

Permission to Feel:

Unlocking the Power of Emotions to Help Our Kids, Ourselves, and Our Society Thrive

Marc Brackett, Ph.D.

(Summary by C.Bibby)

Part II.

Chapter 4: R(ecognize)

A. Emotions have **two core properties** or dimensions: *energy & pleasantness*.

B. The primary emotional message we interpret from reading pp's emotions, strangers or intimates alike, is to either approach or avoid or freeze.

C. Definitions

attribution bias: attributing a feeling (or reason for a feeling) based only on our experience, our own emotional state, or solely on so's bx.

gender stereotypes, racial implicit bias: attitudes tt affect our actions & decisions (in an unconscious manner).

appraisal theory: Many emotions have universal, underlying themes, but their individual causes vary from person to person.

Each emotion has what psychologist Richard Lazarus termed a "core relational theme" – a meaning.

D. Recommendations

1. Use Mood Meter often.
2. Practice noticing a change in one's own thoughts, energy, or body or in someone else's facial expression, body language, or voice.
3. Increase your awareness of stereotypes & implicit biases we hold (w/re: to gender, race, class) to understand how they impact how you read emotions.
4. Be open to the idea that you may mis-read someone's emotion (and then course-correct).

Chapter 5: U(nderstanding)

A. This is finding the “Why?” of any emotion.

The *core skill is the search* for the underlying theme (deeper than the words) or possible cause that fuels the emotion...As we listen, we’re looking for a meaning that goes deeper than the words being said (uncover the deepest of feelings)...Behavior alone is a clue to the riddle, not an answer.

Understanding is where the science of emotion becomes *a detective story*. When trying to understand disruptive behavior, it helps us address the underlying disease vs. the surface symptoms.

B. Subskills.

1. develop *pattern recognition* of “whys” over time & different situations to better understand the current situation.
2. sharpen *perspective-taking skills*
3. sharpen storytelling ability

C. Psycho-physics

“Pain isn’t pretty.” The refusal to acknowledge unhappy childhood emotion, or the inability to deal w/it, gets handed down from one generation to the next. (p.89)

Happiness facilitates creativity and social bonds. But paradoxical to what we’ve been taught, *the constant pursuit of happiness can be self-defeating*. Research show that *the more we value happiness, the more likely we are to feel disappointed*. Thus, although happiness is often seen as highly desirable, we need to distinguish bw the different kinds of happiness. Not all of its forms are beneficial for all purposes in life and in every situation (p95).

D. Technique

1. Ask the right questions (p.92):
 - What just happened? What was I doing before this happened?
 - What might have caused my feelings or reaction?
 - What happened this morning, or last night, that might be involved in this?
 - What has happened before w/this person that might be connects? (If your emotion has to do w/a rx.)
 - What memories do I have about this situation or place?
 - What might I need right now that I’m not getting? (Bibby)

2. Listen & absorb the answers w/o judging them or challenging them.
3. Let them sink in, process and then determine next questions.
4. Ask more questions.
5. Be mindful of attribution bias and appraisal theory that can cloud our seeing others clearly.

It begins w/being an emotion scientist, not a judge. If you aren't asking questions, you haven't acquired the skill yet. If you aren't listening to the answers, you aren't using the skills.

6. Don't wait too long to ID feelings lest they bc daunting.
7. Don't talk exclusively about uncomfortable feelings. Remember that ALL emotions are information.

E. Recommendations.

1. Help cts create authorship of their own lives. Help them take control of their own emotional destinies, w/o ignoring or silencing what is going on inside.
2. Help cts differentiate bw:
 - a) anxiety: worry about future uncertainty & our inability to control what will happen to us
fear: the palpable sense of a danger that lies just ahead & will eventually strike at us
pressure: you perceive force from the outside that tells us st important is at stake, depending upon our performance
stress: a response to too many demand & not enough resources (actual, threatened or *perceived*, Bibby).
 - b) anger: a response to unfair treatment or an injustice; and
disappointment: an unmet expectation;
 - c) jealousy: a form of fear, of losing so important or an important person's attention.
envy: coveting st that someone else possesses that is not ours.
 - d) **Joy** *feels* energetic & contentment *feels* calm, & joy is *caused by* a sense of getting what one wants & contentment is *caused by* a sense of completeness (not wanting or needing anything). Joy is something we strive for (think the pursuit of happiness). **Contentment**, however, is more a state of psychological balance, not something we actively pursue – we feel contentment when we cherish the present moment (p.95).

Chapter 6: L(abeling)

“If you can name it, you can tame it.”

