
Feeling Safe with Feelings

A new heart I will give you, a new spirit put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart that feels.

C. Stern (ed.), *Gates of Repentance*

Most anxiety sufferers are uncomfortable with strong feelings and avoid them whenever possible. Fear and anxiety, of course, involve strong feelings, but they are by no means the only feelings that make people uncomfortable. Anger, hurt, guilt, ambivalence, and even excitement are "unsafe" for many. Such intense feelings produce anxiety, which further reinforces the secondary fear response. This chapter will explore the relationship between anxiety and feelings, and offer ways to deal safely with feelings.

As discussed previously, most adult anxiety sufferers were reared in families with unhealthy patterns of dealing with feelings. The most common pattern is emotional repression, in which feelings are blocked before they are

expressed. Feelings can also be avoided through denial, intellectualization, and other defense mechanisms. When feelings are blocked off, the physical arousal or "charge" associated with them freezes in the body as muscle tension. This can become a pattern, called *body armor* by Reich (1961, 1972), which further blocks a person's ability to feel.

The fight/flight reaction can fixate on certain feelings, based on negative experiences associated with those feelings. A good example is anger, a feeling that is often expressed as out-of-control behavior. Anyone who has been victimized by violence or intimidated by someone else's rage will tend to react to anger with fear. In this case, the fear response fixates on the anger stimulus. Fear can also develop in response to our own anger, if we have ever lost control or felt that we might behave destructively. By this conditioning process, anger triggers fear.

Fear is part of the fight/flight response to danger. When that danger consists of intense feelings, our survival instinct will activate the fight/flight response in reaction to those feelings. Shallow breathing, elevated heart rate, muscle tension, and other fight/flight mechanisms can thus be activated by feelings. Naturally, the survival instinct will attempt to avoid "dangerous" feelings by use of defense mechanisms. However, if a feeling is sufficiently intense, it may penetrate the defenses, leading to heightened fear and anxiety.

In many cases, by learning to defend against their feelings, children are actually developing coping skills for emotional survival within their families. The ability to block off feelings can be adaptive, protecting children from negative consequences for expressing their feelings. For

example, children who might otherwise cry when upset can, by holding it in, protect themselves from such negative feedback as "Don't be a crybaby!" or "Crying won't solve anything." Or where anger might meet with punishment, holding it in can be a safeguard.

Dysfunctional emotional patterns in families range from *repressive*, where feelings are not permitted, to *abusive*, where intense feelings are expressed destructively. On either end of this continuum, the likely result is emotional inhibition in the children, especially in those who are sensitive or fearful. As a result, most children from emotionally dysfunctional families do not learn how to express feelings appropriately. They do not develop a vocabulary for their feelings, and they may not learn to use words for identifying what they feel. In some cases children may know how they feel, but they do not know how to express their feelings. They may therefore hold their feelings in as a form of self-preservation. Subsequently, when they leave the dysfunctional family as adolescents or young adults, they will be unprepared for interacting effectively with other people.

Since children learn primarily by imitation, their emotional styles tend to reflect the emotional styles modeled by their parents. Parents who are uncomfortable with feelings create an environment in which feelings are not a natural part of daily interaction. For the children, feelings will not be safe, and skills in communicating feelings will not be acquired. As with many other abilities, the development of emotional skills is affected most by early life experiences. As a result of rearing in emotionally dysfunctional families, the majority of anxiety sufferers—and most other

people who seek psychological counseling—need help dealing with feelings.

Generally speaking, boys are at a greater disadvantage in developing emotional communication skills due to the mistaken idea—widely held throughout the world—that emotional expressiveness is a sign of weakness in men. The idea that "real men don't cry" exemplifies this myth. Girls, on the other hand, are reinforced for expressing feelings, and girls' play style often involves sharing feelings, compared to the more competitive play style observed in boys. These differences can become a significant source of conflict in adult relationships, where men and women may find that their communication suffers as a result of gender differences in emotional style. The male emotional style, for example, is often described as *controlled*, with greater reliance on logic than feelings. In contrast, the female emotional style is often described as *expressive*, with greater reliance on feelings and intuition than logic.

