

Emotions & Neurodivergence

A self-help workbook



1: Noticing Feelings

About

This is the first workbook in a series about emotions. It will focus on bringing awareness to our emotions, our relationship with them, and how to respond to them. As neurodivergent people, we may experience emotions that are louder, harder to name and difficult to cope with.

Our next workbooks in this series will focus on accepting and processing our emotions.

This workbook will help you explore your own emotions and suggest some ways to notice and respond to your emotions.

Why do we feel emotions?

Emotions are **messengers**. They are bodily sensations that help our brain understand our experiences and communicate our **needs**.

For neurodivergent people, emotions can feel different. Sometimes emotions feel very strong and overwhelming. Other times, it can be hard to recognise or name what we're feeling at all. When someone has trouble identifying their emotions, this is called **alexithymia**.

Emotions help us with...

Communication

Information

Behaviour

Motivation

Thoughts

Memory



Shame around emotions: We might have been told we are overreacting or 'too sensitive.' But the truth is, emotions are just signals. There are no good or bad emotions. What we should focus on is how to respond to our emotions in ways that match our values and who we want to be.

The most important thing to remember is **all of your emotions are valid**.

Met and unmet needs

We feel emotions when our needs are met. Experiences like connecting with others and accomplishing things can help us feel **happiness** and **contentment**, while meeting needs of safety, trust, and belonging lead us to feel **secure** and **comfortable**.

But what about when our needs aren't met?

Anxiety: When we don't feel safe or secure emotionally, we can feel worried, nervous, or uneasy about what might happen next.

Frustration: We can feel annoyed or irritated because things don't feel fair or clear.

Loneliness: When we don't feel connected to others or don't have someone who understands us, we can feel lonely and isolated.

Some other emotions

Insecurity: When we don't feel accepted or valued, we might start doubting ourselves or feeling unsure about who we are.

Anger: When we feel ignored, treated unfairly, or disrespected, frustration can turn into anger.

Sadness: When our emotional needs aren't met, we might feel sad or empty, especially if we don't feel understood or supported.



Where to Start

Before we explore emotions more deeply, it can help to think about a specific situation or feeling. This gives you something real to focus on as you go through the workbook. You can notice what fits for you, what doesn't, and how your understanding changes.

Ask yourself: Are there any emotions that you find particularly difficult, uncomfortable or confusing?

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Pause and think: What do you usually notice about this emotion? Describe your experience.

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Consider: What might learning more about this emotion enable you to do? Why is it meaningful to you?

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Differences in Emotions

The way each of us experiences emotions can be different. As bodily sensations, we can feel **overstimulated** or **understimulated** by our emotions.

Hypoarousal (Shut Down or 'Freeze')

Protects us from
feeling too much
at once



Hyperarousal (Fight-or-Flight)

The brain's
saying 'this is
important, pay
attention!'

Loud or Quiet?

Some emotions can feel very strong, and it's easy to notice and name them. We can think of these as loud emotions. Other emotions might feel quieter, and we might not even realise we are feeling them or know what to call them. Everyone experiences emotions a bit differently, so what feels loud or quiet can be different for each person.

Differences in Autism and ADHD

Neurodivergent people often process emotions differently because of differences in connections between areas of the brain and chemicals in the brain called neurotransmitters. Since emotions are felt in the body, differences in processing sensory information can also make emotions feel louder, quieter, or more confusing.

Ask Yourself: What emotions do you find difficult to notice? What ones do you more easily recognise?



Alexithymia

Neurodivergent people are more likely to experience **Alexithymia**. This word comes from the Greek 'a-lexis-thymos' meaning "lack of words for emotions."

You may experience alexithymia if you:

Find it hard to tell what you're feeling

Struggle to talk about feelings

Feel emotions mainly in your body
like a fast heartbeat, tight chest,
or stomach aches, rather than
as a clear 'feeling.'



Managing Emotions with Alexithymia

When we find it hard to identify emotions, we might describe ourselves as just feeling 'good' or 'bad'. The problem with this is it doesn't help us to understand the message our body is sending us. This can lead to meltdowns or neglecting our needs.

Alexithymia doesn't mean less emotion

Individuals with alexithymia often still feel what another person feels but can struggle with understanding what that feeling means. This difficulty with cognitive or affective empathy can impact relationships. Asexuality and detached attachment styles are also more common if someone has alexithymia.

