my current situation/emotions remind me of previous experiences? How?

What could I do to manage this emotion?

What's the healthiest, most productive way for me to manage this emotion?

The Tendency to Avoid

At this point you might be thinking, “But some of these feelings are icky! Why would I want to feel these things? Why can’t I ignore them, block them out, laugh them off, just be angry, avoid them? That’s worked for me before.”



Er, the phrase “worked for me” seems pretty loose. Yes, it may have “worked” for you in the sense that you haven't had to face uncomfortable emotions head on, but chances are it’s impaired you in other ways. Unprocessed feelings don’t go away, but they can fester and end up being more detrimental to your health and wellbeing in the long run. “Stuffing” or avoiding uncomfortable feelings also prevents you from being genuine. You may feel the need to avoid certain topics that get you agitated or upset, or find yourself putting up “walls” to disconnect from or depersonalize negative emotions. This, in turn, may cause you to appear apathetic or arrogant towards others. In other words, the inability or unwillingness to accept and tolerate uncomfortable emotions may not only impact your health and wellbeing over time, but it may also prevent you from forming deep, meaningful relationships with others.

There are many things people do to numb or avoid difficult feelings. For example, it’s commonly known that alcohol and drugs are used as an “escape.” Other avoidance tactics include binge eating, binge shopping, binge watching a tv show--basically any kind of binge. Also working long hours, surrounding yourself with people or noise (never turning off the tv), refusing to talk about certain things, or staying so busy you never allow yourself to rest. Do any of these sound familiar?

List behaviors you’ve engaged in to avoid difficult emotions:

When you’ve used the avoidance tactics, describe how you or others may have been impacted:

Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviors

As mentioned earlier, it's common for us to believe that we are skilled in emotional intelligence. It's time to put that thought to the test. Take a look at the statements below and determine if each one is a thought, a feeling, or a behavior, then circle your answer. Some of them are tricky, so take your time. [The answer key is at the end of the workbook.](#)

- | | | | | | |
|--|----------------|--|----------------|--|-----------------|
| 1. Airplanes are scary. | Thought | | Feeling | | Behavior |
| 2. I'm afraid to get on the airplane. | Thought | | Feeling | | Behavior |
| 3. I got on the airplane. | Thought | | Feeling | | Behavior |
| 4. I'm overwhelmed with how much work I have. | Thought | | Feeling | | Behavior |
| 5. I have too much work to do. | Thought | | Feeling | | Behavior |
| 6. I'm staying late to finish the work I need to get done. | Thought | | Feeling | | Behavior |
| 7. I'm sad that I'm unable to attend the party. | Thought | | Feeling | | Behavior |
| 8. I'm not going to the party; I'm going to stay home. | Thought | | Feeling | | Behavior |
| 9. I don't feel like going to the party. | Thought | | Feeling | | Behavior |

How'd you do? Which statements did you get correct? Which were the most challenging?

Do you think you will be more aware of the difference between thoughts, feelings and behaviors now? Why or why not?

Regulating Emotions

Now that you are better able to identify and label your feelings, the next skill is to work on managing them. Emotional regulation is the ability to pause between a feeling and a reaction, and intentionally choose a response that is appropriate to the situation; therefore, emotional regulation describes a person's ability to effectively manage and respond to an emotional experience.

For example: a preschooler may have a limited skill set of regulating their emotions and might respond to the word "no" by stamping their feet, name calling, slamming doors, tears, screaming, or mean messages. An adult with a greater ability to regulate their emotions might respond to the word "no" with acceptance, inquire as to why the answer is no, lay out a skilled argument as to why the person should reconsider, walk away, deep breathe, or build a good sweat through exercise, etc.

Whether we are aware or not, most of us self regulate our emotions several times throughout each day. Examples could be eating a sliver of cake when you want the whole thing, reminding yourself that everyone makes mistakes and it's okay for you to make them too, saying "no" when someone is pressuring you to buy something you don't want, and the ability to get through an uncomfortable or awkward conversation rather than avoiding it--these are all examples of ways we regulate our emotions. Each of these situations invoke feelings which we manage in different ways.

Emotional regulation is healthy. When we struggle to regulate emotions and cope by engaging in unhealthy or inappropriate behaviors, that is called emotional dysregulation. Emotional dysregulation can take the form of abusing substances, physical or verbal aggression, avoiding difficult conversations or situations, self-injurious behaviors, or losing yourself in futile tasks such as spending hours on social media, etc.