- A.** Neuroscience brain-imaging research confirms: “if you can name it, you can tame it.” *Labeling an emotion is itself a form of regulation.* Labeling is linked to lower activation of the amygdala.

Children who can accurately label their feelings enjoy more positive social interactions than kids who cannot, who experience more learning & behavioral pxs.

This skill counters our cultural emotional illiteracy / vocabulary gap.

B. Technique.

1. Use Mood Meter.
2. Be specific as possible by using emotional granularity: adaptive value of putting feelings into words w/ high degree of complexity that mirrors our inner lives; it’s the opposite of clumping clumpers: the maladaptive value of using only a few emotional words.). Every possible term bcs a moment to pause for self-reflection: Am I feeling it *this* strongly or perhaps not quite so extreme?

A. 4 Main Things Labeling Does:

- a. legitimizes & organizes our experiences, creates a mental model of the word; it helps us (and others) better understand our experiences;
- b. it helps us & others to meet our needs (including managing our feelings);
- c. meet the needs of others (including managing others’ feelings);
- d. connects us to the rest of the world.

B. Psycho-physics.

- a. Feelings can be uncomfortable but they should alarm us. We experience uncomfortable feelings more deeply than comfortable emotions bc they slow our processing down bc they indicate a problem.
- b. Stress in and of itself isn’t bad for us; it can be adaptively useful. The *determining factors are whether it helps or hurts is its duration & intensity.*

C. Definitions

- Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: the language we speak determines our worldview & even how our minds work.
- schadenfreude: happiness or satisfaction caused by so else's misfortune
- alexithymia: difficulty recognizing & expressing emotions

Chapter 7: E(xpress)

“The currency of rxs is emotional expression.” p.126.

A. When we express our emotions, we're saying:

Here's what I feel & why.
Here's what I want to happen next.
Here's what I need from you right now.
It's probably as intimate as we'll ever be.

B. It's good for us:

drops in MD visits;
increases in immune fx;
lower BP;
long-term improvement in mood;
reduction in stress;
higher grades for college students;
less absenteeism at work;

C. It *connects us* to others. Labelling our *positive* emotions & making them known to pp who are closest to us is equally important. It's part of what keeps us close. In a sense, expressing emotions is like a transaction bw pp. You express, and I react. *The currency of rxs is emotional expression.*

D. Expression is generally a co-skill. If the listener doesn't do her or his part, it's unlikely that anything useful will come of it (not sure if I totally agree w/this).

Heal our national wounds. In truth, many of the controversies tt dominate the news have their roots in differences in how we experience & express our feelings. p.132

- E. Not expressing harms us. Keeping secrets can actually make pp ill or cause a *continuous pain that lingers on*. We don't need to fix or hide what we feel.
- F. BUT that doesn't mean there are NO limits of what emotions we express. Part of the (Regulating) task is discerning what, when, how and with whom we share.
- G. Permission to feel can st mean expressing an emotion we don't necessarily feel – it's not being dishonest but rather finding a way of communicating that takes other considerations into account.
- H. Gender differences: Women express themselves more overall, particularly pos. emotions & also internalize negative ones such as sadness & anxiety more than men do. Men, on the other hand, tend to express higher levels of aggression & anger than women. But BP & cortisol release are higher in men – indicating that they likely feel as much as women but keep more pent up inside p.132 (Bibby theory: This is why men die sooner than women.). Women are more apt to cry w/family or friends. Men tend to do it alone. Women report higher empathy than men.

I. Definitions

display rules: unspoken rules for emotional expression; often direct the best way to express what other's feel & how they'll likely respond so as we can modify our own behavior accordingly.

emotional labor: the effort required to manage our publicly visible facial & bodily display of emotions (e.g. facial display, posture, behaviors) (p.129).

display rules: the unwritten but widely agreed-upon guidelines for how, where, when & in whose presence we may express our feelings.

anger privilege: the unwritten but widely agreed-upon guidelines for how, where, when & in whose presence we may express our feelings.

authenticity & modified authenticity: Permission to feel can sts mean expressing an emotion we don't necessarily feel – it's not being dishonest but rather finding a way of communicating that takes other considerations into account.

J. Recommendations

1. Practice expressing a variety of emotions (*granulation*).
2. Balance the pros & cons of saying certain things to certain pp, at certain times, in certain places.
Consider: What? With whom? How much? When? Where?

Chapter 8: R(egulate)

“The real test of emotion skills isn’t while reading on the beach; it’s when someone kicks sand in your face!” (chapt3)

“Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” Mike Tyson (chap.8)

A. **Emotional regulation**: the process by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience & express them. The **goal** is to respond in helpful, proportionate ways.

