

## **Smarter Feelings: Training your EQ**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

Emotional Intelligence is a skill set that allows you to be aware of and in control of one's own emotions. It also allows you to express those emotions, and handle interpersonal relationships empathetically.

These skills have shown to be incredibly valuable, and result in tangible improvements in work outcomes. For instance, having a higher emotional intelligence score is positively correlated with company rank, merit raises, ratings of interpersonal facilitation, affect and attitude in the work place. Teaching this skill to students results in higher test scores. One study revealed that for every point you increase your EQ score, you will make on average \$1300.00 more a year in salary. In short, people with high emotional intelligence skills are happier and more successful.

#### **EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE: THE BASICS**

Emotional intelligence is comprised of four main skills: self-awareness, emotional control, empathy and communications skills.

Before we can dive in to something as complex as communication skills, we need to be aware of our own emotions. We need to talk about them, and learn to use a complex vocabulary for them. We aren't just happy- we are feeling excited, content, satisfied, indulged or accomplished. We aren't just sad- we are lonely, tired, wound, etc. Adding that complexity to our internal vocabulary allows us to understand those emotions better, and in turn moderate and react better to them.

The next step is practicing that moderation. Once we've named that emotion, and frankly by the process of thinking about it, we are better able to react to it in an appropriate way. We can't control our emotions. However, you can control how you react to your emotions. This process is a large part of mindfulness.

The next skill is empathy. When we understand these emotions in ourselves, we then learn to extend that grace to others. If you are not naturally empathetic, you can be taught to accurately identify emotions in others. I think it's important to note that empathy is something that needs to be practiced with emotional safety. In my experience, a lot of veterinarians are naturally empathetic. However, I find many veterinarians take on too much of the burden of others emotions. Understanding someone else's feelings does not mean you have to take them on as your own.

The final skill in emotional intelligence is social skills- specifically listening and communication skills. Communication skills are really key to so much, but truthfully, until you have done all the background work of understanding and controlling your own emotions, you will have trouble as an effective communicator.

#### **SELF AWARENESS**

Self-awareness is a difficult process. It can be difficult to face that mirror inward and really get to the heart of who you are as a person. However, we can't really move forward until we understand ourselves.

#### **Take Time to Reflect**

Just like all skills, this takes practice. Make some time in your daily schedule to reflect. Mindful meditation is how we build "the observer" in our minds. Too much of our lives is spent in self critique. Our "inner critics" can be a loud and wholly unhelpful voice. In this practice, we want to be aware of our body and mind. Let your emotions float to the surface. Examine them. Don't judge them! Just see them for what they are, and then let them float away. If you need help getting this process started there are an abundance of excellent meditation programs out there. Headspace.com is a popular choice.

#### **Work on Your Emotional Vocabulary**

To really understand and express the complexity of emotions, we need to work on our emotional vocabulary. Often at the start of this process, when asked about an emotion, we will default to one of the five basic emotions: happy, sad, angry, shame and fear. However, things are always more complicated

than that. In his book *A Practical Guide to Making Friends with Your Emotions and Raising Your EQ*, Ian Tuhovsky walks through an exercise of categorizing our emotions by activation (low vs. high), enjoyment (pleasant vs unpleasant) and affect (positive and negative). This exercise can be a great way to work through the complexity of emotions.

### **Don't Shun Negative Emotions**

All humans suffer. That's just part of life. Chasing constant unwavering happiness is a fool's errand. Everyone is going to have some down moments. That's normal! What we want to focus on is learning to recognize and process, so we don't have to sit with our negative emotions for too long.

### **Let Go of Judgement**

You cannot control your emotions. You can only seek to understand them and their origins, and work on how you react to them. It is far more productive thing to work on understanding them than sitting in judgement of yourself for having emotions or the emotions themselves.

### **Understand Your Core**

Through this reflection and journey we can begin to notice trends in ourselves. This can help lead us to our core. Your core is made up of your strengths, your weaknesses, your values and your triggers. A lifetime of experiences has shaped you in to the person you are. Get to know this person and you'll understand your reactions and modulate them better.

## **MODULATION**

### **Start from Balance**

You will have a much easier time modulating and controlling your emotions if you come from a place of physical and mental wellbeing. This means taking care of the basics. Ask yourself some simple questions: Am I sleeping enough? Eating Healthy food? Have I had some water today? Have I been taking care of my personal hygiene? Am I moving enough? When is the last time I took some time for myself? When was my last vacation? When is the last time I did a hobby I enjoy?

