



MEN'S EMOTIONAL HEALTH

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Try the following test, answer yes or no to the following statements:

- I often feel numb, as if nothing can affect me;
- I do not want to feel anything;
- You should keep your feelings to yourself;
- Being a man means being strong;
- Showing how you feel is weak;
- Sometimes I get embarrassed, ashamed or angry with myself about the way I feel;
- I avoid crying in front of other people, it is not manly;
- Most of the time I just do not know what I feel;
- When I get angry with people, I tend to bottle it in and/or explode;
- Sometimes I am taken over by my emotions, then I cannot control how I behave;
- I try to be positive about life but somehow negative feelings keep returning.

If you have answered yes to several of these statements your emotional health may require attention.

WHAT IS EMOTIONAL HEALTH?

You might think emotional health simply means feeling positive. However:

- It is not possible to feel good all the time – feelings such as anxiety, sadness and anger are natural reactions to what life throws at us;
- If you try and make yourself feel good you can push negative feelings underground; they can pop up when you least expect them to;
- If you believe you should be happy all the time you may start to feel bad about feeling bad; you then risk spiralling down into a cycle of self-blame and depression.

Emotional health means respecting your emotions and accepting that they are an important, healthy part of you.

For many men this is difficult largely because they have been brought up to believe that they should control their feelings. Because feelings will not go away men can end up experiencing a wide range of problems.

If men develop a more friendly relationship with their emotions then they are likely to feel:

- A greater sense of self-acceptance and self-worth;
- Calm and less worried about how they will respond in different situations;
- More satisfied with their life and relationships;

- More in control of their behaviour;
- More alive and able to live life to the full;
- Healthier; studies have shown that men who express their feelings have stronger immune systems and are less vulnerable to diseases such as heart disease, asthma and arthritis.



THE FIRST STEP

The first step towards greater emotional wellbeing is to see that all emotions – from joy to rage to grief – are valuable. Most people tend to think of feelings as either good like happiness or bad like sadness. But the reality is that there are just feelings that are painful or uncomfortable because they really want to grab your attention.

In order to assess your emotions write down a list of feelings you do like and a list of feelings you do not. In what way do you think the feelings you do not like might be useful to you, e.g. you may not want to feel anger but recognise that it helps you ensure you are not treated unjustly?

Remember:

- Every emotion is there for a reason – if it was not your body would not have produced it;
- How you behave and how you feel is different. It is possible to feel and express anger, for instance without becoming violent or abusive;
- Without ‘negative’ feelings you would not be able to experience positive feelings?

“The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.”

Kahil Gilbran

WHAT ARE FEELINGS?

Emotions are physiological and neurological responses that have evolved to help people to adapt to – and survive within – their environment. When we are faced with a dangerous situation our digestive processes stop, hence the dry mouth and ‘butterflies’, and heart rate and respiration increases to quickly increase oxygenation of the muscles to meet the demands of the flight-fight-freeze response.

This prepares us to run away or confront whatever is going on. In this respect feelings are like a guide that can help people successfully navigate their way through life. More than this, feelings are powerful, energising and make life worth living – there is little point in being physically healthy if you are constantly bored, stressed or depressed.

Basic Emotions

Basic emotions are universal and innate. They are of rapid onset and last a few seconds at a time. Researchers disagree about how many basic emotions there are, but most would include the following in their list:

- Joy
- Distress
- Anger
- Fear
- Surprise
- Disgust

GET TO KNOW YOUR FEELINGS

By accepting and respecting all of your feelings you can gain a deeper understanding of what you feel on a day-to-day basis. How can you get to know something you are constantly pushing away?

Getting to know your feelings helps you to work out what you think and feel about things. When we are emotionally unaware we can find it hard to understand clearly many of our thoughts and feelings. This can result in us behaving in ways which are irrational and unconstructive, which we later regret, or which are inconsistent with our beliefs and values.

Every now and then ask yourself ‘what am I feeling now?’ or ‘what was I feeling when such and such happened?’ This can help develop awareness.

