

“TUNING IN” TO OUR EMOTIONS BASICS

By Andrea Corney & Jay M. Seiff-Haron

We talk frequently about the importance of sharing feelings in high-fidelity communications. People often report that they understand the concept, but aren't aware of any feelings. I have a few “checklists” that I use to help me tune in to what I am feeling. Practice them one at a time!

1. Scan Body

I am usually first aware of an emotion in my body. I may not know yet what the emotion is, but the sensation in my body is an early warning signal for me to stop and pay attention. When I don't have a clue what I'm feeling, I start with these questions:

- When I scan my body, where am I feeling sensations inside?
- Is my heart pounding? Am I breathing faster? How does my stomach feel?
- Are there any areas that are tense, loose, hard, soft, blue, red, etc?

2. Check Relationship

If I am giving feedback about a specific behavior and can't find the right words to name my feelings, I will use a simple relationship check:

- I feel closer to you, a behavior draws me towards you
- I feel more distant from you, a behavior pushes me away

3. Hear Inner Dialogue

Body sensations are often accompanied by an inner dialogue that I'm not even aware of until I listen. I stop and listen to my internal chatter, try to notice what it has to tell me:

- Am I making attributions? Where in me do they come from?
- Do I have any feelings “leaking” out through my thoughts?
- If I heard someone else say these words, what feelings would it suggest?

4. Find 4 Basic Feelings

When all else fails, I use a sort-of rhyming list I learned from a colleague, Flo Hoylman. Do I feel...

- Sad
- Glad
- Mad
- Scared

These four are a good start already: lots of other feelings fall into these categories. Scanning myself for these often helps me start to figure out what is happening. And, they sort of rhyme, kind of.



*Oh, and your feelings have been
trying to get in touch with you.*

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5. Expanding My Repertoire: Feelings are Not All Equally Useful

These 7 feelings seem to represent the facial expressions that -- researchers find -- can be recognized, on sight, by people in every culture on Earth:

Sad	Glad	Mad	Disgusted (You bad)	Ashamed (Me bad)	Surprised (Egad!)	Scared
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6. More than One Feeling At a Time

I can feel more than one feeling at the same time, and this increases the difficulty when others (and, sometimes, I myself!) try to guess at my signals.

It helps me organize my feelings when I can say, “Part of me feels ____, and another part feels ____.” It helps me understand myself, and thereby helps me make myself understood.

7. Find My Go-To’s

People also have “go-to” feelings that they use to cover up more vulnerable feelings, feelings that (though upsetting) still are easier to express (or to feel) than the ones underneath. For example, whereas one person might numb out to cover hurt, another might grow angry in the exact same circumstance; one might cover anger with sadness, another might do the opposite.

While people vary enormously among themselves, one thing that helps me to sort this out is that an individual’s patterns tend to be fairly stable. If I am feeling my “cover” feeling, I generally know (even if it takes me a minute to find it inside) what the underlying feeling is going to be.

8. Why Do These Go-To “Cover” and “Underlying” Feelings Matter?

Sharing the more underlying feelings tends to improve communication because people feel trusted when you make yourself vulnerable. Put another way, though all feelings are valid, sharing the more vulnerable ones tends to invite connection and empathy (in part, because sharing vulnerability causes the listener to feel trusted), whereas sharing the more reactive “cover” feelings tends to elicit pushback, defensiveness, repetition or confusion.

For example, picture two elementary-age kids on a playground. One accidentally trips the other. If one stands up and pushes the other furiously, it is far less likely to result in a conversation than standing up and plaintively saying, “Ow!” Both get attention, but in different ways. The latter probably elicits a variety of responses from different people; the former invites a fight.

If the purpose of a mutual conversation is dialogue, then it bears mentioning that “cover” emotions (*frustrated, numb, anxious, guiltily, rageful, etc.*) tend to be off-putting. They shut down conversations, making them more difficult. Underlying vulnerable emotions (such as *happy, sad, afraid, hurt, ashamed, or the calmly insistent form of anger*), by their nature, are more vulnerable, more in keeping with our essential selves, and are more likely to elicit relational, engaged responses.