

3.5 Feel Your Emotions

Don't suppress emotions; allow yourself to fully experience and process them.

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Few of us are comfortable truly feeling our emotions. We find ways to ignore them, distract ourselves from them, or displace them. In many Western cultures, the idea that boys don't cry is still prevalent, which can generate the belief among men that suppressing emotions is a positive thing to do. Even those of us who aren't explicitly told to suppress our emotions grow up emulating our parents and other adults around us. If they deny their emotional reality, we internalize the idea that we need to do the same.

Unfortunately, suppressing emotions can lead to unexplained low moods and a sense of disconnection or even depression. If we lack an appreciation of our inner world, we may adopt behaviors to actively avoid our emotions. This can make us prone to negative behavior such as outbursts of anger or social withdrawal, emotional eating, or excessive social media use. All these behaviors are rooted in an effort to numb our feelings or distract ourselves from them.

Emotions are critical to living a full life, so we need to feel them and learn to understand what they mean to us. According to the Nonviolent Communication approach, our emotions are a guide to discovering and accessing our unmet needs (see Tool 2.1).

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- Our emotions represent a map of our inner world. If we can't feel them, we will find it difficult to navigate our internal landscape.
- Feeling and processing suppressed emotions can have a powerful therapeutic impact.

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- Some emotions can seem too painful or scary to feel.
- Working with your emotions can take a lot of time and effort.

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To practice this tool, set yourself up in a situation where you won't be disturbed and have time to connect with your internal world. This could be seated meditation, a walk in nature, or somewhere else you feel comfortable. Allow yourself to feel whatever you feel, no matter how unexpected. If something upsets you, do not seek to hide it or distract yourself from it—simply feel it. Becoming aware of the sensations in your body can help here, as the wisdom of the body is a major key to accessing feelings.

Another way to connect with this tool could be with the assistance of a supportive friend. When choosing friends to explore this tool with, make sure you select those who are able to listen and offer space. Most people are in the habit of offering advice or criticism; when you're focused on feeling your emotions, you'll be in an unusually open, sensitive state and may experience this kind of feedback as hurtful. If you don't have any friends you trust to support you in this process or desire the support of someone more committed and experienced, you may want to explore it during therapy

(see Tool 3.1).

Whichever methods you choose will likely require practice; you may need to try many times before you're able to actually sit with your feelings and experience them fully. If what you're feeling is particularly painful, you may be tempted to stop the process and bottle up the emotion. If you can be patient, however, and fully experience whatever arises, it will gradually dissipate, and you'll likely feel a tremendous sense of relief.

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Psychological tools for dealing with difficult emotions: insighttimer.com/adrianaspataru/guided-meditations/dealing-with-the-difficult-the-hint-meditation.