What if I don't feel as many emotions?

Emotional numbing (also called **hypoorousal**) is a type of stress response. This happens when the nervous system feels overwhelmed by stress, trauma, or too much sensory input.

Fight, flight... Freeze?

When fight-or-flight doesn't feel possible, the body tries to protect itself by slowing everything down and saving energy. This can make a person feel very tired, spaced out, emotionally flat, or disconnected from the world.

Physical symptoms

People experiencing this might have ongoing fatigue, brain fog, headaches or migraines, low mood, trouble moving or thinking clearly, or feel like life doesn't feel very real.



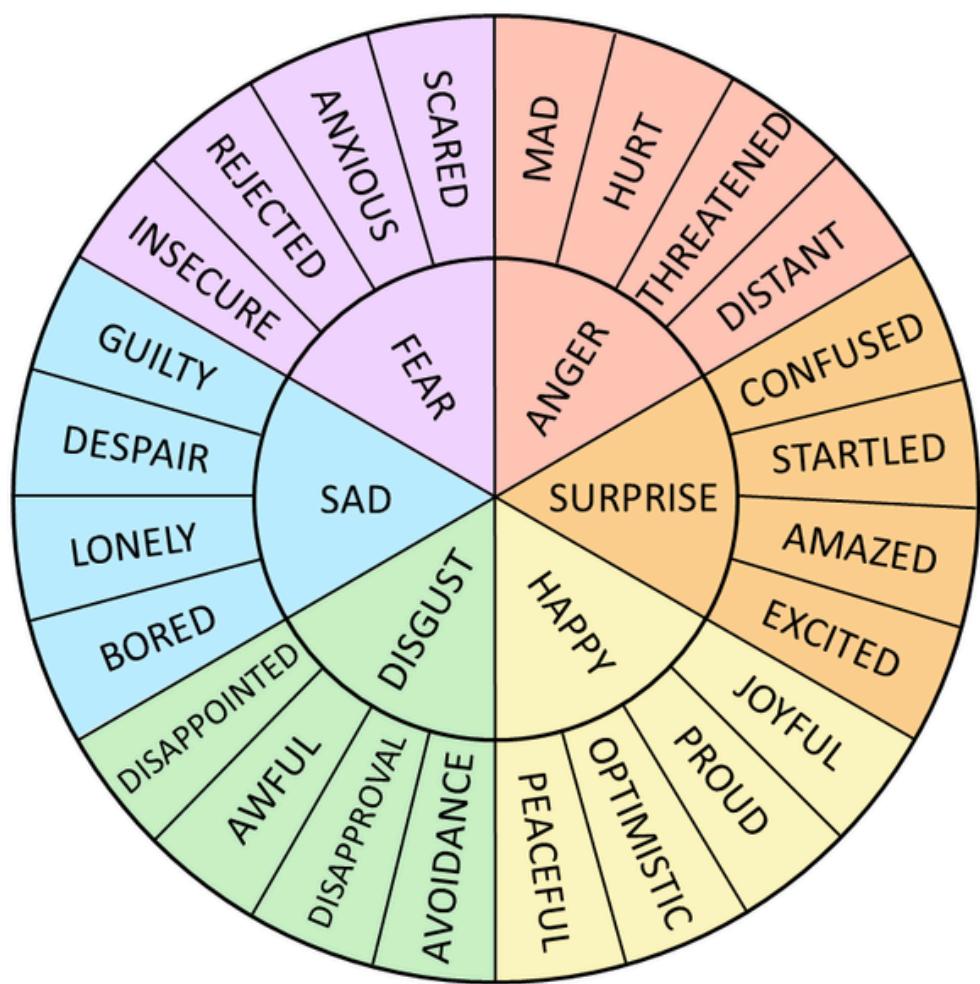
A Coping Mechanism

Hypoorousal can happen after trauma, but it can also happen because of sensory overload, especially for autistic people. Some people call this a sensory shutdown. The nervous system can also be more likely to shut down under stress in ADHDers because of less dopamine and difficulty regulating arousal. This isn't your fault - it's the body doing its best to cope and stay safe.