What should we learn about feelings early in life? First, that feelings are natural, normal, and safe. What is unsafe is the *behavior* associated with some feelings. For example, the feeling of anger is, in itself, safe. But violence, aggression, or other out-of-control behavior is not safe. One of the first lessons to be learned about feelings is that we have choices about how we *express* our feelings, and that there are both appropriate and inappropriate ways of doing this. Anxiety surrounds feelings when we do not learn to distinguish between feelings and behavior, and when skills for handling feelings are not learned. Since confusion between feelings and behavior seems to be greatest with anger, a separate discussion in the next chapter is devoted to this particular feeling.

Second, that the source of most feelings is our own thoughts. Cognitive psychologists believe that all feelings are launched by our thoughts and perceptions. Depression, for example, is the result of negative or depressing thoughts, and, as we discussed in Chapter 11, anxiety is often produced by what-ifs, shoulds, worrying, and other thoughts. From this viewpoint, therapy for emotional disorders consists of changing the underlying thought patterns that launch our feelings.

Rational-emotive therapy was developed by Ellis (1994) and based on the idea that thinking precedes feeling. In this therapy approach, changing irrational beliefs to rational beliefs changes the way a person feels. For example, the irrational belief, "I must have love and approval from everyone in order to be happy," leads to fear of rejection and criticism. Such a belief also leads to fear of expressing feelings that might upset others, as well as passive behavior and a tendency to agree to do things when you do not want to. The underlying irrational belief, however, can be changed: "I would like to be loved by everyone but I don't need this to be happy. It is not reasonable to expect everyone to like me, or to please everyone all the time. There will be times when people won't love me, just as I don't love everyone I meet. Even if someone doesn't love me, I know other people who do love me." Another common irrational belief is, "I must be good at everything I do. I cannot make any mistakes." This belief is the basis of perfectionistic behavior and it leads to stress, frustration, and feelings of low self-esteem. Once these irrational beliefs are replaced by rational beliefs, the corresponding behavior and feelings tend to change.

Although thoughts may be responsible for our feelings, the reverse is also true: our feelings can influence our thinking. Once a feeling is launched, we tend to focus on thoughts that are linked to that feeling. When we feel depressed, for example, we are likely to remember things that caused us to feel depressed in the past. Indeed, when feeling depressed, our thoughts about the past, present, and future may all be filtered by the lens of depression. Likewise when we feel anxious, we tend to "awfulize" and "catastrophize"—to worry and anticipate bad things, such as losing control, going crazy, having a heart attack, and so on. This is called "state-dependent thinking," meaning that our thinking can be influenced by our emotional state.

Feelings involve both mind and body. Physically, feelings are controlled by both the brain's limbic system and autonomic nervous system (which controls the hormones responsible for the physical aspects of feelings). In many cases, the body's reactions to strong feelings—increased heart rate, perspiration, shallow/rapid breathing, trembling, and so on—are identical to the fight/flight response, but the mind determines *how* we will react to these body reactions. Without the mind's ability to distinguish between the fight/flight response and strong feelings, all feelings would probably trigger fear and anxiety in sensitive people.

Our ability to identify feelings—to know what we feel—is another important skill. This requires a vocabulary for feelings—the words to be used in identifying feelings and verbally communicating them to others. Young children begin with only two words to identify feelings: "good" and "bad." But there are dozens of feelings, and feelings often arise in mixtures and combinations. For example,

you can feel angry, hurt, and sorry at the same time. Another combination that can be confusing is love and hate, felt at the same time towards the same person.

Feelings are often energizing, due to increased adrenaline levels at times of emotional arousal. When we are in touch with our feelings and can express them, we feel more energetic. In some cases, the adrenaline "rush" associated with strong feelings can be mistaken for anxiety. On the other hand, when we are out of touch with our feelings, or cannot express them, we may experience numbness, depression, and fatigue.

It is also important to understand the "feeling curve." Feelings follow a natural course involving a waxing phase, a peak, and a waning phase. The pattern can be compared to ocean waves that approach, reach a crescendo, and then wash away from shore. Happiness, sadness, anger, grief, and fear all follow this basic pattern. If we understand this, we will be more effective in handling feelings. There will be more options in handling a feeling if, for example, it is recognized in its early, waxing stage. Once a feeling reaches a peak in intensity, it is more difficult to control because rational thinking is outweighed by strong emotional arousal. Nevertheless, it is always possible to control one's behavior, even when feelings seem to take over.

