

ASSERTIVE SELF-DEFINING SKILLS

Expressing Emotions

One way of asserting ourselves is by expressing what we feel. This may be a surprise, since many associate it with actions and getting something that we want. Expressing emotions is easier for many women because it was reinforced as part of being female. Males often have more trouble expressing emotions because they were discouraged from a young age, especially with other males. However, these generalizations are not true for everyone.

Anger can be a troublesome emotion for both genders. Traditional female socialization often discouraged expressing anger, so it may feel uncomfortable to do so. Males receive more permission to show anger, but may have learned to do it in dominating or aggressive ways. All genders benefit from expressing assertive anger; it empowers us to stand up for ourselves.

It is not appropriate to express feelings when someone is abusing you. Depending upon the emotion, it could increase your emotional vulnerability or in the case of anger, increase your danger. They generally don't value how you feel but only feel entitled to their behavior.

Steps for expressing emotions:

1. Begin with an "I" statement, such as "I feel . . ."

Learn not to say, "you make me feel." This is often where expressing negative feelings goes wrong. That is a blaming statement and tends to reduce constructive discussion. Even when someone has wronged you, how you feel depends upon how you interpret it. Example: being late for lunch could elicit anger, disappointment, concern, or fear, depending upon how the waiting person thinks about it.

2. Name your emotion.

For instance, glad, sad, mad, scared, disappointed, frustrated. If needed, look online for an emotions chart to improve your ability to identify emotions.

3. Describe the reason you feel that emotion.

This helps to promote understanding. That way, if you've misunderstood something, that is identified. Also, the person can more easily understand what they are responsible for.

4. Optional: You can describe what you would like to do because of your feelings.

For instance, "I feel like walking out of here" or "I feel like hugging and kissing you."

Putting it together: “I feel sad because you didn’t remember my birthday.” or “I feel like crying because you forgot my birthday.”

Summary of Steps:

EXPRESSING FEELINGS

1. Begin with “I feel”.
2. Express the feeling that is appropriate.
3. Briefly describe the reason you feel that way.
4. Optional feeling statement: describe what you would like to do because of your feelings; “I feel like . . .”.

Expressing Feelings Practice: Write your responses in the spaces provided.

A. You tried out for softball and didn’t make the team. Tell your friend how you feel.

B. You’ve been dating someone for several months and would like to continue. They have just told you that the relationship is over for them.

C. Your partner has forgotten your anniversary.

D. You gave a lot of time to a work project and have received positive feedback from everyone but your supervisor.

E. A friend wants to drive home after they drank enough to exceed the limit on blood alcohol level.

F. Your partner tells you that you look great in your new outfit.

G. Your long-time pet is diagnosed with a cancerous tumor. Express to your partner or friend how you feel.

H. You are trying to watch your intake of sweets. Your mother is insisting that you try her chocolate cake after you've explained you're not eating sweets right now.

Difficult Situations for You: Think about times you could have used this skill in the past and write how you would change the interaction now.

Expressing Empathy

Expressing empathy is a powerful way to connect with others. It demonstrates you understand or that you are trying to understand their point of view. This promotes their feeling heard by you and increases their willingness to continue sharing.

It's important to know that you do not have to share the person's perspective to give them empathy. That depends upon the situation. Demonstrating understanding and connection is the goal here. You can offer your viewpoint after empathy when that feels appropriate.

Steps for expressing empathy:

1. Listen to the other person's situation or problem.

Make your first response, no response. When we're leaping ahead to what we want to say, we're not good listeners. This increases the chances that the person won't feel heard or that you will misunderstand.

2. Pick out what you think the other person's feeling is.

For instance, glad, sad, mad, scared, frustrated, etc. If needed, find an emotions chart to help you develop a better emotional vocabulary.

3. Pick out the possible reason for their feelings.

4. Tentatively reflect the feelings and reason back to the person. Use words such as "It sounds like you're feeling ___ because of ___." or "I'm wondering if you're feeling . . ."

It is important to be tentative because no matter how sensitive we may be, we sometimes are wrong about our perceptions. Being tentative avoids appearing to tell the person how they feel as well.

Putting it together: It sounds like you're feeling sad because I haven't remembered your birthday.

Summary of Steps:

EXPRESSING EMPATHY

1. Listen.
2. Pick out what you think the feeling(s) is.
3. Pick out the possible reason for the feeling.
4. Tentatively reflect the feeling and reason back (it sounds like. . .)

Expressing Empathy Practice: Write your responses in the spaces provided.

- A. Your partner says, “I don’t want to go home to dinner every Sunday, but I guess mother would miss me if I didn’t.”

- B. Your friend says, “I did it! I went to the job interview and they hired me on the spot!”

- C. Your friend says, “I don’t think I’ll ever get done with this degree. What’s the use of trying? There aren’t that many jobs available, anyway.”

- D. Your friend says, “My eight-year-old came home two hours late. I called everywhere and was frantic. I feel bad that I only showed my anger and not my concern for her.”

- E. Your partner comes home and says, “I’m sick of getting no appreciation at work! They don’t know what they’re doing there and they expect me to fix everything.”

- F. Your friend says, “I took my car in for an oil change and two hours later, the mechanic hands me a bill for \$350! I couldn’t believe it!”

Empathy Practice, continued

G. A friend recently separated from their abusive partner. They say, “I don’t think I can handle everything on my own. The kids are really upset and won’t listen to me, and my partner is not paying child support.”

H. Your friend who has a disability says, “I can’t work very many hours, I can’t drive anymore, and I don’t have energy for the kids. I’m just no good for anything.”

Difficult Situations for You: Think about times you could have used this skill in the past and write how you would change the interaction now.

Beliefs Permitting Expressing Emotions and Empathy

Look over the following beliefs and work with any you have trouble with. Writing them several times, posting them on a mirror, asking someone to tell you the belief are all valuable ways of incorporating them into your belief system.

- If others do not agree with what I feel, I must be wrong or crazy. *I value my emotions regardless of whether others agree and examine why I feel them.*
- I should respect the views of others and keep my opinions and emotional responses to myself. *I have the right to express my emotions and opinions.*
- I shouldn’t take up others’ valuable time with my problems. *I deserve to be listened to and receive help.*
- It’s not feminine to express anger or disappointment. OR It’s not masculine to show I feel hurt or sad. *My emotions are not right or wrong; they are part of being a human being.*

It takes time and practice to retrain our brains. See the Assertive Beliefs handout from my blog at <https://madisonmentalhealthcounselor.com/assertive-beliefs-2> for more information.