

# Social and Emotional Awareness through Writing

Rob Colgate  
Badgerdog at The Library Foundation  
Williamson County Caregiver Conference 2020





# Introduction

- Personal Introduction
- Session Overview
- Check-in Question
- Temperature



---

# Session Overview

- Overview of emotions and writing
- Understanding emotional intelligence and its benefits
- 5 different writing activities to engage emotional intelligence skills




# Check-in question: We're building a planet together!

What landscape are you? A frozen tundra, field of chamomile, suburban front lawn, mountain made of cookie dough, etc.

Put your answer in the Zoom chat!





**Temperature:**  
**Close your eyes and raise  
your hand to answer the  
following questions**

---

# What is an emotion?

An immediate, short-lived response to something that happens in the environment or is evoked in the mind that causes shifts in:

- Thinking
  - like, dislike
- Physiology
  - breathing, heart rate, hormones
- Expression
  - face, body, vocal tones
- Behavior
  - fight/ flight, approach/ avoid





# The Value and Importance of Emotion

- Every emotion has a purpose
  - Emotions signal valuable information and energize required behaviors
  - Emotions help with rationality and wise decision making
- Value of positive emotions
  - Broaden our thoughts and actions
  - i.e. Joy > play, push limits, be creative
- Value of negative emotions
  - Narrow our thoughts and actions
  - i.e. Anxiety > problem solving to get rid of source of emotion



---

# Emotions and Writing







## Some empirical studies highlighting the relationship between writing and empathy

(1)

Discussion of poetry was used to facilitate a number of meetings between medical students and doctors

Students largely reported after discussing the prescribed poems that they felt they had grown in their empathy and understanding of what it is like to be a patient (Muszkat et al., 2010).

(2)

Medical students at the University of Hong Kong were tasked with creating poetry and visual art in response to their experiences in observing patients in pain or distress.

Similar results were produced, suggesting a deeper empathic understanding of patients by their caregivers and increased appreciation of holistic care and the caregiver-patient relationship (Potash & Chen, 2014).



---

# Writing and Anxiety

A case study in which an adolescent girl developed severe anxiety in response to her upcoming spinal surgery examined the effects of her own writing of poetry on her anxiety and how it interacted with her psychotherapy.

Here, results suggested a cathartic release through writing, supporting the notion that writing as an expressive art can counter negative feelings (Naidu & Shabangu, 2015).





# Reading and Mood

Last year, I conducted a study examining the effects of reading poetry on negative mood.

We found that reading poetry consistently helps maintain mood, rather than improve or worsen it.

This suggests that reading can help individuals sit with and process difficult emotion experiences that they otherwise might suppress.



# Emotional Intelligence (EI)

the capacity to be aware of, control, and express one's emotions

---

# EI consists of five (5) major skills (RULER)

- R ecognizing emotions
- U nderstanding emotions
- L abeling emotions
- E xpressing emotions
- R egulating emotions.



# Highlights of Research on Emotional Intelligence

## Lower EI

- Aggressive Behavior (fighting)
- Poor-quality relationships (friends, co-workers, partners)
- Excessive drug, alcohol, & tobacco usage
- Higher rates of anxiety & depression

## Higher EI

- Higher empathy and well-being
- Strong interpersonal relationships
- Higher satisfaction at work (and school)
- Increased academic achievement
- Hold leadership positions (workplace)
- Increased social skills
- Improved school/work climate
- Decreased anxiety and depression
- Better physical health outcomes
- Leadership skills and attention
- Teachers have better relationships with students, less burnout, better relationships with administration, more positive about teaching



# Interactive Portion: Writing Exercises to Engage EI Skills

---





# Recognizing Emotions

Recognizing emotions is the skill of being able to identify emotions in oneself and others by interpreting different features:

1. Facial Expressions
2. Body Language
3. Vocal Tones
4. Thoughts
5. Physiology (what your body does automatically)
6. Context

What is the function of recognizing emotions?

- Provides us information to approach or avoid
- Helps us to enhance relationships and communication
- Makes social interaction easier
- Helps us learn norms/values of our own and others' cultures





---

## EXERCISE:

1. We need three volunteers — raise your real hand or use the Zoom feature!
2. Volunteer — Choose one emotion from the list to the right to act out.
3. Audience — write in the chat both your guesses for what emotion is being expressed and what features led you to your guess (face, body language, vocalizations, etc.)

Annoyed

Pleasant

Angry

Surprised

Anxious

Thrilled

Bored

Calm

Disgusted

Thoughtful

Miserable

Carefree





# Understanding Emotions

Understanding emotions means being conscious of how your emotions influence your thinking, behavior, perceptions, memory, and judgment. It is having the knowledge that emotions have causes and consequences, that emotions change and progress.