Elium and Elium (1992) take this concept even further. They describe the feeling curve as having a "point of no return." When feelings build up beyond this threshold of emotional intensity, we enter a "non-thinking zone," in which rational thinking is impossible. In this zone, the discussion of feelings and decision-making is not advised. "Just feel," Elium and Elium recommend. After a feeling peaks and emotional equilibrium is restored, we can

think clearly again. In this "clear-thinking zone," communicating feelings and problem solving are more likely to be successful.

An automatic link can form between a specific feeling and a specific behavior. Anger and explosiveness, hurt and withdrawal, fear and avoidance, depression and overeating are some examples. Through the conditioning process described earlier, these links are established as automatic or unconscious habits. It is, therefore, important to distinguish between feelings and behavior in order to break the link between them.

There are no right and wrong feelings. A feeling is an emotional reaction to something, usually thoughts or perceptions. While the underlying thoughts and perceptions may be distorted, it is not quite accurate to say that the corresponding feelings are wrong. Indeed, it could be said that feelings are always right in relation to their triggering thoughts or perceptions, however distorted those thoughts or perceptions may be. In communicating feelings, the most productive attitude is to allow each person to have his or her feelings, and focus instead on the thoughts, perceptions, and assumptions underlying the feelings. It is also important to recognize that everyone has a right to feelings, just as everyone has a right to opinions.

In helping people develop skills for dealing with feelings, the CHAANGE program provides a Bill of Rights and Responsibilities. This is a list of rights we each have as a human being, with our corresponding responsibilities for allowing others to have the same rights. The bill of rights and responsibilities provides a framework for communicating feelings within relationships—between customer and store clerk, employee and supervisor, friend and friend, par-

ent and child, husband and wife. As you read through the following bill of rights and responsibilities, ask yourself, "Which rights are acceptable to me, and which are not?"

BILL OF RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

1. The right to be treated with respect (recognizing your responsibility to treat the other with respect)
2. The right to have and to express your own feelings and opinions (recognizing your responsibility to allow the other to express feelings and opinions)
3. The right to be listened to and taken seriously (recognizing your responsibility to listen to and take others seriously)
4. The right to set your own priorities and to choose your own opportunities (recognizing your responsibility to allow others to set their own priorities and opportunities)
5. The right to say no without feeling guilty (recognizing your responsibility to allow the other to say no)
6. The right to ask for what you want (recognizing your responsibility to allow others the right to refuse)
7. The right to get what you pay for (recognizing your responsibility to allow others to get what they pay for)
8. The right to ask for information from anyone (recognizing your responsibility to allow the other the right not to give that information)

9. The right to make mistakes (recognizing your responsibility to accept the consequences of those mistakes)
10. The right to choose not to assert yourself (recognizing your responsibility to allow the other not to assert also)

A useful distinction can be drawn between *expressing* feelings and *communicating* feelings. Expressing feelings usually means raw release of built-up emotional energy. This could be called venting, which serves an energy-discharge function. However, in a relationship it is more productive to communicate feelings, which means to discuss feelings as a way to resolve them. In communicating feelings, one does not act out the feelings, but rather talks—with self-control—about them. As already pointed out, discussing feelings is not productive during the non-thinking zone of the feeling curve. It is sometimes necessary to first release the emotional charge associated with a feeling in order to reach a point of clear thinking and ability to discuss your feelings. This may require a physical-release activity, such as exercise, or simply doing something while a feeling completes its cycle. Once self-control is reestablished, emotional safety and productive communication are possible. Only then can the other person hear or empathize with your feelings without defensiveness or concern about safety. On the other hand, this does not mean becoming intellectual or losing touch with your feelings. Later in this chapter, some guidelines are offered for healthy communication about feelings.

Having been taught that feelings are "dangerous," anxiety-prone people tend to block or suppress feelings in

order to avoid them and feel safe. Since this is an unnatural pattern, we can expect some symptoms to develop when feelings are frequently held in or suppressed. What are the symptoms of emotional suppression?

