

Emotional Literacy

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Definition of Emotional Literacy

There are various definitions of emotional literacy, but perhaps the simplest, most precise and most practical is this:

The ability to express feelings with specific feeling words, in 3 word sentences.

For example, "I feel rejected."

This seems to be the most clear and direct way to identify your feelings. One practical and important benefit to doing this is that it helps you and others know what you need whenever there is some painful or uncomfortable feeling. In the case where a person feels rejected, for instance, it is an indication there is a need for acceptance. Similarly, when we feel hungry there is a need for food and when we feel thirsty we need water to satisfy our natural human need.

Developing Your Emotional Literacy

As suggested above, the purpose for developing our emotional literacy is to precisely identify and communicate our feelings, which in turn helps identify and communicate our emotional needs. When we develop our emotional literacy we are helping nature fulfill its design for our feelings, which is to inform us about our emotional needs. Also, as the interdependent social creatures we are, we each need to communicate our feelings in order to get the emotional support and understanding we need from others, as well as to show our emotional support and understanding to them.

It can also be said that one of the first steps to developing our emotional intelligence is to improve our emotional literacy. In their four-branch model of emotional intelligence, Mayer and Salovey say the first branch of emotional intelligence is "...*the capacity to perceive and to express feelings.*" They add that "*Emotional intelligence cannot begin without the first branch...*" ¹ They have also written that the "*ability to label emotions*" is part of their model of emotional intelligence. ²

In the English language we have thousands of words which describe and identify our emotions. EQI.org has been building a list of such words since 1995 and the list is now over 4,000 words. The list can be found on this [link](#).

Although the words exist in abundance, there are many reasons we don't make much use of this rich vocabulary. Perhaps the main reason is that we just aren't taught to speak using many different feeling words. Instead it is more common to label peoples and situations. For example, "He is an idiot" or "This is ridiculous."

If you would like to develop your emotional literacy, we suggest the first step is to start using simple, three word sentences such as these:

I feel sad. I feel motivated. I feel offended. I feel appreciated. I feel inspired.

This may feel strange at first, since not many people do this. But it gets easier with time.

In my experience, sometimes just by naming a feeling, we begin to actually feel the feeling. It seems that by naming the feeling we help our mind access the emotional part of the brain where feelings are stored. This step of identifying the feeling by name is, it seems, essential to a high development of one's innate emotional processing abilities.

A Few Basic Feeling Words

Here are a few basic feeling words.

Positive Indicating our needs are met.	Negative/Painful Our needs are not met.
Comfortable	Uncomfortable
Accepted	Rejected
Acknowledged	Ignored
Appreciated	Unappreciated, Resented
Loved	Unloved, Hated
Lovable	Unlovable
Desirable	Undesirable
Aware	Unaware
Satisfied	Unsatisfied
Supported	Unsupported, Obstructed
Encouraged	Discouraged
Optimistic	Pessimistic, Hopeless
Respected	Disrespected, Insulted, Mocked
Safe, Secure	Afraid, Insecure
Peaceful, Relaxed	Tense, Stressed
Motivated	Bored, Unmotivated
Free	Trapped, Controlled, Obligated
Independent	Dependent
Competent	Incompetent
Adequate	Inadequate
Proud	Guilty, Embarrassed, Ashamed
Worthy, Deserving	Unworthy, Undeserving
Excited, Energetic	Depressed, Numb, Frozen
Fulfilled	Empty, Needy
Validated	Invalidated
Connected	Disconnected, Isolated, Lonely

What Is and Isn't Emotional Literacy

We suggest the following guidelines to help you distinguish between what is and isn't emotional literacy.

Emotional Literacy	Not Emotional Literacy
I feel.... criticized unimportant disrespected	I feel like I feel that... I feel like you (This is a "you message" in disguise. See below)

I Messages vs. You Messages

When we talk about our feelings using three word sentences we are sending what have been called "I messages". On the other hand when we say things like "You make me so jealous" we are sending a "You message". These "You messages" typically put the other person on the defensive, which tends to hurt our relationships over time.

Note that when we say something similar to "I feel like you..." we are sending a "You message" in disguise as an "I message"!

Expressing the Intensity of the Feeling

Some feeling words not only express a feeling, but also express the intensity of the feeling. By expressing intensity, they communicate the degree to which our needs are being met and our values and beliefs are being upheld. Accurately capturing the intensity of an emotion is critical to judging the message our feelings are sending. If we either exaggerate or minimize the feeling, we are distorting reality and undermining the effectiveness of our communication.

Here are a few ways to verbally express the intensity of a feeling

1. Weighting the feeling with a modifier

I feel a little hurt. I feel extremely hurt.

