

For example, you can tell your friend how much you will miss him/her. Also, you can make a special effort to spend more time with him/her. These options may be painful at the time, but they give you the opportunity to express your feelings to your friend. On the other hand, you can avoid the friend until he/she leaves town so you won't have to say good-bye. Or you can stay busy making other friends so you won't miss this particular friend as much after he/she leaves. These choices may allow you to postpone or avoid painful feelings at the time, but they do not provide the opportunity for closure with your friend. The point is that you have options, and it's your decision.

Here are some useful questions to consider when deciding how to respond to your feelings:

- Does the intensity of my feelings match the situation?
- Do I have several feelings that I need to pay attention to?
- What interpretations or judgments am I making about this event?
- What are my options for expressing my feelings?
- What are the consequences of each option for me?
- What are the consequences of each option for others?
- What result am I hoping for?
- What do I want to do?
- What if I do nothing?

Even doing something like taking a deep breath or going for a walk to think about it can be a way of responding to your feelings. Remember that you have many options when it comes to expressing emotions.

### **Understanding the Impact of Your Family**

Our families helped shape our attitudes about emotions, our abilities to identify emotions, our ways of interpreting events, and our ways of expressing emotions. If you are having difficulties in any of these processes and are trying to change them, you may find it helpful to consider what you learned about them from your family. Many people do not recall being taught "family rules" concerning emotions, but such teachings occurred, whether directly or subtly. A subtle example might be where a parent distanced him/herself from you or left the room whenever you got angry, thus indicating that expressions of anger were unacceptable. In other families a parent may yell,

"Don't raise your voice at me," suggesting a rule against the child's expressing anger, but subtly conveying the rule that expressions of parental anger are permissible. Identifying your family's rules can help you change the ways you experience and express your emotions.

Some common examples of problematic family rules include:

- Always treat other people's feelings as more important than your own.
- Never do anything that might cause dissention or negative feelings for someone else.
- Don't express anger.
- Use anger to get attention.
- Ignore your feelings, or better still, don't feel.
- Don't trust others with your feelings; keep them to yourself.
- Never trust your feelings; trust only your logic.
- Be happy all the time.

As a child growing up you may not have been able to experience or express your emotions in ways different than those prescribed by your family. As an adult you have more options, including replacing those rules which are not helpful.

### **Final Note**

Learning to experience your feelings fully and expressing them in ways that are adaptive and healthy is not a simple process, but there are some key components that can help. In general, it is important to become a good observer of your feelings, to accept and value them, and to attend to what they signal to you. Pay attention to how your interpretations and thoughts affect how you feel and also how the lessons learned in your family about emotional expression continue to influence your behavior. When deciding how to express how you feel, give some thought to all of your options. And most importantly, be patient. Don't become discouraged when you find yourself struggling with this process. Learning to experience and express your emotions is a life-long process.

You are welcome to stop by or call to make an appointment:

**131 Van Housen Hall**  
**315-267-2330**  
**8:30-4:30 pm**



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Do you often feel like your emotions are out of control? Do you fly off the handle at people who don't necessarily deserve it? Do you blow up over minor incidents? Do you find yourself wanting to cry over "nothing?" Or maybe you're at the other extreme. Do you find it hard to get worked up over anything? Do you feel numb even though something upsetting has happened? Do you have every right to be furious, but you don't feel anything? Experiencing and expressing emotions are integral parts of life. Yet, for many people, emotions remain mysterious, confusing, and difficult to express constructively. This brochure provides information about learning to incorporate emotions into your life in healthy ways, including how to express them in ways that are conducive to building healthy relationships.

### Accepting and Valuing Your Feelings

Feelings are an important part of you. In order to live fully and effectively, you need many sources of information (e.g., your senses, your thoughts, your perceptions) to guide you, motivate you, and help make sense of things. Your emotions provide one such source. Often, there is a strong relationship between the events in your life and your feelings— for example, to feel sadness in response to loss, or to feel happiness in response to something desirable. Feelings may also be related to past events or even to expectations of the future. For example, sorrow about a recent loss may evoke sadness from past losses. These feelings can be an important source of information as well. Rather than ignore or exaggerate your feelings, it is helpful to be able to take your feelings as they are, accept them, think about them, and learn from them.

