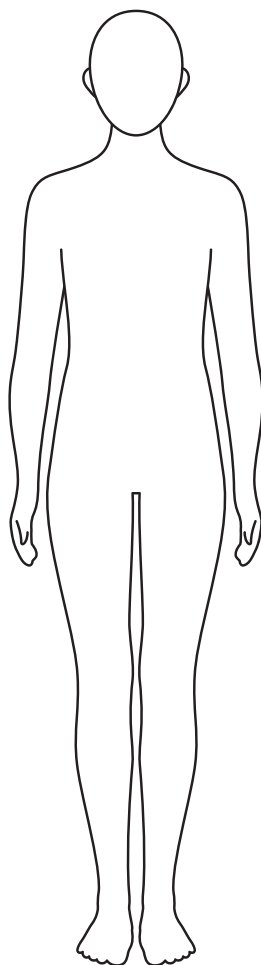


How to Process an Emotion

Many of us hear that we should be “processing our emotions,” but what does that actually mean? The following worksheet will walk you through the five steps involved in processing an emotion. The more you practice, the easier it will be to work through your emotions without having to use the prompts on this worksheet.

Step 1: Notice

The first step in working through an uncomfortable or painful emotion involves turning your awareness inward and noticing the physical sensations arising in your body. To do so, find a comfortable position where you can pause for a few minutes. Close your eyes if that feels comfortable. Take five deep breaths. Start scanning your body to notice how you are feeling right now. Don't worry about identifying any emotions. Just focus on what is happening in your body. After a few minutes, use the figure here to circle areas where you noticed any sensations. Include a description of the sensations too, being as specific as you can.



Step 2: Allow

The next step is to allow yourself to feel whatever it is that you are feeling. So often, when we experience uncomfortable emotions, we have the urge to push them away, distract ourselves, or numb ourselves from the feeling. We may also tell ourselves that we “shouldn’t” be feeling this way, which can result in judgment and shame on top of what we are already experiencing. If you are not used to allowing yourself to feel certain emotions, you may feel scared or overwhelmed at the prospect of letting yourself feel them, but avoiding your emotions only makes them more intense over time.

What are some ways you’ve behaved in an attempt to numb, push away, or distract yourself from uncomfortable emotions? Which emotions most often elicit these behaviors?

Think back to the bodily sensations you identified in the first step of this exercise. What urges do you have in response to these bodily sensations? For example, do you feel the urge to fidget? Are you thinking about everything you need to check off your to do list? Do you want to stop doing this exercise? Write down what urges you have below.

Try to sit with this urge for a moment without acting on it. Imagine that the urge is simply a wave in the ocean and that you are riding it until it passes. What is this experience like for you?

Once the urge passes, write down what you feel in this moment, allowing yourself to feel it without attempting to block it in any way.

Step 3: Investigate

Let's dig a little deeper to understand why you may be experiencing these bodily sensations. Maybe they arose because you're judging this exercise and don't think it's going to be helpful. Maybe they arose in response to an interaction you had with someone earlier in the day. Whatever the reason, practice coming from a place of curiosity. These questions will help you discover why you might be feeling this way.

What were you doing right before you experienced these bodily sensations? (Or this morning or last night?) How were you feeling before they occurred?

Is there anything notable going on in your life that may have impacted how you feel? Do you have any specific memories or thoughts connected to this experience, person, or situation?

