

Definition

EMOTIONAL AWARENESS

Emotional awareness means knowing when feelings are present in ourselves and others.

It is closely related to [emotional literacy](#), which means being able to label feelings with specific [feeling words](#). At its highest level it means being able to predict feelings in advance.

Levels of Emotional Awareness

This model deals mainly with levels of self-awareness. There are also levels of awareness of the feelings of other people.

Knowing the feeling is present The first level of emotional awareness is knowing when feelings are present in ourselves. We become "aware" of the feeling when we first think about it or realize we feel something at that moment.

Example: We might be feeling impatient and start to tap our fingers. But at first we are not aware either that we are tapping our fingers or of our feeling. Then we might notice we are tapping our fingers and we might also realize we are feeling impatient. We might also be saying to ourselves, "I can't believe how long this is taking." Then we might realize we are feeling judgmental by judging how long it "should" take.

Another example: You are in a room. Another person enters. At first you don't see them, but maybe you realize there is a new noise. You turn and then you see the person and become aware they are in the room.

Acknowledging the feeling

To continue the example of the person in the room with you. After you have become aware there is someone in the room, you might acknowledge that person by waving or saying hello.

We may not know exactly what the feeling is, but if we notice and acknowledge that we have *some* feeling, we have taken

the next step.

Nature has given us a sophisticated guidance system in our feelings. Our negative feelings, for example, call our attention to things which are not healthy for us. They tell us when we are out of balance. If we feel lonely, for example, we need more connection with other people.

The literature on emotional intelligence points out that our feelings direct us to what is important to think about. Through thought, our feelings can point us to the causes of our negative feelings and to possible solutions. But if we fail to acknowledge our negative feelings, we won't be able to focus our attention on the problem that needs to be solved. For nature's inner guidance system to function we must acknowledge our feelings.

Many people try to stop themselves from feeling their negative emotions. They may use drugs and alcohol. They may use entertainment and distraction. They may also try to simply deny the existence of their negative feelings. Even education, memorization, intellectual or religious pursuits can serve to stop us from acknowledging our feelings. All of this defeats nature's purpose in supplying us with negative feelings.

Identifying the feeling

Still continuing the example of the person in the room, a further acknowledgement of the person could be to greet the person by name. In a similar way we can identify and name our feelings once we realize we have them.

The more specific we are in identifying our feelings, the more accurate we can be in identifying the unmet emotional need and taking appropriate corrective action. (See [emotions page](#)) In particular with [anger](#), it helps to identify the more specific or more primary feelings. Even with our positive feelings it helps to identify them specifically so we can use this information to help us create happier lives.

Like anything else, the more we practice identifying emotions, the better we get at quickly selecting the correct name for the feeling. Each time we identify an emotion and assign a label to it, the brain's cognitive and emotional systems work together to remember the emotion, the circumstances and the label for the emotion.

I read once that just the simple act of naming a feeling helps us feel better, and I have often found this to be true. Evidently this happens for several reasons. First, we have a natural fear of the unknown. When we label our feeling, we

move it from the unknown to the known and thus we help make it less scary and more manageable.

Second, when we label it, we are using a different part of the brain than where we feel the feeling. I suspect that we are actually diffusing and moving the chemicals from their concentration in the emotional section to the cognitive section where the pain is not felt as much.

Finally, by beginning to think about our feeling, we are also taking the next step towards solving our problem. When our thoughts are clear, this helps us feel more in control and empowered.

Accepting the feeling

Going back to the person in the room, after we have greeted him by name, we can help him feel accepted. Similarly, once we have felt, acknowledged and identified our feelings, the next step in emotional awareness and in benefitting from the natural value of our emotions is to accept the feeling.

Sometimes we might think that we shouldn't feel the way we do. Such thoughts are the result of beliefs which have been programmed into us by others. One of the primary benefits of a highly developed emotional intelligence, though, may be that it helps us become more independent from the opinions and beliefs of others. Instead of listening to others' voices, we are able to put more value on our inner voice, a voice which speaks to us through our individual emotions.

There are several benefits to fully accepting our feelings.