For more support with Hypoorousal, please see Workbook 3 -'Reconnecting with Emotions'.

Name the emotion

This is an emotion wheel. If you feel it would be helpful, we can use it to identify emotions. Start towards the centre with a simple emotion, and then move to the outer ring. How does it feel to name the specific emotion you're feeling?



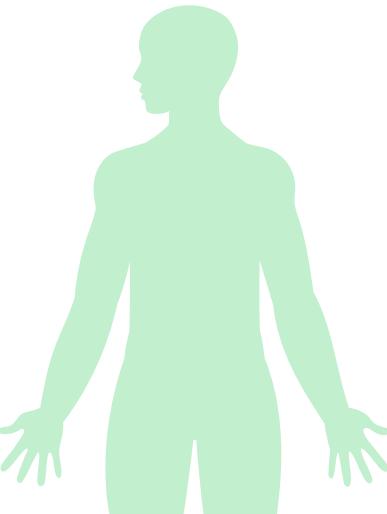
A Gentle Reminder

it's normal to want to figure out exactly what we are feeling. Doing a little exploring is helpful, but we should be mindful of getting stuck if trying to name the emotion feels frustrating or stressful.

Getting in touch with our emotions

The connection between our brains and bodies goes both ways: our nervous system is connected to our entire self. As we have covered, emotions can send loud or quiet signals. Therefore, paying attention to quiet signals can help us notice what we need before things become overwhelming.

Example: An emotion is often a full body response. Here is someone feeling anxiety.

Loud Signs	Quiet signs
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Upset stomach• Shaking• Wanting to run or hide• Heart beating quickly	 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Headache• Tense jaw, shoulders or hands• Feeling 'unsettled'• Feeling irritable

Exercise: Choose an emotion. What signals does your body send?

Loud Signs **Quiet signs**

-
-
-
-
-
-
-

Check in

Well done for getting this far into the workbook. Take a few minutes to reflect on what you have covered so far, and how it connects to what you want to work towards.



Is there anything you have found interesting or relevant about emotions so far?

.....

Write a reminder of your goal here and why it is meaningful to you:

.....

Gentle reminder: Goals should guide and support you, not feel like a burden. You are allowed to move at your own pace.

STOP Technique

Sometimes it can be really hard to figure out how we're feeling. Our emotions may feel too loud, too quiet, or mixed up with other feelings. One way to get better at noticing your emotions is the **STOP technique**.

S is for STOP

T is for Take a deep breath

O is for Observe

P is for Proceed

Try this at home: Practicing skills like the STOP technique when we feel calm and regulated can make it easier to recall them in challenging situations. If we practice a lot, eventually it will become a habit.

Stop



As soon as you start to feel a hint of the emotion, in your mind or in your body, tell yourself **STOP**. It might be helpful to think of a STOP sign, the colour red, or any other association that comes to mind.

