

# Mastery of Feelings



*“The only reason anyone does anything is to change the way they feel.”* That quote may sound silly, but if you think about it, it’s accurate. We go to work to make money so we feel financially secure, we prepare dinner because we are hungry, and we go to the gym to feel healthier. This can be true of our emotions, too, particularly the negative ones. Mastery of feelings is about not letting your feelings control your behavior. Instead, you are in charge of your emotions—you have “mastered” the feeling to the degree that it does not control your behavior. This is relevant in the context of bereavement, because the grief journey is wrought with emotions.

Mastering our feelings begins with correctly identifying them. Often times an emotion like anger is just a surface emotion, covering up a more vulnerable emotion such as guilt or hurt.

- **Emotion is experienced physically.** Although it usually goes unnoticed, every emotion you experience is first felt in your body. For example, you may be feeling grouchy and you realize it is because you’re hungry and your stomach is growling. Or, if you are feeling passionate about something, you may realize that you are talking faster and using your hands more for emphasis. If you are having a hard time identifying your emotions, focus on what your body is telling you. Do your shoulders hurt? Then you may be stressed. Does your stomach feel queasy? Then you may be anxious.
  - When someone dies, their body stops working, and a suicide means that they made their own body stop working.
  - People die in different ways - from cancer, heart attacks, car accidents, or maybe old age. When somebody dies by suicide it means that they made themselves die. Often this is because they had an illness in their brain and didn’t think anyone could help them.
  - Sometimes a person’s thought process can become distorted. They chose suicide because they cannot think clearly and cannot see other options to end their pain.
- **What you choose to focus on dictates how you feel.** When you are feeling happy, it is likely because you are thinking about the things in your life that make you happy. Maybe it is almost the weekend, it’s sunny outside, or you are looking forward to dinner with your children. Likewise, if you focus on the negatives in any of these situations – you’re stuck in traffic on a Friday afternoon, it is too hot outside, or your children tend to bicker at the end of the day – you are more likely to be in a bad mood. The circumstances are the same, but your perspective is different because of your positive or negative focus. When you have little control over the situation, like being in the summer heat, try making room for both the positives and negatives; accept that you are hot and there is not much you can do about it, then look for the positives in the situation. Mindfulness exercises may help in learning to be more aware of your thoughts and surroundings.
- **Your words and language patterns affect your emotions.** All words have different emotional states associated with them. For example, a word as simple as the modifier “too” generally implies something is undesirable. You may say things like, “I’m too tired” or “This is too hard,” and you will start to believe yourself. Using the words “never” and “always” can also box you into a corner. Saying things like “I’ll never get over this” or “I’m always going to feel depressed” will make it that much harder to make a change. It’s like that saying by Henry Ford, “Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t, you’re right.” Being mindful of your vocabulary, statements, phrases, and metaphors can help manage your emotional state. Try altering your statements to be more positive.





The truth is you can feel any emotion by actively deciding you want to feel it. It doesn't always seem that easy, but just being aware of your emotions is a good place to start.

Four techniques for mastering negative feelings are discussed below, but only the last is truly effective:

1. **Avoidance** means evading situations that could potentially lead to negative feelings. For example, you may avoid taking risks or approaching a stranger because you fear failure or rejection. You may also avoid experiencing your negative feelings by self-medicating with drugs, alcohol, or food. We have all avoided negative situations at some point in our lives, no matter how big or small.
2. **Denial** is disassociating from the negative feeling by saying things like, "It's not that bad." The problem with this approach is that by ignoring your feelings they tend to increase and intensify until you do address them.
3. **Competition** is a way for you to identify with your negative feelings so that you feel unique. You may catch yourself thinking or even saying, "You think you've got it bad? Well wait until you hear my story..."
4. **Learning and using** is the positive approach to mastering your negative feelings. This is a very broad solution, but ultimately you want to learn from your negative emotions and find ways to use them to your advantage. A key piece of mastering your feelings is understanding how each feeling serves you. Your negative emotions are not necessarily bad when you consider that they are an indication that something is wrong. In many instances, negative feelings are a "call to action", a chance for you to make a change, therefore let's call these negative emotions "action signals."

By changing the language and meaning of negative feelings to "action signals" your feelings can be your guide. By identifying the message of each action signal, we can use our emotions to make changes for the better. Here are some examples of action signals and what they could mean:

- **Discomfort** (includes boredom, impatience, unease, embarrassment). Your subconscious is telling you that you can be or do more. The message may be that you need to change your perception of or actions toward the situation.
- **Fear** (includes concern, anxiety, terror). There is the anticipation that something unpleasant is going to happen soon. The message of anticipation requires preparation, and the anxiety aspect gives you the added push to prepare.
- **Frustration**. You may have the subconscious belief that you could be doing better than you currently are. The solution is within your grasp, but the current method isn't working. The message is that you may need to be more flexible with your approach or perhaps even change it entirely.
- **Disappointment** (includes feeling sad or defeated). Something or someone didn't live up to your expectations. Disappointment is two-fold because you can be disappointed in others or disappointed in yourself. Regardless of who you are disappointed in, the message may be to shift your expectations to make them more appropriate for the given situation.
- **Overload** (includes depression, helplessness, feeling overwhelmed). You suddenly find yourself faced with too many responsibilities, whether welcomed or not. Feeling overwhelmed is common in grief if you feel like there is no empowering meaning and your life is being directed by forces outside of your control. The message is that you must re-evaluate or remind yourself what is most important to you. Focus on what you can control and try to find meaning.
- **Loneliness**. Feeling both physically and emotionally alone. After a death, it is common to feel lonely because





your loved one is no longer with you. It is also common to feel lonely because no one at home/school/work/ etc. may fully understand how you feel or what you are going through. The message may be to spend time with people who understand what you're feeling, whether it is friends, family, or in a support group such as offered by Bo's Place.

These frameworks apply to children as well as adults, but might be harder for young children to understand. Still, children who have a vocabulary for feelings like these action signals are better able to express their emotions using language rather than behavior (like throwing a toy across the room in frustration). With younger children, you can begin by promoting expression of feelings in age-appropriate ways. Using language not only allows them to feel respected and understood, but it can also help them soothe themselves and better manage their emotions. As their language skills develop, younger children will be better able to identify and label their own feelings. Helping your child find appropriate ways to express their emotions will promote self-confidence and self-control.

Remember, these negative feelings/action signals can be the root of overarching emotions such as sadness or anger, and identifying your emotions is the first step in mastering them. For more information on children's behavior and emotions, see our "A Child's Behavior is Like an Iceberg" handout.

*This handout was primarily modeled after constructs in Tony Robbins's Awaken the Giant Within. Although this book it is not specific to grief, you may enjoy it if you are seeking further reading on this topic.*

### Further Reading:

- *Healing through the Dark Emotions* by Miriam Greenspan
- *Samantha Jane's Missing Smile* by Julie Kaplow
- *Visiting Feelings* by Lauren Rubenstein
- *The Way I Feel* by Janan Cain

### References:

- Reinsberg, K. (2009, April 19). How to Support Your Child's Social-Emotional Development. Retrieved July 27, 2015, from <http://www.abilitypath.org/areas-of-development/social--emotional/supporting-social-emotional-development.html?referrer=https://www.google.com/>
- Robbins, T. (n.d.) 1992. *Awaken the Giant Within*. New York, New York: Free Press.