2. Choosing a specific word on the continuum of that emotion

I feel: annoyed... angry ... incensed...ballistic.

3. Making use of a 0 to 10 scale

I feel hurt 2 out of 10.

Of the three methods, the 0 to 10 scale is the one we at EQI prefer, especially if someone else is really interested in our feelings.

Explaining Our Feelings

After we learn to find the right word for our feeling and we express its intensity, the next step may be explaining why we feel what we feel. At this point, our analytical brain is called into action. The better we can understand and explain our own feelings, the more we will be understood. The more we are understood, the more likely we are to get what we need.

According to our definition of emotional intelligence, we are each born with the innate potential to identify, express and explain our feelings. But like other aspects of our inborn potential, these must be developed over time.

Miscommunicating Our Feelings

Often, it is socially unacceptable to directly express certain emotions. We may be too afraid of offending others, too afraid of appearing unhappy or unhealthy, and too afraid of social disapproval. Therefore many of us hide our true feelings in order to appear to be happy or "fine." Sometimes it seems we live in a world where appearances often matter more than reality.

So instead of truthfully expressing our feelings clearly and directly, we express the same emotions indirectly, either through our actions or our body language. Sometimes we may actually lie about our feelings. It might be said that when we to hide our feelings, lie about them, deny them or tell people only what we think they want to hear, we corrupt honest communication, distort reality, fight evolutionary intelligence and dishonor nature.

Let's look at some examples of how we corrupt the language of feelings.

Masking Our Real Feelings - There are many ways we mask our real feelings. Sometimes we just plain lie about them, for example when someone says she is "fine" though she is obviously irritated, worried, or stressed. Sometimes we intentionally or unintentionally substitute one feeling for another. For example, if I say "I hope it doesn't rain," we might actually be feeling afraid that it will!

Inconsistency - Often, our tone of voice or our body language contradicts the words we are saying. None of us can totally hide our true feelings, but many of us do try to

disguise our voices to go along with the act. People who are especially superficial even adopt the cosmetic voices found on television in order to further conform to societal expectations, and further mask their true feelings.

Overuse - One of the ways we corrupt language is to over-use a word. Consider the word "love." We say we love French fries, ice cream, apple pie, and our mothers. Doesn't it seem there should be a different word for the way we feel about our parents as opposed to food?

Hate is another word which is overused. If someone hates traffic, hates spinach, and hates lawyers, how can they express their feelings about child abuse?

Note also that when we say we "hate" something, it does not help us identify what we need.

Exaggeration - When we exaggerate our feelings we are lying in order to get attention. People who need to exaggerate have had their feelings neglected for so long, they have resorted to dramatization to be noticed and cared about. Unfortunately, when they send out false signals, they alienate people and risk becoming like the boy who cried wolf. As the story goes, because he sent out too many false alarms, he was ignored when he truly needed help.

Consider these exclamations, none of which are typically true in a literal sense:

I feel mortified. I feel devastated. I feel crushed. I feel decimated. I felt run over by a truck.

Minimization - Many people minimize their feelings, particularly when they are upset, worried or depressed. They use expressions such as:

I'm fine. I'll be alright. I'm okay, don't worry about me. There is nothing wrong. I said I was fine.

Such people typically are either too insecure, too stubborn, too scared or feel too unworthy to share their feelings. They desperately need to be connected with others, but they will not allow others to get close to them. They effectively push people away by withholding their true feelings.

Indirect Communication

Because we are not skilled at directly expressing our feelings, we often use indirect communication of our emotions such as by using examples, figures of speech, and non-verbal communication. Let's look at a few of these forms of indirect communication.

I Feel Like

Using sentences that begin with "I feel like..." may be the most common form of indirectly communicating our feelings. The literal result is that we often feel like labels, thoughts, and behaviors, as we can see below:

I feel like (a label) - In the examples below we are labeling ourselves, and not clearly and directly expressing our feelings.

I feel like: ... an idiot ... a baby ... a failure

We typically use lots of expressions which put ourselves down. These negative labels certainly don't help us feel any better about ourselves. In fact, by mentally branding us, they make it more likely we will repeat the exact kinds of actions which caused our feelings.

I feel like (a thought) - In these examples we are actually conveying more of a thought than a feeling.

I feel like you are crazy.
I feel like it was wrong.
I feel like he is going to win.

I once asked someone how she felt about something and she said, "I feel like you shouldn't have done that." At another point when I asked about her feelings, she said "I don't want to get into all of that." Such a lack of emotional literacy and emotional honesty makes it difficult to have a relationship, even a friendship or a working relationship.

I feel like (a behavior) - Here, we are expressing our feelings in the form of a behavior. Again, these are unclear and indirect. They may be graphic and entertaining, but they are usually exaggerations and distortions which don't help us focus on our true feelings.

