

# Knowing What I Feel

## - activity -

Prepared by Root Cuthbertson 2020

Emotions can be confusing and difficult to identify. What if you don't know what emotions you feel? You either can't identify them, or you're uncertain whether you feel them at all? Relax, there's nothing wrong with you. This can be common in cultures and family group/backgrounds where emotional expression is not encouraged.

If you find it challenging to know what you feel, here are a few things you can try.

### Internal Explorations

**Pause, Be Still, and Breathe.** Moving quickly through life is a good way to avoid feeling emotions. Slowing down and pausing allows you to be still enough to begin to feel whatever emotions may be present. Focusing on the breath is a simple and effective practice, common to many traditions, and a good way to begin allowing your emotions to arise.

**Relax Judgment.** Relax the tendency to judge, criticise, or react to your emotions. Some people have learned to habitually suppress or deny their emotions. Relaxing judgment can begin to allow emotions to arise. For self-judgment, replace the phrase: “I shouldn’t feel like this,” (or similar) with something like: “It's OK for me to feel my emotions.” or “I am allowing this emotion to flow through me.”

For judgement of others, replace the phrase: “It's their fault I'm feeling this way,” (or similar) with something like: “I am feeling something because of what happened, and that's OK.”

**Notice Physical Sensations.** Emotions can involve physical changes in the body. Notice what's happening in your body and what physical sensations you are experiencing – they may be related to an emotion. Things like:

increased heart rate	changes in breathing	sweating	trembling or shaking	tingling or numbness
tightness in the chest	sinking feeling in the stomach or knots	change in body temperature	urge to jump, run, or move	muscle tension or gripping

**Notice location.** Where is the sensation in your body? Chest, stomach, neck, head, skin, or somewhere else? Notice intensity and duration: on a scale from 1 (least) to 10 (most), how intense is the sensation? How long does it last? These can be useful clues for identifying emotions. The same physical sensations tend to accompany the same emotions each time they arise - see if you can breathe into the tense/affected body area and gradually release the uncomfortable sensation.

**Notice Thoughts.** Emotions can be influenced by thoughts and perceptions. Like a detective, you can find clues that may lead to identifying an emotion. What were you thinking about right before the emotion arose? What associations does that bring up for you? Has this happened before? Is it related to anything from your past? Backtracking may reveal patterns in your thoughts and how they relate to your emotions.

## External Explorations

**Write or Draw.** Try writing in a private journal, simply for yourself, to describe your internal state. Writing down what's inside may help you to describe the circumstances surrounding your experience and clarify it. If words don't come easily for you, try drawing, painting, or other forms of creative expression. New insights may emerge from spending some time looking over what you've made.

**Talk To Someone.** Speaking aloud may help clarify what you are feeling. You may benefit from describing the circumstances surrounding your experience to someone else – a friend, family member, mentor, counsellor, pastor, or therapist – who can be a good listener for you? Sometimes your listener can ask good questions that help you gain new insights about your experience.

**Daily Reflection.** As a routine, try keeping a daily log of your emotions. Start by 'taking your temperature' or 'getting a weather report' at several different times of day. “Sunny start. Clouding over mid-day. Showers around 2pm. Clearing for a beautiful sunset.” As you get better at it, try making one brief report at the end of the day, like a recap of the day's emotional highlights (or lowlights). The practice of daily reflection can increase your awareness in several ways, including emotional literacy.

**Music (or poetry, film, video, story).** Try listening to music that evokes specific emotions in you. Notice how you feel, and see if you feel the same way each time you hear that music. Certain films, videos, poems, and stories can be similarly emotional. Practice with recordings like these, which are designed to evoke specific emotions, to help you identify your emotions whenever they arise.

**Use a List of Emotions.** Try printing out a list of emotions (see below) and posting it somewhere you will see it regularly, like your bathroom, kitchen, or bedroom. Which ones seem familiar? less familiar? Spend some time learning about any that are unfamiliar to you. Once a week or so, ask a friend or family member to quiz you, to see how many you can identify.

## References

Erin Bahadur. 2016. "8 Ways to Identify and Express Feelings."

Jennine Estes. "5 Quick Tips for Learning to Identify Emotions."

<https://estetherapy.com/5-quick-tips-learning-identify-emotions/>

Scott Jeffrey. "How to Start Working With Repressed Emotions."

[https://scottjeffrey.com/repressed-emotions/#How\\_to\\_Start\\_Working\\_with\\_Repressed\\_Emotions](https://scottjeffrey.com/repressed-emotions/#How_to_Start_Working_with_Repressed_Emotions)

## Lists of Emotions

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plutchik-wheel.svg>

[https://aca-arizona.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/650\\_Feelings-Wheel-Color.jpg](https://aca-arizona.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/650_Feelings-Wheel-Color.jpg)

[www.cnvc.org/training/resource/feelings-inventory](http://www.cnvc.org/training/resource/feelings-inventory)

This document, prepared by Root Cuthbertson, is released under <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>