Emotions...

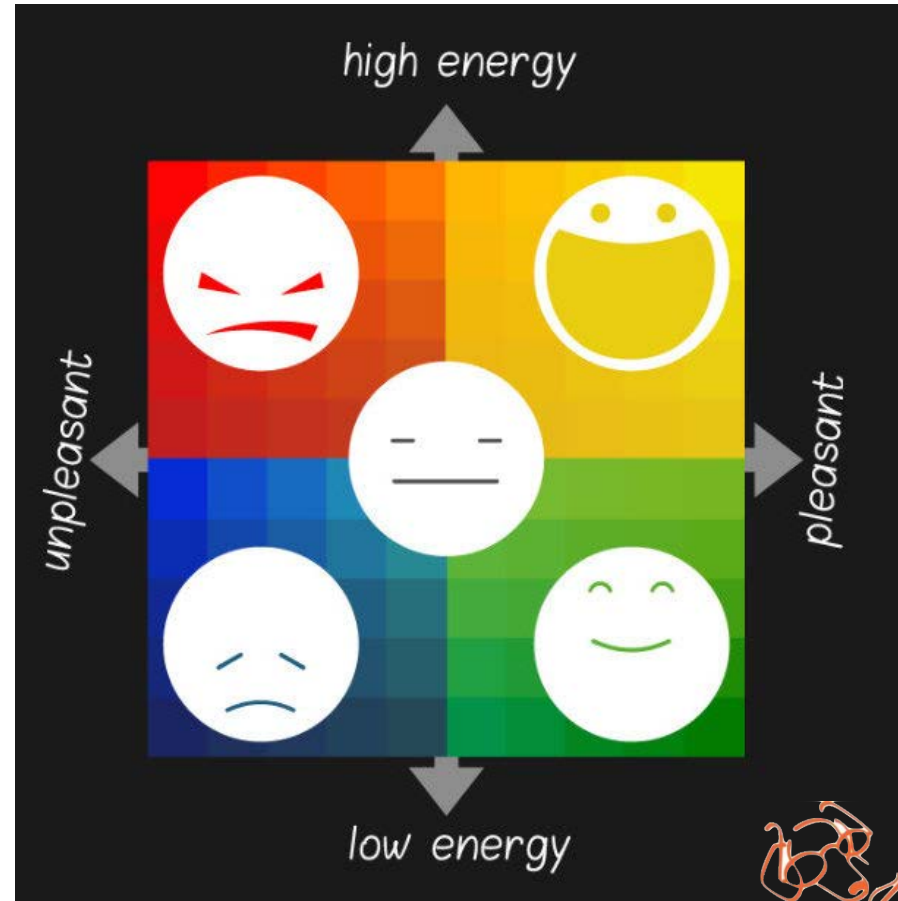
- shape our desires
- affect mental resources
- focus our thoughts on what to do next
- influence our memories and how we retain information



## This is the Mood Meter, an EI tool developed at Yale.

Let's take a look and see when it might be helpful to experience emotions in each quadrant of the mood meter.

- Upper Left (low pleasantness, high energy; "angry" emotions)
  - Debate, competition, self-defense
- Lower Left (low pleasantness, low energy; "sad" emotions)
  - Apologizing, reflecting on mistakes, consoling someone
- Lower Right (high pleasantness, low energy; "calm" emotions)
  - Falling asleep, concentrating on a task, reading
- Upper Right (high pleasantness, high energy; "happy" emotions)
  - Meeting new people, exercising, working as a team



# EXERCISE:



1. Choose one of the emotion pairings on the right.
2. Free write for ~five (5) minutes about the *difference* between the two emotions.
  - a. How are they expressed?
  - b. When might one experience them?
  - c. When would each be useful?
  - d. Any other thoughts!
3. We'll have a volunteer share their thoughts for each pairing

Discouraged — Hopeless

Pleased — Ecstatic

Drained — Despondent

Restless — Anxious

Frustrated — Enraged

Grateful — Content





# Labeling Emotions

Labeling emotions means having a sophisticated vocabulary to describe the full range of emotions by making the connection between the experience of emotion and emotion words.

We can't understand and talk about emotions without having the right words to do it! There are nearly 2,000 words in the English language that refer to emotions.

Here are a few points to consider when it comes to labeling emotions:

- There are basic emotions
  - Happiness, anger, sadness, fear, disgust, and surprise
- Emotions have progressions
  - Annoyance > anger > rage
- There are complex emotions
  - Shame, guilt, pride
- There are emotional blends
  - anger + disgust = ?



---

# Labeling Emotions

Often, *metaphors* are helpful in describing emotions. Metaphors are a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object/action/emotion to which it is not literally applicable.