I feel like: ... strangling him ... shooting him ... wringing his neck ... telling her off ... teaching him a lesson ... filing for divorce ... dumping him ... quitting ... giving up ... jumping off of a cliff

In other words, people who use such expressions feel like a behavior, an action, an act. We might say they are not "in touch with" their feelings. They may be acting out their lives as they think others would rather than acting as unique individuals. Or they simply imagine themselves taking action rather than actually using their emotions to motivate them to take some healthy steps. On the other hand, this may serve a healthy function of "venting," assuming we are not actually strangling and shooting people!

A general problem with all of these forms of indirect communication is that if there is a negative feeling which isn't specifically identified, it will be much harder to also identify

the unmet emotional need. (See www.core.eq.org/uen1.htm for more about unmet emotional needs.)

Non-verbal Communication

Evidently, up to 90 percent of our communication is non-verbal. When we communicate non-verbally our bodies are literally expressing themselves. When Shakespeare said the eyes are the windows to the soul he was implying the eyes are the best non-verbal indicator of our emotional and intellectual state of mind.

For example, we think of those who will not look us in the eyes as untrustworthy, dishonest, afraid or insecure. We think of those who have alert, expressive eyes as intelligent, energetic, and emotional. Our eyes have the power to judge, to attract, and to frighten. Through our eyes we can show: interest, boredom, disbelief, surprise, terror, disgust, approval, and disapproval. Many parents can bring their children to tears, for example, without saying a word.

Our faces often express what we are not saying verbally. Our lips may tremble when we are afraid. Our forehead wrinkles when we are concerned or confused. And when people tap their fingers or feet they are usually feeling impatient.

As expected, research suggests that those with high innate emotional intelligence are better at reading these non-verbal cues. This gives them valuable information, particularly from people who are not expressing themselves verbally, or whose body language is inconsistent with their words.

The Value of Naming Feelings

The examples above show that there is some psychological power in naming what is happening. When one person is attacking another with words and the victim does not really know what is going on, the attacker has even more psychological power. But as soon as the victim correctly identifies what is happening, the attacker loses some psychological advantage and the victim somehow feels more secure. This is evidently because the mind has a need to know what is happening, especially when there is danger. Once the danger is identified, it can be addressed. Also, there is a fear of the unknown which is removed when the feelings are named. Naming the other person's feeling seems to have a disarming or a de-masking value. Naming a feeling can be used as a form of counter-attack, or it can be used as a form of understanding and agreement. It all depends on how the technique is used. The ability to identify and name feelings is a form of power, and like all power it can be used to hurt or help.

On a personal level when I am feeling attacked, judged etc. I often have found it helpful to ask someone how they are feeling and what they are in need of to help them feel better. I realize they are in some kind of pain from some unmet need so this helps me to not take their attack so personal. In a way this strategy is a defense, but in my experience it helps me feel less defensive than if I "defend" myself in other, more

common ways. Perhaps this is because I am able to think a bit of their position or perspective and their needs. This, then, is more likely to help me feel some empathy, understanding or compassion. If that person then feels understood, whether on a "logical" or "emotional level, it is likely that they will feel less of a need to attack me.

Making Predictions vs. Expressing Feelings

Here are two examples of expressing feelings vs. making predictions

"You are going to fall," vs. "I am afraid you are going to fall. "

"We are going to miss the train," vs. "I am afraid we are going to miss the train. "

It is usually more helpful to express feelings rather than making predictions. For example, if a parent says to a son, "Get down off of there. You are going to fall and break your neck." the son might feel underestimated or controlled. But if the father says, "I feel really scared you are going to fall and break your neck," the son may feel more cared about than controlled. He will have less need to prove his autonomy and "rebel" or to show his father that, "No, I am not going to fall and break my neck."

In my personal experience with children, teenagers and even in my adult relationships, I find people almost always respond better to me expressing my feelings in an emotionally literate way. This helps me maintain relationships and continue to have influence over people I care about.

An example is in my online work with depressed, self-harming adolescents I have helped over the years. In fact, when I began my volunteer work helping teens online in around 1998, I had to learn very quickly, by absolute necessity, to show I cared in a non-controlling way. It was essential to learn how to do this because they could simply stop talking to me at any time. Then I would lose all influence over them and all ability to help them.

Lives were at stake. The teens I talked to were at high risk of suicide, and some had already attempted it. I can state with confidence that the majority of those young people felt more controlled than cared about in their homes, schools and families. Learning to show I cared, without having any "authority" over them, was literally a matter of life or death. Fortunately, I can say that I was a fast learner and the results were rewarding. I want to add that even though I was a trained suicide prevention counselor when I began my online work, I owe most my education to the teens who were my best teachers. As they taught me how to care about them without controlling them, I also taught them how to identify their feelings. And as they told me how they felt, and why, I listened and learned, while trying my best to always validate, and never invalidate them.

