

OUR FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS: An Important Part Of What Makes Us Human

The feelings and emotions that you experience are the building blocks of effective communication and genuine intimacy with others. But for many people, especially for the men in this culture, the first step to getting in touch with feelings and emotions is just to know that they are present. If you don't know that feelings or emotions are there or if you believe that only certain emotions are "appropriate" to feel, your efforts to communicate with others will be difficult and problematic. Without a willingness to recognize, acknowledge, and express what you feel, you cannot really get to know yourself or truly connect with anyone else in your life.

Feelings and emotions are your spontaneous reactions to your physical stress responses (e.g. the release of adrenaline, cortisol, and other hormones during the "fight or flight" stress reaction) and the self-talk (i.e. thoughts, expectations, judgments, and assumptions) that you use to make sense of and interpret these physical responses that are part of your daily living. Emotions serve as an "action plan" for your body. In addition, emotions can motivate us to work on and move toward the goals that are important to us in our lives. They alert you to the idea that something needs to be done in that moment. Emotions can also be "contagious" (i.e. they can affect other people who are around you); for example, when you become intensely angry, you trigger feelings in others, e.g. they may respond with anger of their own or they may become fearful or anxious.

Often you notice your feelings and little else. Therefore, it is absolutely critical to slow down your internal thought process so that you can tune into your self-talk as well. Whenever there is a feeling, there is also self-talk involved. One does not exist without the other. Your feelings do not have to control you if you allow yourself to get in touch with your thoughts and your self-talk process. This section discusses some important ideas related to feelings and how they work for us as human beings.

First and most important: feelings and emotions are not good or bad, OK or not OK, right or wrong. **YOUR FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS ARE JUST THERE!** They will come and go as you move through your day. The intensity of feelings can vary, e.g. from mild annoyance to volatile rage on the anger continuum. However, no matter what the intensity, feelings cannot be "controlled" by simply ignoring or denying them. When this occurs, they frequently tend to build up and begin to control you and how you react and behave. For example, being passive for a long period of time with others may lead to "blowing up" and explosively "dumping" your anger and your other feelings on someone else. It is crucial to take the time and look inside yourself to become aware of what you're feeling in an ongoing way and then to take the risk to become vulnerable and share those feelings, especially with the people closest to you.

Feelings and emotions can be expressed verbally with words and non-verbally with gestures, facial expressions, and actions (e.g. slamming a door or throwing something). Non-verbal messages have an especially powerful impact on others and will often be noticed and attended to even more than what you say.

YOUR FEELINGS CAN SERVE SEVERAL MAJOR FUNCTIONS:

- They serve as a signal that “something is going on” within you that needs to be attended to
- They help to clarify your expectations and what is important to you in a particular situation
...e.g. your uncomfortable feelings are often triggered by a disparity between what you want and what is actually happening around you
- They can motivate either useful or destructive action on your part

THE IMPORTANT TASKS WITH YOUR FEELINGS ARE TO:

- Recognize the feeling(s) within you as you experience it(them)
- Recognize that you always have choices about how you share your feelings with others
...realizing that you are never “out of control” and that your behavioral reactions to your feelings do not “just happen”
- Express the emotions that you experience in an assertive, open, honest, and respectful fashion with others

TO NOTICE AND TUNE INTO YOUR FEELINGS, PAY ATTENTION TO:

- **Your physical sensations**
...e.g. experiencing muscle tension and getting hot when you are feeling angry
- **Behavioral signals**
...e.g. becoming quiet and withdrawing from a conversation when you are feeling embarrassed
- **Other indirect signals**
...e.g. buying a gift for someone when you feel guilty about something you have said or done to that person

SOME POTENTIAL PROBLEMS IN EXPRESSING YOUR FEELINGS CAN INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- Many people are intensely fearful about what will happen if they allow themselves to truly experience their feelings. They may say to themselves, *“If I allow myself to really feel my emotions, I will...
...appear foolish and look ‘weak’ to other people”
...become completely overwhelmed and just ‘fall apart’”
...lose complete control of myself and my life”
...go absolutely ‘crazy’”
...never stop feeling what I am feeling right now”*
- It is often difficult to be aware of feelings as they arise or to sort out what you want to do with several emotions that you may be experiencing at the same time. It can be all too common to experience multiple feelings simultaneously. This may mean that you communicate confusing and contradictory information to the other person. At times, our emotions may even be in conflict with one another. Take enough time to sort out what your different emotions are and then work hard to communicate any and all of your feelings to the other person (if this makes sense at the time).
...For example, you might feel very relieved and very angry, all at the same time, when you finally find your lost child in the grocery store, after he or she has wandered away and been gone for awhile.

