



## How to Figure out What You're Feeling

Remember how easily your emotions came when you were a child? You rolled around on the floor when you laughed and you never worried about whether you looked silly.

When you fell and skinned your knee, you wailed loudly and cried hot tears. You screamed in anger when your brother threw your favorite doll in the mud.

Most of the time, you never questioned whether these emotions made sense—you just expressed what you felt.

Then you began to grow up. You learned how to tone down your outbursts and stifle your giggles. When you slammed a drawer on your finger, you shook off the pain and swallowed your tears. Instead of hitting your brother, you ignored his teasing and simply walked away.

Some of this was necessary. In the adult world, you can't always show everything you feel. But sometimes, you end up pushing your emotions away too far.

### Staying in control

Maybe you try hard to stay “in control” and never show what you feel. So when you get angry at your boss, you don't say anything.

You may not be able to remember the last time you cried. A lot of days, you probably don't feel anything except stressed or tired, neither of which are emotions.

But not thinking about feelings doesn't mean you don't have them. Emotions are normal. If you refuse to acknowledge them, you have to figure out how to keep them away. So instead of dealing with your feelings, you grab something to eat and try to forget about how you feel.

Of course, it's not practical to eliminate all restraint when showing your feelings. Social etiquette dictates that you can't cry in the middle of a staff meeting or slam your desk drawers when you get angry. But to stop your patterns of emotional eating, you can't keep shoving your feelings away.

To stop these eating patterns, you may have to take the lid off your buried emotions. Sometimes exploring your emotions may help you uncover thoughts and experiences you'd forgotten about.

As you rediscover positive feelings like joy, relief, or peace, you will also find the courage to face emotions that feel a little uncomfortable.

### Identifying your feelings

When you don't pay much attention to your feelings, it's easy to forget how to describe your emotions. Maybe you can only think of a few words such as angry, depressed, or happy.

But within each of these categories lies an enormous range of descriptive words that will capture your feelings more accurately. Being precise makes identifying your emotions even more powerful.

Lots of emotions vary in their intensity, from mild feelings such as “upset” to major responses such as “horrified.” Look at the difference between feeling explosive, furious, or anguished compared to feeling irritated or frustrated.

### Emotions have layers

Think of any recent life situations that prompted an emotional response. Perhaps you wish you could have handled something better in the past. Maybe you are facing an event or discussion you aren't looking forward to.

Now think about the specific feelings you're having or did have with this situation. Be as specific as possible about what you feel. As you dig deeper, you may uncover many emotions besides the ones that initially show up.

For example, if you are feeling angry, decide whether you are livid, bitter, or overwhelmed. Maybe your feelings are less intense such as annoyed, irritated, or grouchy.

Or suppose you are depressed over a relationship break-up. In addition to feeling down, tearful, or sad, look for other words that fit. Maybe you also feel lonely, disappointed, or abandoned.

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Identifying your emotions brings them out into the open. And once you see the whole picture, you aren't as likely to reach for food to cover up what you feel.

You don't even have to write the words down to be able to identify your feelings. You can just think them or even say them to your steering wheel as you drive.

### **I feel, because...**

As you work on identifying your emotions, use the phrase, "I feel, because..." to create a list of your emotions. Start by labeling a specific feeling, then add a few words or a sentence that describes why you have that emotion.

To practice this, take a mental sweep of your present situation and describe your thoughts about life in general. Consider all of the areas that currently affect you, including positive, happy ones as well as issues that are difficult or challenging.

#### *I feel... Because...*

Happy	my three children are wonderful
Frustrated	I can't seem to get caught up
Stressed	Lots of pressure at work
Worried	My company is doing layoffs
Thrilled	I love my new house
Contented	I have a great husband

### **The lost promotion**

Over the past year, Cheryl had worked hard at her job, putting in lots of overtime and skipping lunches to meet deadlines and finish reports.

But when a promotion opportunity came up, her boss announced the position had been given to Karen, another employee who hadn't put in the extensive work that Cheryl had.

After months of working toward this promotion, Cheryl was furious that she didn't get rewarded or appreciated for her efforts.

Normally, this would have sent her toward an eating binge of fast foods and cheesecake. But this time, she sat down and wrote a list of her emotions.

#### *I feel... Because...*

Outraged	Karen got the promotion, not me
Resentful	She's so manipulative
Humiliated	Friends were sure I'd get it
Trapped	Job feels dead-end now
Furious	I worked so hard for nothing
Disgusted	Boss plays favorites
Worn out	I'm fighting to get ahead
Bitter	Life isn't fair

Completing her list helped Cheryl recognize that her feelings were appropriate considering the situation. So she decided to look for ways to deal with her anger and frustration.

First she went to her exercise class and worked off some of her tension. Later that evening, she called a friend and brainstormed ways she could handle her current job while exploring other work options.

Then she took a relaxing bath and went to bed, exhausted but proud of the fact she hadn't slipped into her old pattern of eating to cope with her anger.

### **Taking back your power**

When you successfully identify your feelings, you find the power to change your response. Giving in to a double cheeseburger might have made Cheryl feel better for the moment, but it wouldn't have solved the problem.

By postponing the temptation to shove her anger down with food, she was able to process her feelings and recognize better ways to handle them.

Sometimes your original response will shift as you write down your feelings. When you face a situation that makes you want to immediately send out for pizza or shove a bag of chips into your mouth, postpone eating until you've figured out what you feel.

In your efforts to stop your emotional eating patterns, you can use the exercise "I feel... because..." to dilute the intensity of your feelings and give yourself time to come up with a better solution.

For additional help with Identifying Emotions, see the Diet Coach Café Worksheet, "What do I feel?"