### **Foster Optimism**

Optimism is a skill, one that can be trained. Being more optimistic lets us banish negative rumination, and problem solve faster. Human beings are evolutionarily wired to focus on the negative, but we can fight this! One way to start fostering optimism is by doing gratitude exercises like the Three Good Things exercises. Practicing them routinely will build the skill so you can summon it in the hard times when you really need it.

### **Take Yourself Out of the Moment**

There are several things you can do to re-engage your observer. When you need to do something to get the blood out of your amygdala and back in to your frontal lobe try any of these simple tricks:

- 1) Breathing exercise 1. Take focused breaths for one minute. As you breath make your exhalation take twice as long as your inhalation
- 2) Breathing exercise 2. Take focused breaths for one minute. As you do this, visualize a tiny molecule of oxygen as it enters your nose. Trace its journey all the way to the bottom corner of your lung. Observe it exchange with CO2 in your blood and then follow that CO2 molecule back out of your body.
- 3) Count. I find this particularly helpful for dealing with anger. Sometimes I'm too angry to breath. That's when I start with counting. I count in my head until I feel I have control again.

### **Visualization and Submodalities**

We all have moments in our lives that our difficult to process. We need to look at them though, in order to move on. One trick that can be helpful is by visualizing them, and then exerting control over that visualization. Start with the visualization. Giving our emotions form helps us deal with them more readily. Give your emotions a shape, a color, a temperature. Where do they sit in your body?

Now let's exert some control over them. Can you change the color? Can you grow or shrink their size? Can you change their temperature? Changing these submodalities can help us gain distance from negative emotions and process them.

## **EMPATHY**

There is a lot of confusion surrounding the word empathy, and its close relatives sympathy and compassion. According to Meriam Webster the definitions of these words are as follows:

- Sympathy: the act or capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings or interests of another
- Empathy: the ability to understand and the feelings of another but not necessarily share them
- Compassion: sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it

Empathy is an important skill, but it is one that needs to be processed with emotional safety. You do not have to feel someone else's emotions to understand them. I think of it this way: I see a woman wearing a black sweater. I know that's a sweater. I have worn a sweater like that one before. However, I don't have to put her sweater on to know what it feels like to wear a sweater. Use the skills you've cultivated as an observer to understand someone else's emotion.

## **Non-Verbal Cues**

Albert Mehrabian was a psychologist who studied communication. He is most famous for his "7%-38%-55% Rule", where he discovered when communicating feelings and attitudes, what is verbally expressed only accounts for 7% the impact. Tone of voice accounts for 38% of impact and gestures/facial expressions account for 55% of impact.

## **Listening Skills**

Listening is a difficult skill for many, and one that is under practiced. For those of us who are not natural listeners, practicing the strategies of empathic and reflexive listening can help us build the skill.

In empathetic listening, the listener identifies an emotion that the speaker has expressed, and states that emotion in a response. If a person has just explained how terrible traffic was, and how someone cut them off which nearly caused an accident, an empathic listener might reply "I hear how frustrating that was for you." This lets the speaker know that the listener is engaged and paying attention to the emotional content being shared. It also lets the speaker clarify should the listener have misidentified the speaker's emotion.

In reflexive listening, the listener paraphrases and repeats what was just told to them to show that they were listening. I use this frequently in an exam room to clarify why an animal is presenting. I let the owner talk for about 3 minutes and then I say something like "So if I am understanding you correctly, you are here because Fluffy is having problems with his back right leg. You feel like it's weak, and he has some pain at his hip." This demonstrates clearly that you were listening, and allows the two communicators to clarify any miscommunications.

## **COMMUNICATION**

Communication is at its base a desire to connect and share knowledge. In its most pure form, it involves two active participants who demonstrate mutual respect to each other. When tensions are running high, I fall back to the book. *Crucial Conversations* by Patterson et al. In it, the authors discuss the following strategy:

Facts → Story → Feelings → Action

Most people live in action. They are not paying attention to their feelings. Once you become aware of your feelings, and investigate them, you will discover the stories you have created based on the facts in your environment. Examine these stories carefully.

When examining your stories ask yourself why you feel the way you do. Keep asking why until you get the story back to the facts.

Pay attention for fictional characters in your stories. All too often we make convenient stories that feature victims and villains. Real people rarely adhere to these tropes.

When examining a story about another person, ask yourself why a rational, reasonable and decent person would do what they did.

Whenever possible, take your stories back to the facts. When you recognize you are telling yourself an unhelpful story, use those facts to build a better story.

### **Selected References and Suggested Reading**

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