

Emotional Literacy

By Bob and Marlene Neufeld

Emotional literacy is the ability to feel, name, process and communicate emotions. Being in touch with our emotions helps us understand them and learn from them. In this article, we will explore how emotional literacy looks, and what you can do to develop your emotional literacy.

How Does It Look?

Those who have not learned how to tolerate their intense emotions often react in one of three ways: act out in dysfunctional and harmful ways, clamp down on (suppress) their feelings, or self-medicate. One of the most common fears that our clients have is the fear that if they should really and fully feel certain emotions, they will either hurt others or hurt themselves. People will say *If I allow myself to feel angry, then I'll do things I regret*. The opposite is actually more accurate. Feeling anger is different from yelling, hitting, throwing and even from expressing blame.

Learning to name our emotions has been very useful. Focusing on four core emotions – anger, sadness, fear and joy – is valuable. All other emotions – guilt, boredom, tiredness, loneliness, anxiety, frustration – are either a sub-set of one of these four core emotions or a combination of two or more of them. Some systems include shame as a core emotion. Shame is a complex combination of anger, fear, and sadness, as well as stories of being fundamentally flawed or inadequate.

The doorway to emotional literacy is your body. For example, many experience sensations of anger in their jaw, back, back of the neck, and shoulders, while sensations of sadness tend to be experienced in their throat and chest. Most people experience sensations of fear in their abdomen.

Simply knowing and practicing this has helped us to distinguish between anger and the fight response that fear can often induce. It has also helped us to speak the unarguable truth about our emotions.

It is equally important to feel, name, process and communicate our sexual feelings to our selves and our partners. A common problem experienced by both men and women is loss of desire. We have noticed that our low-desire clients often have difficulty feeling and naming their sexual feelings. Some people shut down and numb out, while others act out their sexual feelings in ways that harm the relationship, like secretly using Internet porn or chat rooms, or going to strip clubs. When they reveal their sexual feelings to their partners, the shame dissipates and they feel closer to their partners. We coach them to create an agreement that involves welcoming and revealing their sexual feelings to their partners, rather than acting them out.

It is important to accept and allow emotions to exist. Carl Jung said, “We can’t change anything unless we accept it. Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses.”

Our Experience

I don't know what I'm feeling; I'm feeling like you don't want to be with me; I'm feeling down. We (Bob and Marlene) used to use phrases like these a lot before we became emotionally literate. These kinds of phrases did not accurately pinpoint what was happening in any depth. They therefore did not lead to greater emotional intimacy. Now we have learned to communicate at deep levels in ways that promote closeness.

Recently Marlene was having difficulty sleeping. She used her skills of emotional literacy to notice what was going on inside of her body. She felt swirling and tightening below her navel. When Bob asked, *What's going on?* she simply said, *My belly is tight and I feel scared.* She didn't tell him anything about her fear. Instead, she just acknowledged it. Bob asked if Marlene wanted to be held, and when she said yes he put his arm around her in spoon position and both went back to sleep.

The Experience of Others

One couple, whom we will call Janet and Dennis, came to us after Dennis had made a major error in judgment. Janet was furious. Dennis was feeling shame and frozen in self-loathing. He had tried to keep the error secret for some time. Now it had come out because there were consequences that impacted them both. They had made an unconscious deal with each other that it wasn't acceptable to express strong feelings to each other. That deal was stopping them from moving forward, responding to the crisis as allies, and in re-building trust.

We helped them to notice their unconscious commitment to withhold feelings, and coached them in making the following new commitment: ***I commit to revealing myself and my feelings to you, even if I am afraid of your response. I commit to accepting your feelings and to being an opening for you to reveal yourself and your feelings to me.***

After a few sessions of revealing and expressing their emotions, they began to notice that not only were they able to make some decisions about how to respond to the crisis, they also began to feel more and more sexual attraction to each other. Their love life became "juicy" in a way they hadn't experienced for a long time.

Developing Your Emotional Literacy

Emotions are not rational thought. They are an energy that stimulates and precedes thought. Our bodies experience emotions (possibly as the result of a stimulus) and then our brains try to make sense of the emotion by creating a story (or thoughts). We need to be in touch with our emotions so that we can understand them and learn from them. Next month we will further explore this idea of being open to learning.

Marlene & Bob Neufeld practice body-centered Coaching and Psychotherapy. They are a couple who help couples learn life-changing skills and create closer, more loving relationships with one another. To learn more, see www.marleneandbob.com or call 613-594-9248 to arrange a complimentary 1-hour introductory session.