Take a deep breath

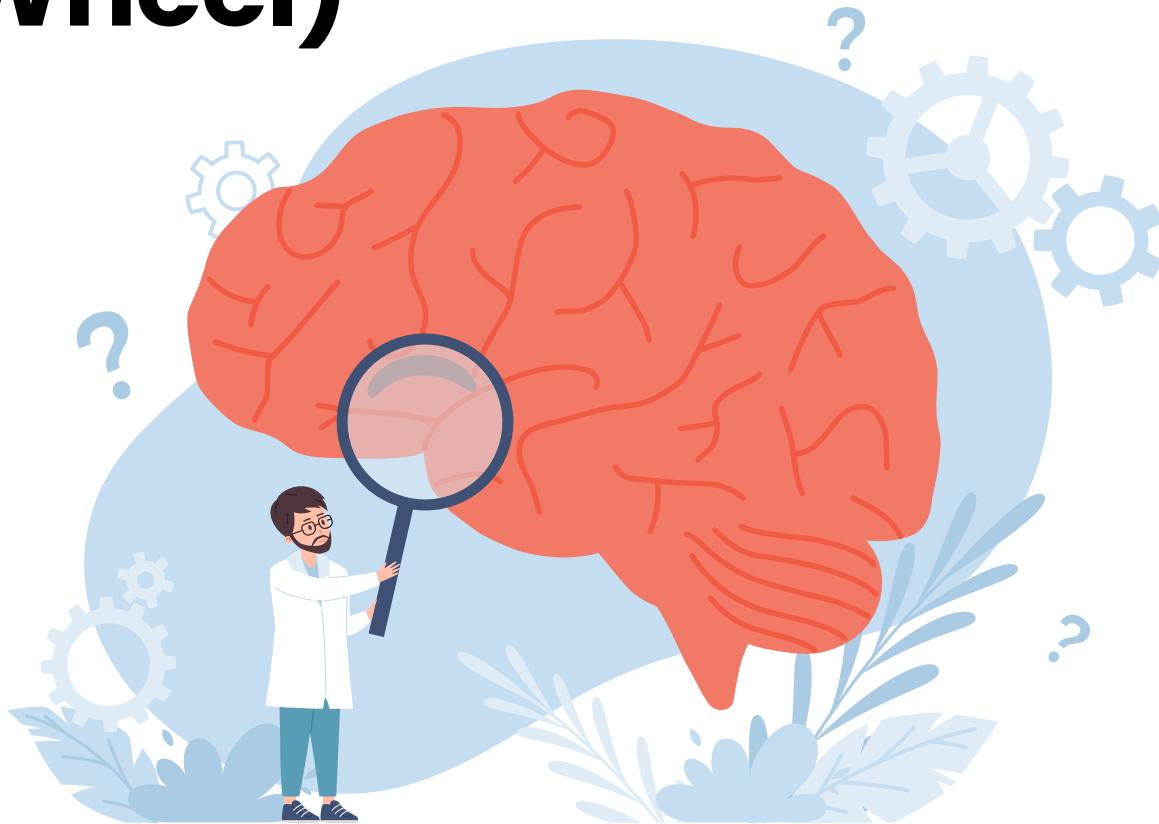


Taking a deep breath that expands your belly helps to promote a state of calm and relaxation by activating your parasympathetic nervous system.

It can be helpful to imagine a balloon in your belly that inflates when you breathe in and deflates when you breathe out.

Some people refer to this step as 'Take a Step Back', which works too!

Observe (Emotion Wheel)



What emotions (if any) do you notice? Is it pleasant or unpleasant? High energy or low energy? Start with simple emotions – we can explore more complex ones later.

How does your body feel? It can help to gently check in with your body from your head down to your toes – just noticing, not judging or overthinking.

Proceed (and Practice)



It's important to bring our awareness back to the present moment at the end of the exercise. Once we have noticed our emotions, we can respond by asking: What is this emotion telling me I need right now?

Be aware of urges to distract, avoid or overthink in reaction to these emotions. These strategies may get rid of emotions in the short-term, but usually bring them back worse in the long term and prevent us from engaging fully with life.

Alternatives

Feelings wheels are not the only way to identify how you are feeling. Some of the neurodivergent community have found other ways more helpful. There is no right or wrong way to notice your emotions.

Listen to a song that reflects how you feel

Do a Body Scan

Compare emotions to the weather, colours, or metaphors

Engage with art

What fictional character do I feel like?

Just ask: 'What do I need right now?'

Journal or use an emotion tracking app like 'How We Feel'

Ask Yourself: Have you ever used any of the above techniques to notice emotions and have they been helpful? Do you have any of your own?

Feelings About Feelings

Sometimes a barrier to noticing our emotions can be extra emotions that come with them (what we call meta-emotions). This usually stems from our relationship with our emotions. We might view some emotions as 'bad' and try to push them down or avoid them.

Examples



Steven felt sad. Then he started to feel guilty about being sad. He thought 'Other people have it worse,' or 'I shouldn't feel this way.' Because Steven felt guilty for being sad, he tried to hide his emotions or avoid thinking about them. He pretended he was fine and kept his feelings to himself instead of talking about them.



Jo had a difficult day and found herself in bed with a headache. Instead of admitting to herself she had a headache, Jo berated herself for having a headache. Why did she have this headache? Why had she not slept properly last night? Jo lay in bed analysing the headache instead of drinking water and taking some painkillers.

How many of us have analysed our feelings, or judged ourselves for having them, rather than treating them as signals and listening to what our body needs?

Reflection: Have you ever responded like Steven to an emotion like sadness, or like Jo to a physical signal like pain?

