



UNDERSTANDING FEELINGS

Learning to Recognize and Transform Maladaptive Emotions

3D Recovery ® Resource 3.1

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Feelings can be Adaptive or Maladaptive

At a basic level, emotions communicate what is important to us, thereby acting as a guide to what we need or desire and, subsequently, what actions to take. Emotions, however, can become maladaptive when they are blocked, avoided, or suppressed. Leslie Greenberg (2002) suggested that in order for individuals to transform maladaptive feelings, they must not only learn about their emotions but experience them as well. Transforming emotions involves labeling, expressing, tolerating, reflecting on, and understanding them. Eugene Gendlin (1978) recommended focusing on the body's responses and reactions in order to facilitate awareness of emotions. In fact, making healthy contact with emotions is the most direct and effective way of accessing adaptive feelings and transforming maladaptive ones (Greenberg, 2002). 3D Recovery identifies the most common patterns of maladaptive feelings and offers strategies for transforming these patterns into adaptive emotions..

Adaptive Feelings help people...

- Synthesize complex reactions
- Figure out what is important to them
- Live in the moment
- Transform maladaptive emotions
- Bring relief and change
- Experience greater relational intimacy

Maladaptive Feelings...

- Push away or block adaptive feelings
- Can block acceptance of one's current situation
- Are harmful to self and others
- Don't shift with changes in circumstances
- Can trigger dysfunctional thoughts or actions

Common Patterns of Maladaptive Feelings

1. This Feeling Doesn't Fit

In some situations, a feeling doesn't fit the current situation, such as displaying anger in response to something sad. This "misfit" feeling may represent a denial or turning-away from an underlying primary emotion since it may be difficult to experience or express some feelings. Greenberg (2002) referred to this reaction as "disowning" emotional experience. Sometimes, a person may smile or laugh when feeling angry or sad, because they fear that feeling the genuine emotion may lead to pain or discomfort. Greenberg described two types of misfit feelings:

Secondary Emotions. Sometimes a feeling you are experiencing may be a secondary response to a deeper emotion or to a thought. Greenberg (2002) referred to these types of emotions as "reactions to the reaction" (p. 43). ***Secondary emotions*** can disguise or ward off painful primary emotions, or they can be an emotional reaction to primary emotions. For example, a woman may demonstrate anger about feeling rejected.



Instrumental Emotions. At other times, a feeling is expressed to serve a social purpose; to influence or control others. Greenberg called this an *instrumental emotion*, where one may respond intentionally or out of habit in a way that is inconsistent with the initial primary emotion. For example, crying or exaggerating feelings of sadness may be an attempt to gain sympathy and support.

Discovering More Adaptive Feelings. Greenberg suggested that true transformation of any emotional experience must begin with feeling and acknowledging your emotions openly. Attending to and focusing on your emotions can facilitate the owning of your emotional experience. With time, you will be able to feel an emotion that is different and more adaptive than the difficult emotion you are experiencing at first.

2. There are Feelings Hidden Beneath the Surface

Some emotions can be scary to identify, explore, and express. Often, there is a perceived emotional risk to expressing painful, deep-seated emotions. Gripping to your partner about an unwashed dish may feel less risky than discussing deeper, more serious issues in the relationship. These feelings may be surface-level and superficial, hiding more powerful underlying emotions, such as fear, anger, shame, or grief. A good question to ask oneself is, “What’s the deeper feeling here?” Identifying a deeper emotion can be helpful in resolving unfinished business and moving on. Greenberg (2002) encouraged the acceptance and expression of genuine emotion in order to transform pain into adaptive happiness and peace. Resisting unpleasant emotions can be detrimental to one’s sense of overall happiness.

Discovering More Adaptive Feelings. Getting in tune with one’s bodily reactions can be helpful in fostering acceptance and transformation of emotion. For instance, shame can often result in desensitization to body awareness or even a flooding of bodily responses (Joyce & Sills, 2010). To counteract this numbing of emotion, it is suggested that one become more mindful and work with the body in order to facilitate greater acceptance of painful feelings.

3. This Feeling is Unclear

An *unclear felt sense* is a maladaptive pattern where individuals may feel confused about their emotional state and may be unable to communicate a clear sense of their experience (Greenberg, 2002; Gendlin, 1978). Sometimes, a person entrenched in this pattern may know that there is a feeling but is unable to adequately identify what emotion is present. An individual can sometimes feel overwhelmed with many different emotions all at once, sometimes causing one to shut down emotionally or feel numb. This conglomeration of different emotions is like an emotional stew, where it is unclear what emotion is most salient to the individual at a particular time.

