

How to Feel Your Feelings

They're invisible, powerful, messy, and necessary. Studies find that welcoming them is one of the greatest things you can do for your well-being. Here, therapists and other mental health experts offer wisdom on embracing your emotions, whether you're the stoic, silent type or you're still crying over the *Schitt's Creek* finale.

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Think of being emotional as a strength, not a weakness.

SARA KUBURIC, INSTAGRAM'S
@MILLENNIAL.THERAPIST AND
AUTHOR OF *IT'S ON ME*

I used to be told I was too emotional all the time, and I felt shame and brokenness when people pointed it out. With time, I came to understand that this sensitivity made me a better therapist, friend, sister, daughter, and partner. Many people are uncomfortable with others' emotions because they don't know how to deal with their own. Let their opinion be a representation of *them*, and stay true to showing up as authentically as possible.



Treat your feelings as messengers.

KARLA McLAREN, DEVELOPER OF EMPATHY ACADEMY, AN ONLINE EDUCATIONAL PLATFORM ABOUT DEVELOPING EMOTIONAL SKILLS, AND AUTHOR OF *THE LANGUAGE OF EMOTIONS*

Everybody notices that wherever there's trouble, there's always a bunch of emotions hanging around. But the feelings didn't create the trouble—they're trying to tell you something. Anger, for instance, arises whenever a boundary has been crossed, either physical or behavioral. It reveals what we value. You can't get angry about something that's not important to you, right? Anger can give you the strength to set some boundaries. Sadness can show you that it's time to let go of a situation that isn't working. Anxiety can help you propel yourself forward and gather the energy you need to get things done. When we repress our emotions, we miss out on their valuable messages. Ask yourself what message your emotion might be trying to communicate.

Get to know your feelings by name.

VIENNA PHARAON, A LICENSED MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPIST IN NEW YORK CITY AND THE AUTHOR OF *THE ORIGINS OF YOU*

If we didn't grow up in a family where our full range of emotions was accepted—maybe we were criticized when we were sad or angry—we didn't learn to be with our own feelings, and now we don't trust that other people can make space for them. As adults, we may have become so used to disconnecting that we don't even know how we feel anymore. This sounds so elementary, but sometimes with clients, I use an emotion wheel (which you can find online). It's a circular chart that shows the range of human emotions and how they relate to one another. Say you're feeling sad; on the wheel, sadness has the subcategories loneliness, hurt, and disappointment, which are three very different feelings. This helps you narrow it down and use a word that captures your internal world. You can pick a word from the emotion wheel that best describes what's going on with you at the moment. It's a gentle way to learn to identify and describe your emotions, and you can begin to reestablish that it's safe to feel and connect to them. You may be tempted to judge yourself for those emotions, the same way you were judged growing up. Instead, try replacing that judgment with curiosity. What prompted this feeling, and why? See if you can focus on gaining insight instead of being self-critical.

Embrace the roller coaster...

ANGELA SANTOMERO, COCREATOR OF *BLUE'S CLUES* AND CREATOR AND EXECUTIVE PRODUCER OF *DANIEL TIGER'S NEIGHBORHOOD*

For the first story I wrote for *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*, the theme was disappointment. Daniel was super excited about his birthday cake and wanted to carry it home himself. It wound up completely smooshed, and Daniel was crushed. Dad Tiger asks him to try to find a silver lining in the disaster, but Daniel's got nothing. It was important to me that Daniel didn't resolve the situation right away, because I wanted to reinforce the idea that dealing with difficult emotions is a process. The struggle is part of working through the disappointment, which Daniel eventually does, discovering that smooshed cake still tastes delicious. For both kids and grown-ups, pain can be so overwhelming that we think, *I'm going to feel like this for the rest of my life*. But if we're honest and patient, we discover that feelings really are like waves. They wash over us, and then they pass and we regain our footing. Even if they don't recede entirely, they change. For example, my mother died two years ago, and I'm still working through it, but I'm not living in that grief 100% of the time, the way I was at the beginning. Even the hardest feelings don't last forever.



...and remember that the lows are valuable..

