



HOW TO FEEL - A SHORT GUIDE FOR MEN

“Can’t you just listen?!”

“I don’t need you to fix anything?!”

If you’ve ever hear these from your partner, you possibly came away feeling shitty. You were just trying to help! Isn’t fixing shit supposed to be what we do? So, what’s going on here?

How about this? Have you ever been asked ‘how are you feeling?’ or ‘what’s going on?’ by your partner and had NO IDEA how to respond? And then your partner pushes you for an answer, because they want to help you, to know where you’re at.

But because you can’t answer, or they’re not buying your ‘fine’, maybe they fear you’re holding out on them. So, they ask again and maybe you hold your breath slightly, your chest gets tight and you begin to feel trapped. And you clam up even more.

What's going on here?

What would it be like to be able to answer the question 'how do you feel?'. To not feel trapped in a corner or confused by the question, but to actually know, deep down, how you *feel*?

Our partners want to know us, want to connect with us. But they can only connect with us to the extent we're connected with ourselves. Kind of corny, but true. And when they feel that emotional connection, well then there's intimacy that might just follow.

So what makes it so hard for us guys to feel? Ever heard any of these, or had any of these phrases directed at you:

Man-up
Grow a pair
Don't be a pussy
Suck it up

They all mean the same thing: don't show your feelings. Put a lid on it. Because showing your feelings makes you less of a man, and that's a bad thing.

How about these, if you've heard these it means you're showing 'too much' emotion:

Fag
Pussy
Bitch
Sissy

These words evoke femininity, or put another way, a lack of masculinity. And that's a bad thing in much of mainstream society.

You don't even have to have been on the receiving end for these messages to be clear: showing emotions is a sign of weakness. And why the fuck would we expose ourselves to teasing, ridicule, bullying? In fact, teasing, ridicule and bullying are probably part of the reason why many of us learned that showing our vulnerability was dangerous.

What's the point of feeling anyway?

For centuries, men have been pressed into service to fight for their country. The better we can stuff our emotions, the better we can focus, the better we can fulfill orders, the better we can man the barricades, stand our ground and defend our loved ones. And whilst our many freedoms are the result of the sacrifices of many men, there's a cost beyond the lives lost on the battlefield. Suicide rates* are significantly higher (in some cases almost double) amongst US veterans than the general population. Why is this? Could it be the barrier that's reinforced over and over between a man and his ability to express his feelings? Our soldiers can be put under intense, prolonged stress, experiencing fear, sadness, anger. And our expectation is that they stuff it, handle it stoically and get on with the job.

Because there's a cost to stuffing our emotions. It causes stress in our system - our feelings don't just disappear, they get absorbed into our bodies unexpressed, undigested like a shitty meal. There's increasing scientific literature that shows the impact of stress on our physical and mental health.

Stuffed emotions can come out sideways too. If you crush an unopened beer can, the beer is going to find its way out, probably at high velocity. Maybe you find yourself lashing out in anger, and only afterwards thinking 'where the fuck did that come from?' It could be from these unidentified, unexplored emotions.

*https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/mentalhealth/suicide_prevention/data.asp

So, repressing our emotions can kill us can severely affect our health, our moods, our ability to do our jobs, maintain relationships.

And speaking of relationships, after all that's why we're here, the more comfortable we are with our emotions, the more comfortable we are with other people's emotions.

So, when we get good at knowing what we're feeling, we become better at supporting others in their emotional experiences. When your partner is upset, maybe she's crying, sad about something, instead of freezing up and feeling trapped, you'll be more able to relax, empathise and be there for her. She's going to feel seen and heard by you, accepted by you, cared for, and safe.

This applies to other important people in our lives: parents, children, siblings and friends.

So how do we do this feeling thing...

Our feelings are still there, they're part of us along with our hands and feet. In many of us they're just buried deep.

Let's name them first, starting with the basics. The general consensus is there are four basic emotions:

Happy 😄

Sad 😞

Fear 😨

Anger 😡

Of course there are varieties and combinations, like frustration, disgust, jealousy, but we'll start with the main four.

And to help you a bit more, here's what might be happening with your body when you're experiencing these emotions:

Happy: smiling, laughing, a pleasant warmth in the chest

Sad: a fullness in the face, especially behind the eyes and around the nose; looking downwards, slouched posture

Fear: butterflies in your belly, alertness to your surroundings, physically wanting to retreat or feeling actually stuck

Anger: tense jaw, heat in the chest, loud voice

Here's a simple technique to start getting in touch with your feelings.

1. When was the last time you felt each of the following emotions? It might be recently, or a long time ago. Whenever it was, write down the occasion e.g. *Anger: last week after arguing with my girlfriend; Happy: a year ago on vacation with my friends.*

- a. **Happy:** _____
- b. **Sad:** _____
- c. **Fear:** _____
- d. **Anger:** _____

2. For each of the four occasions you identified in step 1, take the following steps. We'll use happiness as an example because, y'know, happiness :)
 - a. **Close your eyes**
 - b. **Think back to that experience in your life** when you remember being happy. Recall the details of being there: where were you, who was there, what was going on, until you can conjure the feeling.

- c. **Notice what's happening in your body** as you remember. Do a quick body scan from your toes up to your head - tune in to what's happening inside your body. Maybe you notice you're smiling. Maybe you notice a warmth in your chest. For all the emotions, pay close attention to any sensations in your belly, chest/heart, jaw, eyes, forehead.
- d. **NAME the emotion.** Do it. Say it aloud to yourself: *I am HAPPY*

Repeat for all the other three emotions: *SAD, SCARED, ANGRY*. Some experiences are really painful, there may be a good reason why you haven't wanted to feel them. So when you're recalling these experiences that made you sad, scared or angry, you can stay at a distance if you like. Edge in close enough to begin to notice the feeling in your body, and back away when it become too uncomfortable.

Be gentle with yourself, this is edgy work. If you're only feeling the twinge of an emotion, that's OK - be brave and name what you think it is.

The more you do this exercise, the better you'll become at knowing, identifying and expressing your emotions. The idea of being 'emotional' will be less scary (*scary* - notice that emotion there!).

When you're at work, with your partner or your friends, begin to notice when these reactions and sensations come up in your body. And name the emotion to yourself - if something happens that's annoying (like someone cuts you off in traffic), try saying to yourself 'I'm angry'. Or if you have an experience that feels good (like a sip on that cold beer), say to yourself 'I'm happy'.

Thanks for reading. I hope this information is helpful and you begin to feel a shift in yourself AND in your relationship.

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