Recall that anxiety stems from the interaction of sensitivity, personality, and stress. In some cases, unexpressed feelings—which build up internal pressure—can be the stress ingredient that triggers anxiety. Generally speaking, when the anxiety is a vague, undefinable uneasiness, it is probably the result of unexpressed feelings.

Depression is another sign of unexpressed feelings, as Peck (1978) suggests. In *The Road Less Traveled*, Peck defines unexpressed feelings as “stuck feelings.” Depression can result from holding in sadness, grief, and even anger. Taking this idea further, psychoanalytic theory suggests that when anger is held in it can turn against the self. If you find yourself being self-critical along with feeling depressed, anger turned inward may be the underlying source.

Psychosomatic symptoms are physical symptoms that are caused or influenced by psychological pressures, such as pent-up feelings. Headaches, ulcers, high blood pressure, and asthma are some common psychosomatic symptoms associated with unexpressed feelings. Since feelings are a form of energy, that energy will accumulate if it is not released. Like a pressure cooker, unexpressed feelings accumulate within the body, creating a powerful internal pressure that can destroy health.

Muscle tension is yet another symptom of unexpressed feelings. As discussed elsewhere, blocked feelings create the form of muscle tension known as *body armor*. There is some evidence that blocked feelings are associated with tension in specific muscle groups. Anger and frustration,

for example, are associated with tension in the neck and shoulders. Grief and sadness are often held in by tightening the chest and eye muscles. Fear is commonly held in by tension in the stomach and diaphragm muscles, which, in turn, restricts breathing. Blocked sexual feelings are often indicated by muscle tension in the pelvic region. These correlations may not be precise, but the idea that bottled-up feelings are associated with muscle tension is widely accepted, and you can verify this from personal experience.

Once a pattern of muscular armor is established as a result of holding feelings in, the tension itself makes it difficult to be in touch with feelings. Therefore, while some therapeutic approaches advocate tuning into feelings, this will be difficult in cases with extensive muscular armor. Relaxation training and softening of the muscular system—through massage, stretching, and so on—may be necessary in order to invoke feelings. In addition, shifting out of your mind and into your body will help.

What are some methods for tuning in to feelings and dealing effectively with them? You have already taken the first step by considering the preceding ideas about feelings, and understanding the consequences of holding feelings in. The next step is to get in touch with and feel safe with your feelings. Our goal is to overcome fear of feelings, including fear of fear.

It is important to develop a “feelings vocabulary.” A feelings vocabulary, as the term suggests, is a repertoire of words to use in identifying and communicating what you feel. Below is a list of feelings (Table 13-1) and a simple exercise that you can use to enhance your feelings vocabulary. Review the list a few times, and then begin to record your feelings. You can go through the list at the

TABLE 13-1: FEELINGS VOCABULARY (continued)

TUNING IN TO YOUR FEELINGS

Feelings	Days									
	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10
Inspired										
Interested										
Joyful										
Lonely										
Loved										
Miserable										
Negative										
Nervous										
Optimistic										
Overwhelmed										
Peaceful										
Pessimistic										
Positive										
Proud										
Rejected										
Relieved										
Remorseful										
Restless										
Sad										
Satisfied										
Scared/fearful										
Shy										
Stubborn										
Surprised/shocked										
Suspicious										
Tired										
Withdrawn										

1. Relax. Spend five or ten minutes in meditation, yoga, visualization, or a muscle relaxation procedure. This will help you focus on your body.
2. Ask yourself, "What am I feeling right now?"
3. Attune to the place in your body where you feel emotional sensations. Use your feelings vocabulary as you scan your body for the location of feelings, and name them as they become apparent.
4. Wait and listen. Be a patient observer and, without judging, allow your senses to pick up on your feeling's place in your body. When you get a general sense of what you are feeling, ask the following questions to further identify your feelings: Where in my body is this feeling? What is the shape of this feeling? What is the size of this feeling? If this feeling had a color, what would it be?