When you are feeling something consider asking yourself the following kinds of questions:

- "What is this feeling?"
- "What is this feeling telling me about this situation?"
- "Why has this feeling come up right now?"

The following sections will address these questions.

### Identifying Feelings

The relationships between the events in your life and your feelings are going to be less clear if you have difficulty identifying what you are feeling. Naturally, there are times when you are unable to precisely name what you feel. Identifying your feelings may require

you to take time to focus on yourself and your feelings. If you find it difficult to notice or name what you are feeling, it may require that you pay attention to your body. Most feelings are experienced in the body. For example, fear may show up as a knot in your stomach or a tightness in your throat. Our bodies are all different, so you will have to pay attention to your body and not just rely on others' experiences. You may find it helpful to make a list of various feelings (e.g., delight, sadness, fear, insecurity, fury, shame, etc.) and spend some time reading over the list to see if you are aware of having experienced some of these. Feelings are also connected to your behavior. If you aren't sure how you feel, but you realize that you are acting in a way that sends a clear message to others, you may be able to infer what you are feeling from your behavior. For example, if you have an angry facial expression or tone of voice when you are talking with a particular friend, it may be that you are frustrated or angry with that person without recognizing it. Making the connection between life's events and your feelings is very useful. Continuing with this example, once you recognize your feelings, you may then more clearly understand and articulate your concerns with your friend.

### The Role of Interpretations

Often your feelings are related to your interpretations of events more than to the events themselves. While it is natural to think that you are responding only to the events of your life, in fact you make interpretations or judgments of these events, and these interpretations play a key role in your emotional responses. When you stop to think about it, each event could yield a variety of emotional responses; your interpretation of the event helps link a particular emotional response to that event.

Consider the following diagram (adapted from Ellis, 1962):

Event → Interpretation → Emotional Response

Here, an event can be any occurrence in your life (e.g., a score on a test.) Consider the example of two students experiencing the same event, scoring 90% on a test, but interpreting that event in dramatically different ways. One student's interpretation might be, "Wonderful! That was a tough test, I studied hard, and it paid off!" Now, imagine the other student's interpretation to be, "Oh no! I didn't get the top score. I'm never going to get into grad school and that's terrible." Probably, the first student's emotional response will be positive; the second student's negative. The event was the same for both; the differing interpretations led to the differing emotional responses.

Your interpretations can be made so rapidly and so automatically that you may not realize they are happening. When your emotional reaction is disproportionate to the event, it is likely due to your rapid, undetected interpretation of that event, more than to the event itself. In effect, your emotions can be a valuable signal to you that you may need to re-examine your interpretation. Here are some common examples of self-defeating ways people think about and interpret the events of their lives:

- **Dichotomous thinking:** interpreting events in extremes, in "all or nothing" ways (e.g., depicting events as wonderful or terrible, with no recognition of the grey areas in between).
- **Excessive personalization:** automatically concluding that another's behavior or mood is in direct response to you (e.g., "She's in a bad mood. I must have done something wrong.")
- **Overgeneralization:** seeing an event as having more impact, in more areas of your life, than it truly does.
- **Filtering:** magnifying negative events in your life and discounting positive ones.
- **Emotional reasoning:** concluding that what you feel must be the truth (e.g., if you feel stupid, you must be stupid).

Learn to recognize any tendencies you may have to distort events through interpretational styles like these, and then practice choosing and committing to more valid interpretations. The resulting emotions will be more accurate reflections of the events in your life.

### Expressing Your Feelings

Just as you have choices about how to interpret an event, you also have options about how to express those feelings you experience. Often we limit the range of our expressive options by erroneously believing that there are only two options: either directly expressing them to someone else (e.g., in a personal confrontation), or "swallowing" the feelings and keeping them to ourselves. In actuality, there are many ways to respond to your feelings and express yourself. To some extent, you express a feeling any time your behavior is influenced by that feeling, but the way you express that feeling, and the intensity of that expression can vary widely. This is where decision making comes in. First, consider what your opinions are. For example, if a close friend is planning to move away, you may feel very sad about that. You have numerous options here.