Many people ask, "Is it possible to control our emotions?" The answer isn't so black and white. We don't necessarily have control over the emotions that are elicited by any given situation, but it is possible to control our reactions to those emotions, and over time you might train yourself to be more or less emotionally reactive to your circumstances. When people believe that they have no control over their emotions they are less likely to try to regulate them. Over time they feel powerless, life becomes chaotic and overwhelming, and there is a tendency toward instability in areas of work, relationships, finances, etc. Emotion regulation is difficult and takes a bit of intentionality and a lot of restraint. Allowing emotions to run wild may seem easier in the moment, but makes life exponentially more difficult in the long run.



Emotion Regulation Strategies

There are many strategies that people use to regulate their emotions. This workbook will describe a few. Consider practicing these when you are calm, so that you are familiar and ready to use them when you become upset.

Deep Breathing

One way to make deep breathing an effective strategy is to belly breathe. When you inhale, focus on filling up an imaginary balloon in your belly, so that your abdomen feels full and tight. Hold that breath for a few seconds, then feel the relaxation as you exhale. The longer and deeper you breathe (remembering to fill your belly, not lift your shoulders) the more relaxed you will become.

Try several cycles of the belly breath exercise. Jot down your level of stress before and after practicing this exercise.

Self Soothing

Self soothing uses your five senses to create a calmer, more relaxed state of mind. Here are some self soothing strategies you might want to try:

- Touch:
 - Hold ice cubes in your hand
 - Take a hot (or cold) shower or bath
 - Pet your pet
 - Wrap yourself in a soft blanket
 - Gently rub your arms or hands
 - Brush your hair, or your skin
- Sight:
 - Look at pictures of your family and friends
 - Look at beautiful photos
 - Keep toys or mementos around your work space
 - Buy or cut flowers
 - Go outside or look out a window to enjoy nature (research finds that spending time in nature is a great way to decrease anxiety and improve mood)



- Smell
 - Use your favorite perfume or lotion
 - Try some essential oils — on your skin or in a diffuser
 - Light a nice smelling candle
 - Focus on the smell of your food, candy, gum, etc. before you eat it
- Taste
 - Chew a piece of gum or candy. Savor the flavors
 - Take a drink of water or some other beverage. Pay attention to the flavors and the temperature.
- Hear
 - Listen to soothing music
 - Listen to blaring music for a little while (if that helps you)
 - Listen for subtle noises around you — a clock ticking, birds chirping, etc.
 - Purchase a small water fountain or sound machine
 - Tap out a methodical rhythm
 - Hum or sing your favorite song
- Use your imagination
 - If you can't find lotion or soft blankets or music, imagine yourself in a peaceful, relaxing place. What do you see there? What does it smell like? Taste like? Sound like? The more details you can imagine, the more relaxed you will become.

What are ways you already use self soothing to regulate difficult emotions? What other self soothing ideas do you think could help?

Distress tolerance

Sometimes we have to face difficult or distressing emotions, and even though they cause fear, anger or agitation, it's important that we can tolerate those emotional feelings and physical sensations without acting out in harmful or aggressive ways. Sometimes we need to just sit in the discomfort without doing anything.

For this activity you are going to need an ice cube and a 3-minute timer. Go get them right now — I'll wait....

Set the timer for three minutes, and hold the ice cube in one hand the entire time. Don't let go. It's going to hurt. You're probably going to want to set it down or switch hands or something, but resist the urge. Just sit there and hold the ice cube. Focus on something else if you need to — maybe a part of your body that feels strong or relaxed. Count. Take deep breaths. Sing. Do jumping jacks. Do whatever you need to do to get through this, but don't let go...

Could you do it? If you did, then you can tolerate distress! Remember this the next time you feel agitated or upset and feel like lashing out or doing something destructive. You can endure — you just proved it. Wait it out. The feelings will pass.

That was a tough one. Congratulations on making it through.

Could you hold the ice cube for the full 3 minutes? How did you accomplish that, or what stopped you?

When you begin to feel distress that causes agitation, what did you learn from this activity that you will use to keep yourself calm and patiently endure?



Conclusion

Hopefully at this point you're feeling more comfortable, knowledgeable, and empowered in your ability to identify and manage feelings. One last thought I'd like to share is that navigating our feelings takes practice, so as you set out to apply and practice these skill sets, be patient with yourself and remember EAP is a free and confidential resource staffed with professional counselors who are available to you and your family.

Take just a few more moments to reflect on your ability and tendencies in regulating emotions, and jot down some news ideas you have for regulating emotions in the future. Be well!

What are some unhealthy ways you've tried to cope with uncomfortable emotions?

What are healthy strategies you've used to manage your emotions?

List three to five new healthy techniques that you're willing to try in order to help regulate your emotions in the near future.

Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviors Answer Key

1. Thought
2. Feeling
3. Behavior
4. Feeling
5. Thought
6. Behavior
7. Feeling
8. Behavior
9. Thought

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