

Module 23 Transcript

Identifying and Naming Emotions

“How are you?” It’s a heavy contender for the most asked question in the English language. Your bank teller asks you as you fill out a deposit slip. The stranger you pass as you walk your dog mutters it underneath her breath. An old friend says it boisterously over the phone to start a conversation. *How are you?* And you say: *I’m fine.* Or, *I’m good.* Or, if you really want to take it up a notch, *I’m great!*

It’s a simple question that in some ways is at the heart of my career. I ask patients a dozen times a day, albeit with a slight addendum--how do you *feel*? So...how *do* you feel, really? And when was the last time you really sat down to put names to the various emotions at play within your own mind, or to label the inner problems and feelings that are contributing to and driving your stress?

The basic emotional vocabulary constitutes some of the first vocabulary we all learn as children: happy, sad, angry, fearful. As we grow into adulthood, however, many of us become less and less acquainted with the things going on in our minds. The emotions are still there, when you’re performing at your best, or when you’re in the midst of mental health doldrums. But they exist as an almost unnamed miasma of feelings, rather than discrete, clear emotions.

Purposeful introspection, and putting words to what you’re feeling, is central to identifying your current mental well-being and contextualizing it within your own larger narrative. This isn’t an abstract or flippant exercise. It can really help assuage fears and even phobias by breaking down larger experiences into core emotional components. It can lessen the charge of negative emotions and allow you to acknowledge positive ones in a new way. And in some cases, and I see this a lot in my clinical practice, simply assigning a name to something can be enough in and of itself.

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Think of your brain like a jewelry box that's been sitting on your dresser for a while. Inside are a number of necklaces, all jumbled up together--knotted and twisted into an amorphous clump of metal. These necklaces are like your emotions - all intertwined together, none able to be examined independently. But, as it is, it's not particularly useful. The role of introspection, of talk therapy, and of directed mindfulness is to pull apart these necklaces one by one, untangling the knots and holding each independent piece up to the light to examine it. If you've ever had to untangle even just a few pieces of jewelry, you'll know that this is a little harder than it sounds. But again, it's foundational to what we do and how we feel. Studies show that the very act of assigning names to each of these emotions--also known as affect labeling--is an effective means of emotional regulation: changing our views and outlooks around both positive and negative emotions and experiences.

This is a tool called, quite aptly the feelings wheel. It's a visual representation of the various words we have to describe, well, all our feelings. Its purpose is to encourage specificity, and to help demystify the emotions you're feeling. By putting more specific value words to each aspect of your current emotional state--untangling the necklaces, so to speak--you're transforming the abstract into the concrete, into something that can be examined and more fully addressed and understood.

Let's say you're having a pretty good day. Maybe a seven-out-of-ten kind of day. The consummate *I'm-doing-good-thanks* type of day. But *good* is kind of our bare minimum here, so maybe we could be in the neighborhood of *happy*. That's a good start, but we can parse it out even further. What's making you feel that way? Maybe you got a surprise commendation at work, and that makes you feel *powerful*, and *optimistic*. And speaking of surprise, what version of *surprise*? Are you *excited*? Maybe even a little *energetic*?

Or on the other end of the spectrum, maybe you're not feeling so great. *Sad* is broad. Maybe it's more accurate to say *vulnerable*, or to get more precise with it, *fragile*. Once we get

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more specific, we can ask ourselves better questions: what is making me feel so fragile?
When did I start feeling so energetic?

More than anything, this process allows you to take a step back, take stock, and develop a plan to address these emotions once you have a better name for them. Once you've separated the emotions out and described them, ask yourself these questions: What is causing this emotion? Can you point at an external factor that it originates from? If so, what can you do about it? Can you eliminate this thing or circumstance from your life? Change it? Minimize it? And if you can't point toward a direct causation, consider where this emotion springs from in the first place, or why it might be your reaction. Then, ask yourself what actions and experiences this particular emotion may be pushing you toward. Are you eating poorly in response to feeling apathetic or insecure? Or have you lapsed out of a workout routine due to burnout or time constraints? Or, alternatively, is that feeling causing other emotions to well up--one leading to another in a chain reaction? The more time we spend better defining and delineating and understanding our feelings and emotions, the better prepared we are to deal with them and the lessons they offer us.

As I mentioned earlier, the simple act of naming what you're feeling can, in and of itself, improve your mood and make obstacles seem simpler to overcome and problems easier to solve. So, practice this exercise until it becomes habitual, and as you become more used to affect labeling, start to track some of the patterns of your emotions. Once you see the ebbs and flows of your own emotional capacities, you can begin to reorganize and conceptualize your environment, schedule, and priorities to position yourself more effectively for optimal mental health.