Experiencing and Expressing Emotions

Emotions are a very important part of life. They can often be confusing and difficult, but they are also opportunities to learn about ourselves. We can learn to experience and express our feelings in ways that can help us grow, and help us build strong relationships with other people.

Emotions are valuable. They guide us and connect us to others, they give us energy, help us make choices and give us information. Emotions can be about events in our lives now, in the past, or even in the future. Memories can bring up strong emotions, as though an event is happening again. As long as we feel safe, we can listen to our feelings and the messages they give us about our selves and our relationships.

For many of us, our emotions sometimes seem to get out of control. We may cry easily or get angry quickly, or we may sometimes be numb and unable to feel any emotions. We don’t often stop to think about how we experience and express our emotions. We’re just busy having them. But it can be very helpful to name our emotions, to think about how we express them and to think about what we learned about emotions when we were growing up.

If you were a painting today, what colours would you be painted with?
Naming our feelings

Sometimes it’s easy to name what you’re feeling – you’re glad, or ashamed, or disappointed, or affectionate. Sometimes it’s harder to say how you feel. You might need to take some time to focus on yourself and the feeling.

You might need to focus on your body. We often experience emotions in our bodies. We might feel a knot in the stomach, shaky hands, or a fast heart beat. We are all unique and our bodies experience emotion differently. How does your body experience different emotions?

You may need to focus on what you do. Sometimes the way we act can give us clues about what we are feeling. For example, I may not think I am angry but I hear myself snapping at my friend. That shows I am angry.

It can take some thinking, but it’s helpful to name our feelings. Naming a feeling helps us to understand it.

Expressing our feelings

We have choices when it comes to expressing our emotions. Think about the wide range of colours that you could use to paint how you are feeling today.

When we choose how to express our emotions it can be helpful to ask ourselves some questions. How am I interpreting the event? Does my feeling match what’s happening? Do I have more than one feeling to express? What are my some of the different ways I could express my feelings? Do I want to do something? What will happen if I do something? What will happen if I do nothing?

Expressing your feelings is part of taking care of yourself. We can express our feelings by talking, crying, laughing, singing, stamping, yelling, meditating, making art, making music, dancing, writing, and many other things. It is not O.K. to hurt someone because of a way we are feeling, but we have endless options if we do not harm others.
What we learned growing up

We all get messages growing up about how to express our feelings. We were told that some things are O.K. and some things are not O.K.. Some messages from our family may still affect us. Here are some things you might have heard when you were growing up:

- “Other people’s feelings are more important than yours.”
- “Don’t make anyone else angry or unhappy.”
- “Women don’t express anger.”
- “Boys don’t cry.”
- “Ignore your feelings.”
- “Hide your feelings.”
- “Don’t trust your feelings.”
- “Be happy all the time.”

Do any of these messages sound familiar to you? Are there others that you heard?

As a child you may not have been able to break these family rules. As an adult you have more options. You could choose to replace the rules that are not helpful.

If your feelings were weather, would they be…
…a lightning storm…sunshine after rain…a strong wind…something else?

It takes practice to understand and value your emotions, and to express them in a way that is good for you and others. Be patient. Don’t be discouraged if you find yourself struggling. Learning to experience and express your emotions is a life-long journey.