AMY SPENCER, AUTHOR OF *BRIGHT SIDE UP: 100 WAYS TO BE HAPPIER RIGHT NOW*

I'm a born optimist, but I don't believe that nonstop happiness is the goal. Life isn't as simple as sad vs. happy. A flourishing human being is someone who feels all the feelings. If you ask a depressed person how they feel, they usually don't talk about being down. They'll say they feel nothing. The opposite of feeling nothing isn't feeling good. It's feeling both the highs and the lows. It's like a piece of music. Playing just the high notes is pretty, but adding deep bass gives you something gorgeous. And a dissonant chord might jar you, but when you balance it with a brighter chord and the notes resolve, there's such joy. That's how we should compose our lives—with the whole range of notes and chords.



Don't get trapped in your stories.

JI EUN KO, A LICENSED MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPIST IN SAN DIEGO AND WALNUT CREEK, CALIFORNIA, AND THE HOST OF THE PODCAST *THE FULL WELL*

Emotions are like food and drink. You need to process and expel them—otherwise they're just going to linger, and that's when you notice that you're always clenching your jaw, or holding tension in your shoulders, or having stomach issues. Often when people try to let out those feelings, they get stuck in their thoughts. They focus on the story they're telling themselves about what happened instead of on the feelings and sensations that live in their bodies. Say you're disappointed about failing an exam. A host of thoughts might accompany that: *I'm so stupid. I'm a failure.* Try to separate from the thoughts and give attention to your emotions. Maybe you have sweaty palms and a flushed face. Those sensations are the emotions your body is experiencing. Being able to bring your conscious awareness to them helps you remember that those feelings will eventually pass, even if they feel really intense in the moment.

When you're overwhelmed, take a breather.

TATIANA SMITH ROBINSON, A THERAPIST IN FRISCO, TEXAS, AND THE HOST OF THE MENTAL HEALTH PODCAST *TALKING OFF THE COUCH*

Acknowledging our emotions—with ourselves and also with our loved ones—is key. Doing so makes us vulnerable, which builds safety and trust. (Plus, it's not like anyone can read minds!) It's also important to remember that other people have feelings too, and we don't all process things in the same way.

Maybe they need some time to absorb what you said, and that's OK. You can leave some things on the table for the time being—you just can't let them pile up. If you feel big emotions threatening to take over in the moment, here's something that works for both my 3-year-old and me. I call it blowing out the candle: Draw in your breath and then let it out, like you're trying to put out a flame. I know therapists are always saying to take a deep breath! But we say it because it really does help.



Focus on the present moment.

NAOMI BERNSTEIN, PsyD, A CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST IN DALLAS AND COHOST OF THE RELATIONSHIPS PODCAST *OVERSHARING*

To help clients come out of the thinking place and turn their attention to their physical sensations, I use mindfulness. If, for example, your boss sends you an upsetting email, rather than scrutinizing every word and asking your friends what they think, set a timer for 10 minutes and check in with your body. Start at the top of your head and scan down—your face, neck, shoulders. Is there a lump in your throat? Pressure in your chest? Take some slow, deep breaths, just allowing them to happen. Your racing thoughts will only fuel your worries. But when you let your body take over, you may find yourself calmer in just a few minutes. Then you can usually think about your situation more rationally. Instead of *I can't do anything right, maybe it's This may not be the right job for me.*



Ask others to listen to you—and listen to them too.

LIVIA SHAPIRO, A SOMATIC PSYCHOTHERAPIST IN BOULDER, COLORADO, AND THE AUTHOR OF *THE SOMATIC THERAPY WORKBOOK*

Sometimes when we're struggling with difficult emotions, we need support. Often our loved ones want to make things better when what we really need is for someone to just let us sit in the truth of our feelings. A lot of my work as a therapist is witnessing the client and saying, "Tell me about it." And sometimes, "Wow, given the circumstances, that sounds like a really appropriate feeling." Try this when someone needs to talk. Notice any urge you might feel to fix things or to push their feelings away by telling them to look on the bright side. Let the impulse pass, and feel how powerful it is to just listen. Next time you need support yourself, it's OK to tell the other person that they don't have to try to make everything better. Loving and listening are enough.