

Naming your emotions: an 'extra bit' for chapter 14 of *The Happiness Trap*

In chapter 14 of *The Happiness Trap*, second edition, we explore how to open up and make room for your emotions; how to let them freely flow through you, instead of responding to them in STRUGGLE mode (fighting with them or running away from them) or OBEY mode (letting them push you around, control how you behave).

Naming your emotions is an important part of this process. When we put what we are feeling into words, this activates part of the 'prefrontal cortex' (that portion of our brain directly behind our forehead). This has a moderating effect on other parts of the brain that are stirring up our emotions - an effect often described as 'damping down' or 'putting the brake on' emotions. In other words, when we notice and name our emotions, they lose much of their ability to jerk us around. They're still there, but they have less impact; they lose a lot of their power; we are no longer compelled to OBEY them or STRUGGLE with them.

A wealth of scientific research shows the less your ability to name your emotions, the more likely they are to hook you and jerk you into self-defeating patterns of behaviour. So it's well worth making the effort to develop this important psychological skill. (Often, difficulty naming emotions goes hand-in-hand with difficulty noticing what they feel like in your body; if this is the case for you, make sure you also work on the skills in chapter 17, for tuning into your body.)

Regular 'Check-ins'

Throughout the day, 'check in' to your body: ask yourself, 'What am I feeling?' or 'What feelings am I having?' (Keep in mind, often there's more than one). To help you with this, it's often good to keep a written record, in a journal, diary, word document, or a smart phone app such as 'Emotionary'. (There are many good free smart phone apps that can help you to name your feelings and keep track of them, but 'Emotionary' is my personal favourite.)

It's also good to have a list of emotions that you can look at regularly, such as the one on the last page of this document. Ideally you'd print this out, or keep it readily accessible on your phone or computer; that way you can use it whenever you want some help to figure out what you're feeling.

The Basics: Sad, Angry, Happy, Afraid, Relaxed

If you are rarely or never able to name your emotions, and you mostly describe how you are feeling in terms of *good, bad, okay, fine, not good, not bad*, and so on, it's good to start off with a small number of 'basic' emotions. I usually suggest these five to begin with: sadness, anger, happiness, fear and relaxation. (Or, if you prefer the easy-to-remember list: sad, mad, glad, scared, relaxed.)

'Happiness' = a pleasurable emotion, that comes with a sense of being energised.

Other words that come under the same umbrella: pleased, glad, excited. For extreme happiness: delighted, joyful, ecstatic; for milder happiness: cheery, content.

'Relaxation' = a pleasurable emotion, that comes with a sense of slowing down, winding down, as well as a sense of being safe and secure.

Other words that come under the same umbrella: calm, peaceful

'Anger' = an unpleasant emotion that energises, activates, stirs us up; comes with an urge or tendency to want to stand our ground or fight.

Other words that come under the same umbrella: for extreme anger - enraged, furious; for milder anger - annoyed, irritated.

If you're feeling wired up, tensed up, ready for fight or conflict, like you want to yell or shout or smash things or lash out - then you're probably feeling some form of anger.

'Fear' = an unpleasant emotion that energises, activates, stirs us up; comes with an urge or tendency to want to take evasive action, protect ourselves against danger.

Other words that come under the same umbrella: fear, anxiety. For extreme fear: dread, horror. For milder fear: nervous, anxious. If you're feeling tensed up, ready to escape or avoid something, or a sense of needing to protect yourself or others - then you're probably feeling some form of fear.

'Sadness' = an unpleasant emotion that comes with a sense of slowing down and a sense of loss or missing out.

Other words that come under the same umbrella: unhappy, miserable. For extreme sadness: heartbroken, devastated; for mild sadness: disappointed, gloomy. If you feel a sense of wanting to slow down, rest up, cry, hide away from the world, along with a sense of losing or missing out on something important, you're probably feeling some form of sadness.

Check in on yourself throughout the day, and see if your feeling fits into one of those basic five emotions. It doesn't have to be a perfect fit; near enough is good enough for now, because this is a skill you'll improve over time. If you're clear on what you're feeling, name it: 'I'm noticing happiness' or 'Here's a feeling of sadness'. But if you're not clear, ask yourself, 'Which of these basic emotions is it most like?'

A quick recap:

Pleasant, energising = happiness

Pleasant, slowing down, safe and secure = relaxation

Unpleasant, energising, urge to fight or stand your ground = anger

Unpleasant, energising, urge to hide, avoid, escape, protect = fear

Unpleasant, slowing down, sense of loss or missing out = sadness

Going Further

Once you've got a hang of naming those basic five emotions, you can go further.

- A. Learn to name different degrees or intensities of those emotions, as in the examples above (e.g. extreme anger = enraged, furious; mild anger = annoyed, irritated).
- B. Learn to recognise and name other common emotions such as guilt, shame, disgust, surprise and love. (If you need more help to understand what these emotions are, and what they tend to feel like, a good coach, counsellor or therapist should be able to help you. Alternatively, a quick google search will give you the answers.)
- C. Here's one way to do either/both of the above. Once a week (or once every few weeks) look through the emotion list on the next page, and pick a new emotion to work on. Google its meaning if you aren't sure of it. Then practice noticing and naming this new emotion when it occurs.

A List Of Emotions

There are many different lists of emotions, and ways of organising them. This particular list, and the way it is organised, is based upon the work of Dr. Phillip Shaver and his colleagues, J Schwartz, D Kirson, C O'Connor, at the University of Denver, USA.

Anger

- Disgust: Contempt, disgust, revulsion
- Envy: Envy, jealousy
- Exasperation: Exasperation, frustration
- Irritation: Aggravation, agitation, annoyance, grouchiness, grumpiness, irritation
- Rage: Anger, bitterness, dislike, ferocity, fury, hate, hostility, loathing, outrage, rage, resentment, scorn, spite, vengefulness, wrath
- Torment: Torment

Fear

- Horror: Alarm, fear, fright, horror, hysteria, mortification, panic, shock, terror
- Nervousness: Anxiety, apprehension, distress, dread, nervousness, tenseness, uneasiness, worry

Joy

- Cheerfulness: Amusement, bliss, cheerfulness, delight, ecstasy, elation, enjoyment, euphoria, gaiety, gladness, glee, happiness, jolliness, joviality, joy, jubilation, satisfaction
- Contentment: Contentment, pleasure
- Enthrallment: Enthrallment, rapture
- Optimism: Eagerness, hope, optimism
- Pride: Pride, triumph
- Relief: Relief
- Zest: Enthusiasm, excitement, exhilaration, thrill, zeal, zest

Love

- Affection: Adoration, affection, attraction, caring, compassion, fondness, liking, love, sentimentality, tenderness
- Longing: Longing
- Lust: Arousal, desire, infatuation, lust, passion

Sadness

- Disappointment: Disappointment, dismay, displeasure
- Neglect: Alienation, defeat, dejection, embarrassment, homesickness, humiliation, insecurity, isolation, insult, loneliness, neglect, rejection
- Sadness: Depression, despair, gloom, glumness, grief, hopelessness, melancholy, misery, sadness, sorrow, unhappiness, woe
- Shame: Guilt, regret, remorse, shame
- Suffering: Agony, anguish, hurt, suffering
- Sympathy: Pity, sympathy

Surprise

- Surprise: Amazement, astonishment, surprise