Discovering More Adaptive Feelings. Exploring and putting to words the bodily felt sense is effective in helping one focus on one’s experience and its emotional impact. Picking apart and exploring each salient emotion, one by one, can be helpful in having a more clear felt experience (Gendlin, 1978). Gendlin recommended slowing down and feeling one emotion at a time as a way to focus on getting a clear sense of one’s total emotional experience.

4. This Feeling is Shut Down or Interrupted

Greenberg (2002) described a maladaptive pattern where one part of the self limits emotional experience and expression. For example, a person may be on the verge of crying but quickly pulls back the tears in an effort to deny emotional experience. Deflecting is the process by which an individual avoids awareness, perhaps by turning away from a stimulus or by going off on a tangent (Joyce & Sills, 2010).



Discovering More Adaptive Feelings. Becoming more aware of how you may interrupt emotional experience is helpful in facilitating self-acceptance and allowing feelings to emerge without interruption.

5. This Feeling is Too Intense – or – This Feeling Seems to be Muted

Sometimes the intensity of emotional reactions seems incongruent with the experience prompting the emotional response (Linehan, 1993). This can go either way: (a) an emotional reaction that is more intense than the prompting event; or (b) an emotional response that is muted, leaving a sense of feeling numb. Both of these patterns can be problematic. Constant intense emotional reactions may cause difficulty in relationships. On the other hand, emotional flatness (coming off as aloof, numb, uninterested, not caring) can also be perceived by others as being disconnected and not invested in a relationship.

Discovering More Adaptive Feelings. Linehan (1993) discussed how acting on intense emotional reactions can be an ineffective way to reach our goals. If you find yourself acting from your emotions, it might be helpful for you to (a) *observe* the reaction you are having to the situation, (b) *describe* the event in terms of the facts of the situation, and (c) *participate* in the situation to prevent yourself from avoiding the difficult feelings. While you do these three independent tasks, you should try to do each one mindfully (concentrating only on the present situation) and non-judgmentally.

6. This Feeling Seems to be a Reaction to Something Else

Emotional reactions are not only triggered by current events; in many cases past experiences impact current feelings (Jung, 1983). A common example of this is feeling rejected. For example, a friend says they are going to call but they do not. It would be appropriate to feel slightly hurt; however, it may be less adaptive to go into a rage and want to terminate the relationship because the friend was unable to call when they said they would. This maladaptive reaction may be triggered by past experiences of rejection and invalidation. You might be reacting to your friend's failure to call you based on more intense experiences of rejection from the past that prompted the disproportional anger.

Discovering More Adaptive Feelings. When facing situations in which you feel like you are having an emotional reaction to something that has happened in your past, it may be helpful to recognize, notice, and name your feelings (Luoma, Hayes, & Wasler, 2007). Try to stay in the present moment, noticing that the reaction you are having is from the past and not related to the current situation. To help you stay in the present moment, you might reach out and touch three items around you and notice the physical sensation. Next, look around and identify three objects in the room, and name and describe the items. Lastly, breathe deeply through your nose and find three smells you can identify. This grounding in the here-and-now may help you respond to the present with less interference from the past.

7. I'm Trying Not to Feel or Express this Emotion

Sometimes feelings are uncomfortable to experience, especially more negative emotions such as shame, guilt, sadness, or fear (Linehan, 1993). Given the temporary discomfort of emotions, it makes sense to want to avoid the feeling, and in the short term this may help alleviate discomfort. However, in the long run, this may result in more distress. Emotions can be like a bottle of soda. When it is shaken a little bit and the top is open, there will be some release; however, if you continue to shake the bottle without opening the top, eventually the bottle will burst open, letting out all of the pressure that has built up. Similarly, if emotions are not released when they are experienced, a similar emotional build-up may result in a more intense release of emotion later.



Discovering More Adaptive Feelings. Many people are afraid that if they start to feel an emotion it will be overwhelming or will never stop. This is simply not the case. To help put things into perspective, think back on one of the most painful experiences you can recall. If you are reading this paragraph, then you clearly were able to survive that moment. Though uncomfortable, painful emotions do eventually fade and change. When you find yourself experiencing negative emotions, try not to run away from them. Instead, sit with the emotion and notice how it feels and, over time, it will fade in intensity (Luoma, Hayes, & Wasler, 2007).

