

Understanding Feelings?

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Feelings can be confusing, distracting, irritating, or frustrating unless you understand what they are about and how they function. Because many people—especially men—rely more on reason than emotion for direction in life, feelings are often viewed as irritants, distractions, or even enemies. At their base, feelings are biochemical energies in your body in response to various situations, influenced by your past experiences and current thoughts. Feelings (including sexual feelings) are not enemies; they offer you important information that your reason might overlook. Feelings offer data about yourself, your experiences, and your situation that are not available to you from logic or thinking alone.

A Metaphor for Your Feelings

Consider a metaphor that a number of men have told us helped them appreciate the value of their emotions.

ILLUSTRATION 2.2: “LIFELONG, LOYAL FRIENDS”

A way to appreciate your feelings is to consider them to be your “buddies”—lifelong, loyal friends. They have been with you through all of your life’s experiences—from childhood to now. They remember your experiences even before you were old enough to remember, or now when you forget. Each feeling, then, is a savvy veteran of experience who will alert or protect you from situations that could distress you. Your friends vigilantly look after you. They will not lie to you, bullshit you, abandon you, or be silent when concerned that you may forget or be misled by your logic. A good buddy will take you aside, counsel you, and even argue with you when he thinks you could be making a mistake or overlooking potential trouble. You may not like the counsel, thinking your emotional friends overprotect (or underprotect) or make things worse, but they are just doing their job. When you are feeling tentative or conflicted about your sexual health, your “emotional buddies” (loyal friends) let you know—*anxiety, shame, frustration*. Your loyal buddies get your attention; “cover your back.” On the other hand, when you are engaged in mutually healthy couple sex, they reward you with emotional self-assurance and satisfaction.

Feelings Can Be Complicated

Often we have mixed feelings—we feel two or more things at the same time. For example, you may worry that a disagreement with your partner is impossible to resolve, feel hurt and irritated at yourself or your partner, and feel shame that you have failed to find a resolution—simultaneously.

You may focus on only one dimension of the energy (feeling) in your body, ignoring the other feelings. For example, focusing only on frustration, you may miss feelings of hurt and worry.

One feeling can be converted to another. A person who is taught to not feel anger may convert feelings of anger to shame. A person who is taught that anger is okay but fear isn’t may feel angry when afraid or threatened.

Feelings Are Useful

People tend to think of feelings as positive or negative depending on whether they agitate (like fear, anger, and guilt) or encourage (like pleasure, joy, contentment, and satisfaction). Our approach to understanding feelings is to think of them as guides, or loyal friends, trying to get your attention so you’ll consider factors other than logic in your response to a situation. Feelings try to help you respond to different situations. Every feeling is good in terms of its purpose to serve you, protect you, and guide you. Your feelings offer honest information. Listening for feelings is an important skill. Considering them offers you more data to incorporate into your choices about action (behavior).

EXERCISE 2.1: LISTENING FOR YOUR FEELINGS

Alone, provide yourself a quiet, relaxing atmosphere. Focus your attention on relaxing your body until you feel calm, centered, and comfortable. Then imagine that you are a miniature explorer traveling around inside your body, searching for different energies or feelings.

Where in your body do you experience joyful feelings? In your face, eyes, mouth? In your chest or legs?
Where in your body do you experience feelings of anxiety or fear? In your stomach? In your chest? In your cold hands?
Where in your body do you experience anger? In your hot cheeks or ears? In your throat or neck? In your stomach?
Where in your body do you experience feelings of sadness?
Where in your body do you experience feelings of confusion, indecisiveness, ambivalence?
Where in your body do you experience feelings of sensuality and sexual desire?

Write down what you observe. Be specific about each feeling's "location" in your body. What are you learning?

Are You Free to Feel?

Your feelings are valuable sources of personal information, but don't let them run your life. It is not always a good idea to act on them—especially impulsive sexual feelings. Whether and how to act are ethical choices that you need to make. For example, a feeling of anger offers personal information to you about your situation, usually one in which you feel frustrated, treated unfairly, misinterpreted, hurt, threatened, or blocked. These feelings get your attention by agitating your body so you recognize the problem. What you do with this information is the issue.

The guiding principle is to accept your feelings and judge your behaviors. When you make this distinction between feelings and behaviors, you are free to feel. You can feel frustration and choose not to express this feeling to your partner. Rather, you can choose a more positive course by pausing to calm your body (feelings) and then asking your partner for a few moments to cooperatively discuss the matter. You want to learn from your feelings but not let them dictate to you. You want to listen to your feelings, consider their counsel, and then decide how to respond in a constructive, effective fashion. Integrating your feelings and reason gives you a more complete picture of your life, relationship, and sexuality.

Different Ways of Expressing Feelings

There are many direct and indirect ways to express feelings. The words to describe feelings are learned. Some words directly describe emotions: "I feel sad," "I feel close," "I feel frustrated." Others express feelings indirectly. You might say, "Isn't it a nice day?" to express "I feel good today" or "All you do is spend money" to mean "I am worried about money." The more directly you express your feelings, the more likely it is that your partner will understand and interpret your meaning correctly.

You and your partner have your own emotional language, nonverbal (a smile, a glance away) as well as verbal. How do you express your feelings? How does your partner? How have you expressed feelings about sexual concerns? How has your partner? Verbally? Nonverbally? Negatively? Positively? Calmly? Dramatically? Developing healthier ways to share feelings is important and will deepen your intimacy. Learning to "read" your partner's words and actions is part of the uniqueness of intimacy. It takes months and years of sharing experiences, explaining your thoughts and feelings, to develop a mutual emotional language.

Communicating emotions is an important skill in an intimate relationship. For most men and women, it is difficult to feel close without sharing verbally what and how you feel. Love involves sharing warm, positive, romantic feelings but also involves sharing difficult, negative feelings even when that may lead to conflict. Communicating negative feelings in a positive, constructive way can lead to emotional closeness. You can still feel loved and valued even if you are down, anxious, or had a failure experience. Love tries to provide that safe harbor amidst the storms of life.

Vulnerability Within Emotional and Sexual Intimacy

Sharing feelings is important to deepening your long-term sexual relationship. Emotional openness and the nakedness of sex are the two most vulnerable and tender aspects of committed love. During these

experiences, we are most exposed. When you give and receive empathy while you are vulnerable emotionally and sexually, you communicate powerful acceptance and comfort and generate trust and love.

A Crucial Emotional Skill: Empathy

In intimate relationships, an important ideal is to feel emotionally valued and accepted without conditions, to feel unconditional positive regard from and for each other. Empathy, the skill of affirming feelings, is the glue of a deep relationship. It feels good to have your successes and strengths acknowledged, but you feel especially loved and respected when your vulnerabilities and weaknesses are accepted. To empathize with your partner, imagine for a moment that you are her. Imagine that you think and feel as she does, that you experience her reality. When you are empathic with your lover (although you may not agree with her), you offer the greatest gift: acceptance, nurturance, warmth, respect, reassurance, validation, care, patience, and appreciation. These are wonderful qualities to take into the bedroom.

Understanding your emotions is a crucial skill for sexual health in two important ways. First, recognition of your emotions will help you avoid emotional sexualization, which is a major source of sexual impulsivity as well as compulsivity. Second, recognition of your feelings is a valuable awareness to constructively invest in your relationship for emotional and sexual intimacy.