## Emotional Metaphors

- "I carry the burden of guilt."
- "The shame weighs me down."
- "I am brimming over with rage."
- "I am full of love."
- "I feel empty inside."
- "I am boiling with anger."
- "She is an ice-queen."
- "I am cold-hearted."
- "I am going to explode in a minute."
- "He just erupted without warning."
- "*I am hurt*"
- "*I am torn apart,*"
- "*I feel suffocated*"
- "*I'm feeling crushed*"

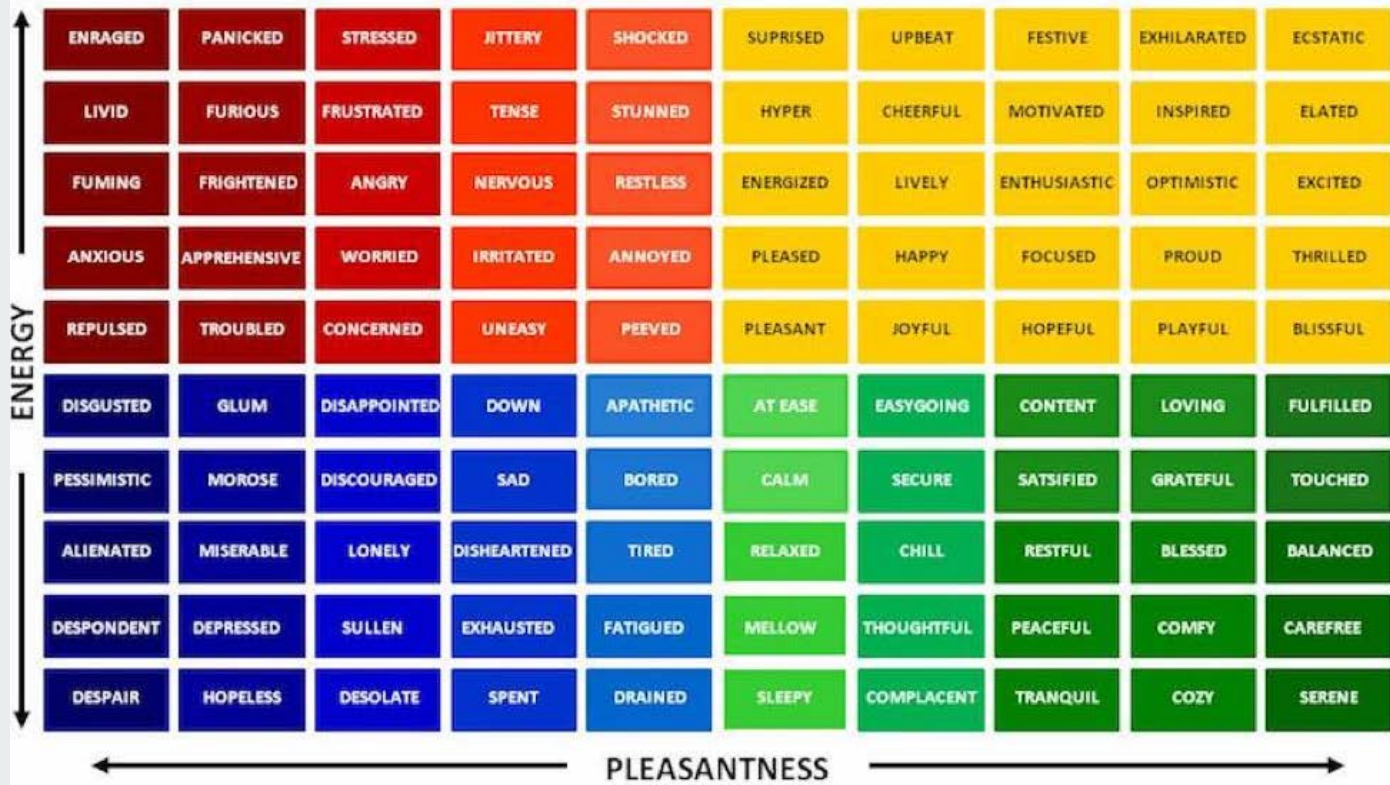


# EXERCISE

1. Choose an emotion from the Mood Meter, perhaps one you've been experiencing personally recently.
1. Devise a metaphor for that emotion — take this in any direction you want! It doesn't even have to make sense to anyone but you.
  - a. My anger is a boot.
  - b. I'm calm like purple.
  - c. You can even make up words!
1. Metaphors can be shared both by volunteers

# MOOD METER

How are you feeling?





# Expressing Emotions

Skillful emotional expression means knowing how and when to express emotions with different people and in multiple contexts.

When people transform their real feelings and thoughts into language (i.e. creative writing!), their physical and mental health often improve. Seriously! Writing is good for you.