Fear of feelings will lessen if you can simply be with your feelings, and suspend any judgments or negative thoughts about them. Thoughts such as "I shouldn't feel this way," "He'll be upset with me if I tell him how I feel," and "I won't be able to handle my feelings," are all based on false assumptions, and they can be replaced. Replace them with the truth about feelings: you have a right to your feelings, feelings are not inherently dangerous, feelings and behavior are two different things, you have a choice about how you express your feelings, feelings always pass at the end of the feeling curve, and you can learn how to communicate feelings effectively.

It will also be helpful to cultivate an accepting and nonjudgmental attitude towards your feelings, much the same way as you would treat thoughts arising in meditation. In discussing the spiritual advantages of a painful childhood, Muller (1992) offers some meditations to create a "place of safety" for feelings. In exploring fear, for example, Muller advises us to relax, and as we allow fear to arise, ask,

Where is the sensation strongest? In the chest, the muscles, the belly? What additional images arise along with the fear? Watch where the fear stays longest, watch as it begins to recede. Simply investigate this fear, making peace with the sensations that arise. If we resist the urge to protect ourselves and move gently into the experience of fear, what other sensations or impulses arise? (p. 36).

By letting fear exist simply as images in the mind and sensations in the body, we can feel safe with fear and let it pass without the usual disturbance and secondary reactions. This attitude is similar to Weekes' (1978) approach to anxiety, discussed in Chapter 12, in which she advises us to face, accept, float through, and let time pass.

We have already discussed the important distinction between feelings and behavior. Keeping this distinction in mind will prove helpful in cultivating emotional safety, and in accepting feelings without judgment or fear. Knowing that you can simply be with your feelings, without responding to any impulses to act them out or behave in a programmed way, will help lower your fear. In this sense, being with your feelings is a quiet and private process that allows you to move through emotional sensations without taking

action. If action is necessary and appropriate, it is best done with self-control.

Feelings sometimes do require action. In some cases, it is necessary to discharge the energy or tension associated with a feeling. If this cannot be done through nonjudgmental meditation, other release mechanisms may prove useful. These include talking about your feelings with someone you trust, writing your feelings in a diary or journal, or writing a letter (that does not necessarily need to be mailed). With anger, there are some additional methods for releasing the emotional charge (see Chapter 14). These are all methods for letting feelings out—for discharging emotional energy—rather than communicating feelings directly to specific people. By far the most difficult action is to verbally communicate your feelings to other people, especially to those who may have behaved in ways that aroused hurt, anger, or other negative feelings. These are people with whom you may have some unresolved issues.

I personally had great difficulty with assertive communication. I feared that if I communicated my feelings to other people, they would become angry or upset with me. I intellectualized my feelings, and avoided assertive communication by telling myself that conflict was negative and the world needed more peace. Like most anxiety sufferers, I struggled with a fear of rejection, which led me to please other people and avoid conflict. I was, in all honesty, often passive and compliant, even when it was not in my best interest. I was frequently unable to be honest about my feelings. In addition, I feared my own feelings when they were intense, and assumed I would be unable to control them. Anger, sadness, and guilt were particularly difficult for me to handle.

I was able to overcome this problem, but not without great effort and practice. One of the most helpful tools was found in Seagrave and Covington (1987). Founders of the CHAANGE program, Seagrave and Covington offer a simple three-step formula for expressing feelings assertively. I have added a fourth step, which makes the technique more complete and successful, at least for me.

“How do you tell the carpet cleaner that he didn’t clean your carpet? How do you tell your guilt-giving mother-in-law that you won’t be having guests for Thanksgiving dinner? How do you say ‘no’ to car-pooling for a friend? How do you ask your supervisor for a raise?” (p. 178). With these questions, Seagrave and Covington highlight the type of situations where assertive communication is appropriate. They suggest the following steps for effective communication in situations where conflict or rejection is anticipated.

STEPS FOR ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION

Step One: Use an empathy statement.

Step Two: State what you want.

Step Three: Suggest an outcome to the other person.

Step Four: Seek an agreement.

Step One is a way to open up communication and reduce the probability of defensiveness on the part of the listener. With an empathy statement, such as, “I know you are very busy but I need to speak with you about something important,” you show the other person that you understand his position and that you are sensitive to his needs and feel-