First, our feelings are a major part of us. Accepting our feelings is therefore a major part of self-acceptance. This does not mean we wish to stay as we are, but I agree with those who say it is easier to make positive changes in our lives if we first accept that we are how we are at the present moment.

Second, accepting our feelings takes less energy than trying to deny or suppress them.

Third, accepting our feelings sometimes helps prevent them from recurring over and over.

Finally, when we have fully accepted our feelings we can shift our energy to productive thoughts or actions.

Reflecting on the

Reflecting on our feelings actually could come at two different levels of emotional awareness.

feeling

First, at a low level of emotional awareness we might only reflect on our feelings after the fact. We might lay awake at night, for example, and think about an event during the day and our feelings about that event. This might help lead us to identifying our feelings sooner in the future.

I believe, though, that when our emotional intelligence is highly developed, the process of feeling our feelings and identifying them takes place quickly enough for us to reflect on the feeling nearly instantaneously or in "real time."

The sooner we can accurately identify the feeling and reflect on it, the sooner we can take actions which are in our best interest. ([related stories](#))

Forecasting feelings The more aware of our feelings, the better chance we have of predicting how we will feel in the future. This can be thought of as forecasting our feelings.

We can improve this ability by considering how we will feel if we choose one course of action as opposed to another. The value of this ability can not be overstated. Only when we can predict our feelings can we make decisions which will lead to our long term happiness.

Consider these statements:

I know I am going to regret this.
I know I will feel guilty if I do this.

versus

It's going to feel so good to...
I know I will feel better if I ...

In the first case, our prediction of negative feelings is trying to help us avoid something. In the second case, our prediction of positive feelings helps motivate us. We simply make better decisions when we listen to our inner messages, in other

words, our feelings.

The ability to forecast feelings extends to other people as well. In other words, when we are more aware of our own feelings and develop a greater ability to forecast our own feelings, it is more likely we will be able to forecast how someone else will feel. This naturally leads to being more considerate of others. Simply put, as we get in touch with our own feelings we realize that what doesn't feel good to us probably won't feel good to others.

[Note about EI tests and forecasting feelings](#)

Emotional Awareness and Happiness

I believe emotional awareness is a key to leading a happier and more fulfilling life. To really "know oneself," as the Greek philosophers urged us to do, requires that we know how we feel in all of life's many situations. When we know how we feel we know what we enjoy doing and who we enjoy doing it with. We know who we feel safe with, who we feel accepted by and understood by.

Though we might be able to lead a productive life, even a "successful" life -- if one defines success by the level of status, education, or material worth -- it is unlikely we will actually ever be happy unless we are very aware of our specific feelings. In fact, it is quite possible to be successful and miserable, as I have written about with respect to my own life. It is easy to accept without question other people's definition of success and happiness. But when we become more aware of our own true and unique feelings we are more likely to find our own individual happiness. This may be the essence of using our emotional intelligence.

Emotional Awareness, Sensitivity and Numbing

If we are emotionally sensitive we will feel things sooner than others will. If we have no emotional sensitivity, or we have numbed ourselves from our feelings we won't have any emotional awareness at all. Sensitive people living in abusive environments and insensitive cultures learn ways to numb themselves from their feelings because so many of their feelings are painful.

Emotional Awareness and the Academic Model of Emotional Intelligence

In my adaptation of the academic model of emotional intelligence I place emotional awareness under the first branch of their framework. This first branch is *emotional identification, perception and expression*. Increasing your awareness of your own feelings is perhaps the first step towards furthering the development of your EI.

Note on the Mayer et al definition and on testing

I believe the ability to forecast our feelings is probably a legitimate part of emotional intelligence, but Mayer et al have not addressed this as yet. I am not certain how you would test this with a paper and pencil test, but not all aspects of emotional intelligence are suitable for such tests. As Mayer et al acknowledge there is more to emotional intelligence than can be tested. Though they don't stress this in their writing, they do say effectively the same thing when they say that "aspects of" emotional intelligence can be tested. This clearly implies that they leave open the possibility that there are also aspects of it which can never be tested in a formal, controlled fashion.