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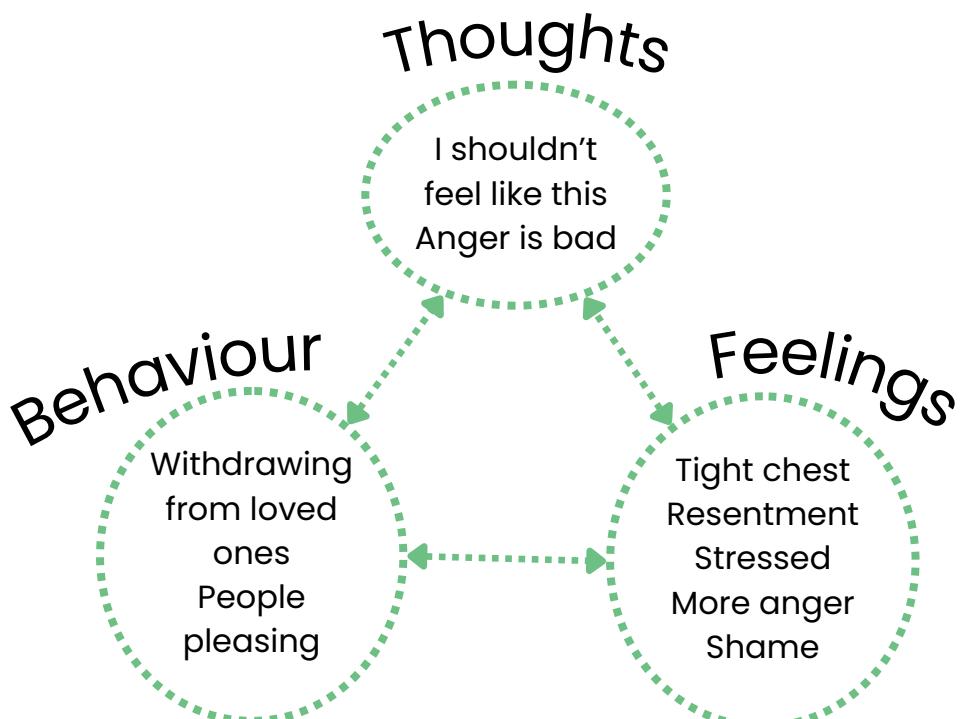
Beliefs about emotions

It's easy to develop unhelpful beliefs about emotions when we experience differences in how we experience emotions. These can block us from responding to our emotions in a healthy way.

“
*I shouldn't
feel like this*
”

“
*I'm too
sensitive*
”

“
*This emotion
is bad*
”



Do you have any unhelpful beliefs around emotions? Think about a challenging situation and ask yourself: What does that mean? Try to rate certainty in this belief from 0 to 100%?

Developing healthier beliefs

Once you've identified an unhelpful belief about emotions (a specific emotion, or emotions in general), we can gently explore whether these beliefs reduce suffering and enrich our lives in the present.

Belief to be challenged

“

”

Evidence for (where could this belief come from?)

In CBT, a common tool for examining beliefs is to explore the evidence supporting them — why we believe what we do.

.....
.....
.....

Evidence against

We then explore evidence against our belief. It is important to keep in mind the goal is not to get rid of the belief but develop a more balanced one.

.....
.....
.....

Questions to ask ourselves

- What experiences do I have that show that this belief is not completely true all the time?
- When did this belief protect me in the past?
- Would I say the same thing to a close friend or family member?
- Is this my belief, or is it someone else's that I have internalised?
- If this is an old belief, is it still in line with my values now?
- Has this belief actually helped me in the long-term?

Notes

Sources

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/sensory-differences/sensory-differences>

<https://www.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/services/child-development-and-neurodisability/autism-home/autism-support/understanding-managing-difficult-feelings-in-asd-videos/>

Cowperthwait, Colleen M., and others, 'Skills Training in DBT: Principles and Practicalities', in Michaela A. Swales (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy*, Oxford Library of Psychology (2018; online edn, Oxford Academic, 10 Aug. 2017)

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Well done.

Whew, you reached the end! 😊

Our next workbook in this series on Emotions will look at how to accept and manage our emotions.

Remember your needs are, and always have been, valid.