Co-regulation: regulating one’s own emotions while also navigating another’s emotions & those emotion’s impact on our own (Bibby)

Regulation is not:

- not* feeling;
- exerting tight control over feelings;
- banishing ed uncomfortable emotions;

B. 5 Broad Categories of Skills.

1. **Mindful breathing.**

Calm the body & mind so we can be fully present & less reactive or o.whelmed by what’s happening around us. We hit the brake on the activation of our stress response system by decreasing our heart rate. We regain balance and control bc the area of the brain in charge shifts from the brain stem to the motor cortex; resets the autonomic (excitatory) NS by activating the parasympathetic NS.

Helpful Tips:

- Remove distractions.
- Use good posture.
- Close your eyes.
- Breath through your nose instead of mouth.
- Place a hand on a spot where you feel the breath
- Count your breaths.
- Repeat a calming phrase w/each breath (e.g. in/out, deep/slow, calm/ease).
- Gently return to your breath if distracted.
- Start small (e.g. 1 minute), PRACTICE and build on that.

2. Forward-looking strategies.

We *anticipate* something will cause an unwanted emotion & either *steer clear* of it or *modify* our physical (or mental) environment. When it's impossible to avert the future completely, we can still anticipate and change it.

Avoidance.

Helpful but don't rely on it when it will create more problems (e.g. everything in moderation).

Expectation management. (Bibby)

Plan a future pleasurable reward.

Tips: Requires some self-awareness / self-knowledge (re: you own R-U-L)
 Look for alternative needs to be addressed (e.g. skill building, assertiveness).

3. Attention-shifting strategies.

Tempering the impact of emotion by diverting our attention away from its source.

Examples: looking away, turning on/off the TV, walking away from a stressful encounter; repeated a positive phrase to ourselves, procrastination, food)

Self-talk: Diverting our attention with kind & empathetic comments, reality-checks, perspective-giving.

It's tough bc our inborn negativity bias (our brains remember negative events better than positive ones; "The brain is like teflon when it comes to positive & velcro for negative ones."[Bibby]) & the negative talk we picked up from our parents/peers leads to negative self-talk.

We can't just drop it – we need to replace it. Harsh self-criticisms activates the sympathetic nervous sx (fight/flight) & elevates stress hormones. Self-compassion triggers the mammalian caregiving sys & hormones of affiliation & love such as oxytocin.

Tip: Use third-person sentences, as if comforting a distressed friend. It helps give a tiny bit of psychological distance from your experiences, which can be useful for regulation.

4. Cognitive-reframing strategies.

Analyze what's triggering our emotions & then find a new way of seeing it – essentially, transforming our perception of reality as a way of mastering it.

We consciously choose to view a situation in a way that generates the least negative emotion in us or we attempt to take the perspective of the person who is activating you & assume the best intention.

fMRI: reappraisal significantly dampens activity in the amygdala.

Research: Students asked to think of pretest anxiety as beneficial performed better on examines than control group.

BUT! Don't over-use if there's a long-term solution that needs to be worked on.

5. **Meta-Moments.**

The absolute BEST tool for responding instead of reacting. In simplest terms, it's a pause. The Meta-Moment involves hitting the brakes & stepping out of time. We call it meta bc it's a moment about a moment. We often associate it w/counting 1-10 or taking deep breaths. Anything to give ourselves a little room to maneuver & deactivate.

Ask questions:

“How have I handled situations like this in the past?

What would my *Best Self* do right now?

Visualizing our *Best Self* redirects your attention away from the “trigger” & toward your values. This helps us to choose a helpful regulation strategy.

Steps:

1. Sense the shift. You are activated, emotionally or physically.
2. Stop or pause! Create the space before you respond.
3. See your best self. Think of your *best self* adjectives in vivid detail, your reputation.
4. Strategize & act. Use your RULER skills & *lean into your best self*.

This process never ends. “We’ll never stop having to work at being our best selves. But the payoff is worth it: better health, decision making, relationships, better everything.”

Tips: May have to chill first so you can think rationally.

Know your own personal, regular go-to strategies so they're v. familiar & easier to access.

Good brainpower depends on a good diet, exercise & sleep (as does reduced anxiety, depression).

Take care of you by doing things YOU love.

Practice mindful breathing, which is perhaps the ultimate prevention strategy.

5. Attend to your emotional reserves (“body budget”) & re-fuel as needed.

C. Recommendations

As you learn these, give yourself permission to learn/fail/grow.

Forgive yourself & others and extend grace as you learn.