- Our culture can be very limiting about which emotions are “appropriate” for us to experience. For example, men are frequently given the message “*don’t feel sad and cry like a baby*” and women are often given the message “*don’t get angry and act like a bitch.*” Work hard to expand your feelings repertoire. In reality, men do feel sad and women do get angry. Allow yourself to be fully human and experience all the emotional states that are part of who we are as human beings.
- Expressing your feelings can be a risky proposition. If you share your feelings, you are allowing yourself to become vulnerable and your self-disclosure could possibly be used against you by the other person, especially in a conflict situation.
- Watch out for substituting opinions, judgments, and other self-talk for your feelings. For example, saying “*You have absolutely no right to say that*” is a making a judgment; saying “*I don’t like what you just said to me*” is expressing a feeling. Also, be aware that whenever you are saying “*I feel like...*” or “*I feel that...*,” you are offering expressions of what you think (i.e. your self-talk), not what you are truly feeling.
 - ...e.g. “*I feel like you shouldn’t have done something like that*” vs.
 - “*I’m angry (or hurt) about what you just did*”
 - Also remember that experiencing sensations is different from feeling emotions
 - ...e.g. saying “*I feel cold/hot*” or “*Something just doesn’t ‘feel right’ about this situation*” is not expressing a feeling
- Disclosing your feelings won’t necessarily change a situation or someone else’s behavior, even when you do it in an assertive and respectful way. Try to stay aware of this expectation that you ought to be able to get whatever you want if you do tell someone how you feel. The idea that “*talking about feelings doesn’t do any good anyway because it doesn’t necessarily help me get what I want*” is a control issue. The really positive part about sharing your feelings is that it does create an opportunity to emotionally connect with the other person and it has the potential to “open a door” between you and that other person that can lead to a constructive and useful conversation between the two of you. That is an important goal in and of itself.

SHARING YOUR FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS WITH OTHER PEOPLE

An important part of sharing feelings and communicating effectively is to recognize clearly that your feelings are yours and belong to you. They are ultimately your responsibility. You are not simply an “innocent bystander” as your emotions swirl within and around you. And your feelings at any given moment do not have to determine your actions in that situation. In reality, you can feel one way and make the choice to respond in a very different way from your initial desire.

Everyone doesn’t react emotionally in the same way that you do in a particular trigger situation. Some people become totally overwhelmed and rageful if something goes wrong when they are assembling a product they have bought. Others view difficulty in doing this simply as a “challenge” they need (and perhaps even want) to address and thus tend to forge ahead, actually focusing more effectively at addressing the task at hand. Different feeling reactions create different outcomes. You also may react very differently to exactly the same situation in your life depending upon how you are feeling about yourself on a particular day. You might actually feel significantly less annoyed about your children’s misbehavior when you are feeling calm, “centered,” and pretty good about yourself while you might

become harsh and punishing with them when you are feeling insecure, preoccupied, overwhelmed, or “not feeling okay” about yourself.

Keep in mind that, even though others have the power to contribute to your experiencing a feeling response, no one has the power to **“cause”** you to feel anything (with the possible exception of being in a actual life-threatening situation. Often, intense emotional reactions in the present are expressions of something occurring now that parallels something that has occurred in the past and left its “mark” on you (i.e. a “core hurt” from your childhood). For example, if you frequently tend to feel rejected and abandoned by people in the present, this may, in part, have to do with experiencing similar feelings in the past with people who were significant to you at the time (i.e. family and friends who weren’t really there for you or who tended to “disappear” abruptly from your life at that time).

Likewise, when others share their feelings with you, remember to realize that their emotional reactions belong to them and are not “your fault” nor yours to “fix” (with a few major exceptions, e.g. if you are being intimidating and abusive with another person). In reality, you generally don’t have the power to be able to pull this off. Often, however, just being there to listen to someone else’s feelings can be helpful and healing to that person who, in the end, needs to take responsibility for their feelings and figure out how they wish to respond to them, in the same way that you do.

Expressing feelings takes practice and a desire to get closer to others. We need to strike a balance between sharing our emotions and feeling safe in our own lives. As was mentioned before, some people may try to take advantage of you when you talk about how you feel and become vulnerable with them. If, however, you share too little, especially with the important people in your life, you will begin to fear that they would not really accept and love you if they actually knew who you were inside (i.e. shame and feelings of inadequacy develop). As a result, emotional distance begins to creep into your most significant relationships.

Clearly stating your feelings and emotions with others helps you stay in touch with your own inner experience and helps you get to know and accept yourself and who you really are. This process can also assist others in getting to know who you really are. Sharing your feelings openly, honestly, and respectfully with others can bring zest, “aliveness,” and genuine intimacy to your communication process and to your interactions and relationships with those around you. In addition, your feelings can actually change if you allow yourself to re-assess the activating situations and the self-talk you have created about them. Talking with others can help you do just that!