- Drops in physician visits
- Increased immune function
- Decreased blood pressure
- Long-term improvements in mood
- Reductions in stress
- Higher grades
- Shorter periods of unemployment
- Better attendance at school or work







# Expressing Emotions

Emotional labor occurs when we must exert effort to change our emotional expression. It comes in a variety of forms and can cause burnout, loss of satisfaction, depression, and anxiety.

- Masking
  - Communicating an emotion that is entirely different from what you are feeling
- Inhibition
  - Giving the impression of having no feelings when you are actually feeling an emotion
- Simulation
  - Pretending to feel an emotion that you actually are not feeling
- Intensification
  - Giving the impression of having stronger feelings than you actually do
- Deintensification
  - Giving the impression of having weaker feelings than you actually do



# EXERCISE

1. Choose one of the forms of emotional labor on the right.
1. Write a few sentences about a time you participated in that emotional labor.
  - a. What emotion did you express, and what emotion did you truly feel?
  - b. What compelled you to alter your emotional expression?
  - c. How did you feel afterwards?
2. These may be more personal — we can have volunteers share, or we can simply move to the next slide

- Masking
  - Communicating an emotion that is entirely different from what you are feeling
- Inhibition
  - Giving the impression of having no feelings when you are actually feeling an emotion
- Simulation
  - Pretending to feel an emotion that you actually are not feeling
- Intensification
  - Giving the impression of having stronger feelings than you actually do
- Deintensification
  - Giving the impression of having weaker feelings than you actually do



# Regulating Emotions

Regulating emotions includes the thoughts and actions that we use to prevent, reduce, initiate, maintain, or enhance emotions (PRIME) in order to promote personal growth, build relationships, achieve greater well-being, and attain goals.

## PRIME

- Prevent an unwanted emotion
- Reduce an unwanted emotion
- Initiate a desired emotion
- Maintain an emotion
- Enhance an emotion





# Regulating Emotions

## HELPFUL STRATEGIES

### Thought Strategies

- Mindfulness
- Positive self-talk
- Positive reappraisal
- Acceptance
- Visualization
- Humor
- Distraction (short-term)

### Action Strategies

- Breathing
- Good health habits:
  - Food, sleep, exercise
- Social support
- Constructive activity
- Avoiding/modifying situation
- Problem solving
- Seeking professional help

## MOSTLY UNHELPFUL STRATEGIES

- Negative self-talk
- Venting and complaining
- Avoidance
- Denial
- Suppression
- Ignoring the emotion or problem
- Wishful thinking
- Rumination and worry
- Blaming oneself or others
- Procrastination
- Psychological manipulation
- Yelling or screaming
- Physical aggression
- Poor habits (eating, sleep, exercise)
- Abusing substances



# Regulating Emotions

## HELPFUL VS. UNHELPFUL STRATEGIES

### Unhelpful Strategies

- Require little to no effort
- Lead to disengagement
- Decrease wellbeing
- Do not resolve the problem
- Can be harmful to self
- Negatively impact relationships
- Provide immediate relief
- Derail us from achieving goals

### Helpful Strategies

- Require effort/practice
- Involve engagement
- Require planning
- Often times involve people
- Promote better health and wellbeing
- Help to build and maintain relationships
- Solution focused

## POSITIVE SELF-TALK & REAPPRAISAL

*Let's try it.*

### Instead of

*"Why did he blow up at me for no reason? What a jerk!"*

### What could you try?

*Self Talk: "Marc, take the high road. Respond with kindness."*

*Reappraisal: "It must be something else that's triggering him right now. What can I say to help him feel less angry?"*



## EXERCISE

1. Choose one of the sentences on the right.
2. Practice positive reappraisal of the statement.
  - a. How can we reframe/rephrase the statement to both be true and positive?
3. We can have both spoken volunteers and chat sharing for this exercise.

1. Why am I so obnoxious? I swear people must hate talking to me.
2. I'm never going to be able to write this proposal.
3. How is everyone else so good at this? I don't belong here.
4. I promised myself I would stop putting off my work! Why am I still procrastinating?
5. Who would ever want to hang out with someone as boring as me?
6. Couldn't he just have texted me earlier instead of flaking last minute?
7. I'm just trying to help him! Why is he being so frustrating?
8. I'm so sick and tired of people not taking me seriously.



# Major

# Takeaways

- Emotions are important!
- Developing emotional intelligence supports forward health and wellness outcomes
- EI is developed through active practice
- The five skills of emotional intelligence are
  - Recognizing
  - Understanding
  - Labeling
  - Expressing
  - Regulating
- Writing is one way to engage actively with our emotions and the five EI skills



# Questions?

---