Unfortunately, one thing I did not learn until recently though, is the importance of always looking for the unmet emotional need which generally corresponds to each specific painful feeling. Taken together, in other words identifying the need as well as the feeling associated feeling, the two are a powerful combination for improving our emotional lives. You could say that the first step to such improvement in our emotional health is identifying the painful, distressing or uncomfortable feeling. Next comes the process of translating that feeling into a need.

Note about Invalidation

In my work with adolescents I quickly noticed two things. One is that they had never heard of the word “invalidation.” The other is that they had all, literally without exception, been invalidated both at school and at home.

Looking back, I see that constantly being invalidated had a doubly damaging effect on them. First, they started to distrust their own minds and perceptions. Second, they were not able to get to the second step of identifying their emotional need, since their feelings which corresponded to those needs were dismissed by those around them.

Talking Your Pain Away - Brain research indicates expressing our feelings with words helps reduce emotional pain and distress

In an article titled "Talking the pain away," Lea Winerman reports the findings of a study conducted by Matthew Lieberman at UCLA. Lieberman and his colleague used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to scan the brains of participants as they played a computer game which caused the player to feel some social rejection. The researchers found that this social rejection activated an area of the brain that also lights up in response to physical pain—the anterior cingulate cortex.

They also found that people who had relatively less activity in that area—and who reported feeling relatively less distress—had more activity in the right ventral lateral prefrontal cortex. That is the area of the brain associated with verbalizing thoughts and language production. So, according to Lieberman, this suggests that putting feelings into words may help someone feel better.

In another study, Lieberman and his colleagues asked 30 participants to view pictures of angry, scared or happy-looking faces. Again using fMRI, the researchers found that when the participants labeled the faces' emotions using words, they showed less activity in the amygdala—an area of the brain associated with emotional distress. At the same time, they showed more activity in the right ventral lateral prefrontal cortex—the same language-related area that showed up in their previous study about social rejection.

The results of the second study give more evidence that verbalizing an emotion, or in other words, identifying and labeling feelings, may help us feel better when we feel emotional pain.

Source <http://www.apa.org/monitor/oct06/talking.html>

Notes

1. Emotional Intelligence as Zeitgeist, as Personality, and as a Mental Ability, p. 109, Mayer, Salovey and Caruso, Chapter in *Handbook of Emotional Intelligence*, Bar-On, Parker (Eds.) 2000
2. What is Emotional Intelligence, by John Mayer and Peter Salovey. Chapter 1, pp. 10,11 in *Emotional Development and Emotional Intelligence: Educational Implications*, by Peter Salovey and David Sluyter. 1997.

Appendix A

Why It Can Be Hard to Talk About Feelings

Once a friend of mine was telling me about a time she tried to talk to her romantic partner about feelings. She tried to use the ideas suggested on this site. For example, she asked her partner how much he felt respected by her from 0-10. The discussion did not go as easily as she hoped. On the train ride home she made a list of why she thought it was hard for some people to have such a discussion. We later expanded her ideas and came up with this list.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Talking about feelings directly is an unfamiliar and unknown field• It is strange to have someone ask such personal questions• People are not used to thinking about how much they feel something, in other words to what intensity• They are especially not used to putting a number on their feelings• Putting a specific number on their feelings may be even more frightening than giving a relatively honest, but vague answer when asked how they feel about something• Something like this has never been taught to them• They are embarrassed or ashamed, afraid, to talk about feelings• It makes one feel too vulnerable• Just the question frightens them because it is so personal• They are afraid of exposing themselves, of being "naked"• They don't know if they should be honest or what the consequences might be if they are. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• They are afraid to hurt someone with their answers• We are taught that feelings are bad or weak or are too personal to talk about to others• They are afraid to ask how someone else feels because they might hear something they don't want to hear• They are especially afraid to ask how much someone feels something from 0-10 because they are afraid to hear a number which they won't want to hear• It takes a lot of energy to think about such things when one is unfamiliar, uncomfortable, afraid• The definitions of the words can vary from one person to another• The definitions of the feeling words and the ways feelings are expressed can vary from one culture to another |
|---|---|

Additional Resources

See www.core.eqi.org for additional information on:

Caring, Common Negative Feelings, Emotional Awareness, Emotional Honesty, Emotional Intelligence, Emotional Needs, Empathy, Feeling Words, Invalidation, Listening, Respect, Understanding, Unmet Emotional Needs