You may also find it useful to keep a diary of your emotional ups and downs. Sometimes it is particularly useful to focus on times when you just cannot

comprehend why you are behaving in the ways you are. When reflecting on your feelings at these times, think widely and ask yourself questions like:

- Who or what was I feeling the emotion towards?
- What was the feeling like in my body?
- What would the feeling look like if it was an image?

Stay with describing. To start with do not get caught up with the why of it; looking for explanations can move you away from the actuality of the experience.

Talk to others about your feelings, it can encourage you to describe your feelings more fully. Ensure you talk to people who:

- Accept your emotions, and do not start judging you for how you feel;
- Are able to listen to you talk about “negative” feelings without reassuring you;
- Do not try to tell you what you are really feeling.

IDENTIFY THE BELIEFS BEHIND YOUR FEELINGS

As you get more aware of your feelings, you may want to work out how you came to feel that way.

All feelings have thoughts behind them. Try to identify the kinds of thoughts that were running through your head that may have led you to feel the way you did. For instance you felt angry because a fellow student who stopped to smile and chat to you last week, today walked right past you. You may have been thinking, “they hate me, what have I done?”. Keep on broadening out your understanding of what you were thinking – even if at a rational level you can see that some of your beliefs do not really make sense.

CHALLENGING AND CHANGING YOUR BELIEFS

You may realise that the beliefs on which your feelings are based are not really rational. For example, you may be thinking in all or nothing terms (“If she doesn’t talk to me for one evening, then she must hate me completely”). Your beliefs may be based on previous experiences rather than current reality. For instance you may have grown up believing that people are only positive towards you when they want something from you and thus find it hard to accept praise.

If you find this to be the case, it can be tempting to give yourself a hard time for holding irrational beliefs. Hold on, if you hold these beliefs it is because at some level you really believe them to be true. You will need to give yourself time to think them through and re-evaluate how you see things.

A good way for you to do this is to start to behave in ways that will show you that your previous beliefs are wrong. For instance, if you believe that you would be ridiculed if talking in public, then giving it a go is the best way of proving to yourself that this is not the case. Telling people how you feel towards them, and listening to how they feel towards you, is also a way of challenging irrational beliefs.

You can have no better proof that your partner can talk to other people for a whole evening and still love you, than if they tell you this themselves.

HOW TO TELL PEOPLE HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT THEM

- Express yourself in terms of how you feel, rather than what you think the other person has done wrong. This reduces the likelihood of them feeling told off and inducing defensiveness;
- Remember how you feel about the way someone has behaved might be very different from their intention behind their behaviour;
- Sharing feelings is a dialogue not a battle, it is not about who is right or wrong but about overcoming miscommunication and misunderstanding;
- Sometimes you will be more skilled at talking about your feelings than the other person, therefore you may have to work extra hard to keep it on a non-combative footing.

GETTING HELP

If you are experiencing one of the more severe forms of mental distress, such as depression, panic attacks, or phobias.

If this happens there is no shame in turning to a professional for help. Indeed asking for help is often the most courageous thing that a man can do. Particularly as men are brought up to believe that they should be able to cope with things on their own. Most people find they get over their sense of shame and embarrassment quickly once they start receiving professional help.

SOURCES OF HELP

Your GP

If you are experiencing regular emotional distress, talking to your GP is often a good step to take. Your GP will likely have understanding of the difficulties you are experiencing and be aware of the various options available to you.

NHS 24

Call on 111

Abertay University Counselling & Mental Health Service

Tel: (01382) 308805 Email: counselling@abertay.ac.uk

Our experienced and qualified counsellors will:

- listen carefully to what you have to say;
- help you to explore and understand your difficulties;
- help you to find ways of managing them more effectively.

Useful Websites

<https://abertay.co/ZDhl>

<https://mentalhealth-uk.org/mens-mental-health/>

Helplines

If you urgently want to talk to someone about your emotional difficulties and are feeling despairing or suicidal you may want to contact:

Breathing Space

<https://breathingspace.scot/> Tel: 0800 83 85 87

The Samaritans

www.samaritans.org Tel: 116 123

Saneline

Tel: 0300 304 7000



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