8. This Feeling is Related to Dysfunctional Thinking

Negative self-talk is a hallmark of depressive symptoms, suggesting that one's patterns of entrenched thoughts may fuel depression (Moyers, 1993). Individuals whose thinking is impacting their feelings are often unaware of such pervasive negative thoughts. Additionally, Greenberg (2002) referred to secondary emotions as reactions to one's thoughts or feelings rather than to the situation. For instance, a person may display anger in response to persistent irrational thoughts of being used. Hence, the feeling may be maladaptive if it is based on cognitive distortions. Sometimes, over-analyzing or rationalizing one's feelings can also prevent one from experiencing them adequately.

Discovering More Adaptive Feelings. Becoming more aware of your negative self-talk is paramount in challenging automatic negative beliefs and, in turn, creating more adaptive feelings. Brainstorming alternative ways of viewing situations is also important in the process of generating adaptive feelings. You can list these automatic thoughts and alternative responses in a journal or thought log.

9. This Feeling is Related to Ineffective Actions

Feelings and actions can get entangled in a vicious cycle. Sometimes, a person's feelings (such as fear) may interfere with effective actions. At other times, a person may feel overwhelmed by emotion and act in an impulsive manner. Inhibited actions or acting out impulsively are both harmful and self-defeating patterns (Joyce & Sills, 2010). For example, someone may abuse illicit substances in order to cope with anxious feelings. However, such abuse can generate even greater anxiety, thus fueling more ineffective actions of continued substance use and abuse. Not doing anything can be just as harmful as acting out impulsively. For example, someone who is depressed or paralyzed with fear may choose to sleep all day, and this avoidance can lead to other detrimental effects, fueling greater depression or avoidance.

Discovering More Adaptive Feelings. Joyce and Sills (2010) recommended that individuals examine their bodily responses to thoughts and feelings in order to facilitate more adaptive actions. Similar to a thought log, you can create an action log, where an account of your behaviors, their resulting feelings, and alternative behaviors are recorded. Hence, understanding how your thoughts, feelings, and actions are intertwined and related to each other is important in the process of creating more adaptive emotions.

10. I'm Feeling Bad about the Emotions I am Experiencing

Sometimes emotional experiences can become a vicious cycle, resulting from a maladaptive emotion resulting in more of that same maladaptive feeling (Freud & Strachey, 1991). For example, many people will start to worry about one thing. Overtime, however, they will begin to worry about worrying about the event. Another common example of this pattern is anger. Some people hold the belief that they should not be angry, and become angry at themselves in situations where they express anger.

Discovering More Adaptive Feelings. It may be helpful to accept your emotions rather than making judgments about what you should or should not be feeling. It is often best to simply accept the emotion that you are feeling at the time and find healthy ways to experience and express your emotions.

Steps to Discovering Adaptive Feelings:

1. Uncover and express your genuine feelings.
2. Be mindful of bodily processes and reactions/changes to events/stimuli.
3. Slow down and distinguish each emotion to understand your total emotional experience.
4. Don't censor your emotional experience; express yourself in a way that is appropriate and comforting (i.e., journaling, sharing with a trusted friend).
5. Look at dysfunctional thoughts that often generate maladaptive feelings and practice replacing this pattern with more functional thinking.
6. Practice more effective actions instead of impulsive behaviors or paralysis based on maladaptive feelings.

Examples of Adaptive vs. Maladaptive Responses to Specific Feelings

Emotion	Adaptive Response	Maladaptive Response
Sadness	Grieving; Reaching out	Hopeless despair; Desperation
Anger	Empowering; Protective	Destructive
Anxiety	Signals danger	Traumatic
Shame	Remorse	Self-hate; Contempt
Disgust	Healthy outrage	Abuse of self or others
Pain	Leave a harmful situation	Misery with no relief
Love	Caring; Freeing	Addictive; Clinging



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Summary of Understanding Feelings

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Adaptive versus Maladaptive Feelings

Maladaptive Feelings...	Adaptive Feelings...
Don't fit the situation	Fit the current situation
Are hidden beneath the surface	Are explored and understood
Are unclear or hard to describe	Are clearly identified with words
Are shut down or interrupted	Are felt and expressed
Are proportional to the situation	Are too intense or too muted
Respond to the present	Are outdated response to the past
Are avoided or denied	Are accepted and shared
Are related to dysfunctional thinking	Are based on functional thoughts
Are related to ineffective actions	Are responses to effective actions
Are responses to other feelings	Allow each emotion to be experienced without judgment