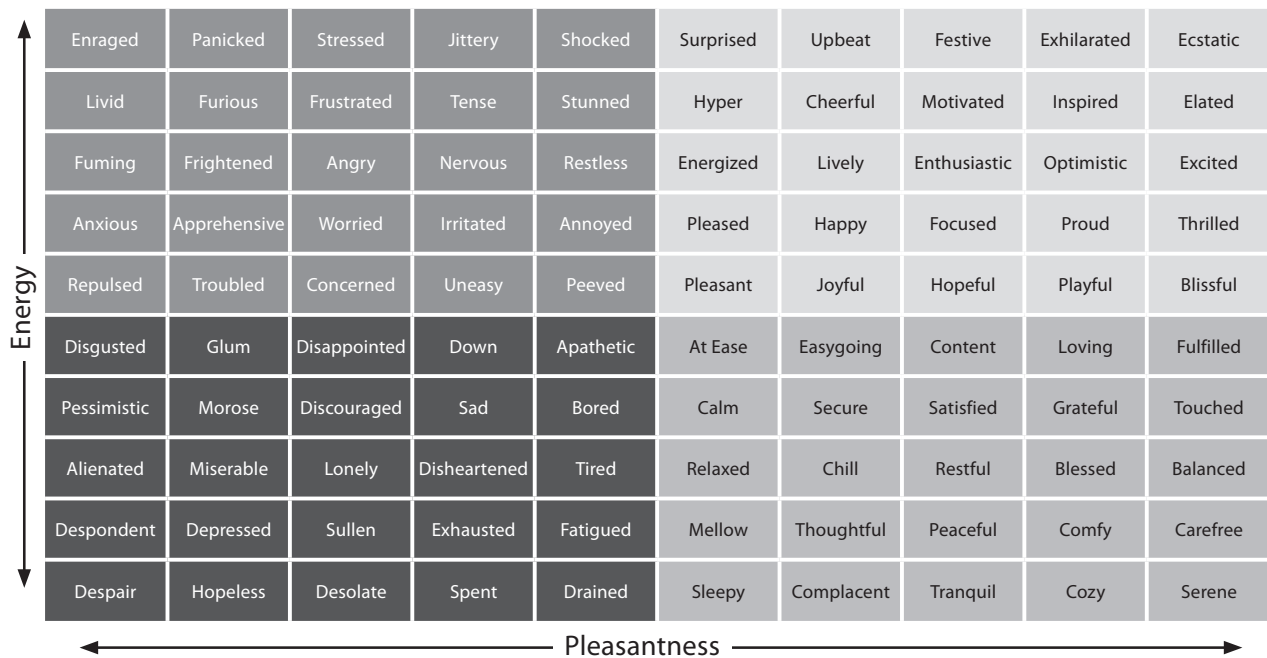
Have you met your basic needs today? Are you hungry, thirsty, lonely, or tired? Have you been outside today? These are important questions because sometimes bodily sensations can be misconstrued as emotions if you haven't met your most basic needs.

Step 4: Label

Based on the bodily sensations you identified and the investigative questions you filled out, what emotion are you feeling? If you are struggling to identify an emotion, use the following mood meter to help you out, which asks you to first identify if you are feeling high or low in *energy* and then high or low in *pleasantness*. This can help you find a word that fits your experience. If you feel like none of these words fit, find one that is the closest match and look up some synonyms. You can also feel more than one emotion word at the same time.

Mood Meter

How are you feeling?



What emotion word best describes how you feel right now? _____

On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being *not at all intense* and 10 being *the most intense it could be*), how intense is the emotion in your body right now? _____

Are you experiencing any emotions *about* your emotions? For example, guilt about feeling angry? Frustration about feeling sad? Describe any secondary emotions, or meta-emotions, you feel here.

Steps 5 and 6: Explore and Release

To work through whatever emotion you are experiencing, you need to explore ways that allow you to release the pent-up energy in your body that the emotion is creating. Otherwise, the emotion will continue to build up over time, just like steam in a pressure cooker. With enough steam, the pressure cooker will eventually explode. You can release your emotions through a variety of exercises that emphasize movement, connection with others, mindfulness, or self-expression. Put a check mark by any of the following activities that you'd like to try.

Movement

- Move in some way, whether it's yoga, stretching, walking, running, jumping jacks, shaking, dancing, yelling, or punching a pillow.

Mindfulness

- Do a deep breathing exercise. Try breathing in for a count of four, holding for a count of four, and then exhaling for a count of four.
- Slow down and mindfully observe your five senses while doing any routine activity, such as cleaning, organizing, cooking, or taking a shower or bath.

Connection with Others

- Spend time with close friends or family. Studies show that when you are especially close to someone, you can sync up heart rates and breathing patterns. When you're with loved ones, you're also more likely to engage in affection and touch—whether

in the form of a kiss, a friendly pat on the back, or a platonic hug—and to laugh authentically, which does wonders for making you feel safe, heard, and understood.²⁹

- Be around other people in general, whether this involves smiling when you see a stranger or engaging in small talk. This reassures your brain that it is okay to get out of your head and be present in the world around you.
- Cuddle or spend time with a pet.

Self-Expression

- Write in a journal or share your feelings with someone.
- Do something creative, such as painting, drawing, dancing, listening to music, singing, or playing an instrument.
- Cry. Scientists have recently discovered that we have different types of tears. Tears that we get when cutting an onion (basal tears) have a different composition than emotional tears (psychic tears), which have neurotransmitters that are released during times of stress.³⁰

Now pick one of the activities that you identified from the list and spend the next 20 minutes engaging in the activity. When you're done, reflect on the experience. What was it like? How do you feel now?