

## Chapter

# 1

# Self-Regulation: The Bedrock of Emotional Wellbeing and Healthy Relationships

We are all born with a deep genetic need to be in relationships with others. Our survival depends on this connection. Maybe this is why we yearn for that perfect mate, deep friendships and unconditional acceptance. Unfortunately, we find ourselves drowning in perpetual conflict more often than we feel dipped in loving harmony. In order to form successful relationships with others, we must first establish a stable emotional foundation within ourselves. This stable foundation is called “emotional wellbeing” and is dependent on the skill of self-regulation. Self-regulation and emotional wellbeing are the glue that holds us together. It allows us to develop empathy so we can see the world through the eyes of others. It fosters a sense of compassion where we seek to relieve the suffering of others. Without the ability to regulate our thoughts, feelings and actions, being close to others all too often brings us pain instead of a joyful bond, and our world of unity splits rapidly into separate entities fighting with each other.

Almost everyone I know has said the following words: “When I grow up, I will never \_\_\_\_\_ my children.” Or “When I grow up, I will never treat another human being like that.” Yet, it didn’t take us long to break these promises to



ourselves. In its simplest form, this book helps us repair our fractured foundations and helps children develop strong foundations for emotional wellbeing by learning the five steps to self-regulation.

Doing it differently than was done to us requires we become consciously aware of our emotions, willing to learn how to regulate their intensity and skillful in communicating them to others. Without the above skills, emotions can become weapons instead of tools.

## Emotional Wellbeing

“Emotional wellbeing” is an umbrella term for emotional intelligence (EQ) and social emotional learning (SEL). It broadly describes an internal state of emotional health. I’ve chosen to use the term emotional wellbeing throughout this book because of the wealth of definitions existing regarding the terms EQ and SEL, and the significant overlap in research, application and understanding of each term.

Emotional intelligence and social-emotional learning deal with fostering social-emotional development. Emotional intelligence, as introduced by Daniel Goleman (1995, 1998), is a form of aptitude relating to our emotional lives. It includes such skills as the ability to recognize and manage emotions, motivation, impulse restraint and effective handling of relationships. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an organization dedicated to advancing the science of social-emotional learning, has identified five core social emotional competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

Emotional wellbeing equals mental, physical, social and cognitive health. Significant amounts of research now exists in regard to our emotions, their de-

velopment, and their impact on life and school success. The core features of emotional wellbeing include the ability to:

- Identify and understand one's own feelings.
- Accurately read and comprehend emotional states in others.
- Manage the expression of strong emotions in a constructive manner.
- Regulate one's own behavior.
- Develop empathy for others.
- Establish and sustain relationships.

(National Scientific Counsel on the Developing Child, 2005)

Pause for a moment to reflect on your own emotional wellbeing. Can you identify what you are feeling at the time you are feeling it? If you are like me, it could take hours, weeks and sometimes years to figure out the true feeling in a given situation. At the Loving Guidance office, I would often become angry and express that anger in inappropriate ways. Months later, I would reflect on those moments only to discover that behind my anger I was feeling fearful and overwhelmed. Years later, I see the situation with different eyes. I was afraid we would fail and equally afraid we would succeed. Either way, I felt the responsibility for Loving Guidance was mine and mine alone. This erroneous perception created a great deal of stress within me. Now I know our office team and divine forces are in this together. The burden of success or failure is not on my shoulders; it's not even part of my job description! My job is to be the best me possible, and all else will fall into place.

## Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is the ability to regulate our thoughts, feelings and actions. It is at the core of emotional wellbeing for academic and life success. It is the essential skill that allows us to put a pause between impulse and action (Vohs & Baumeister, 2004). Imagine what life would be like if we acted on every thought we had, every impulse generated and all the emotional distress we felt. I could eat two gallons of ice cream, run over at least one slow person crossing the street and create a

Research identifies self-regulation as the foundation for our performance in all domains from reading to getting along with others.

- Lyon & Krasnegor, 1996

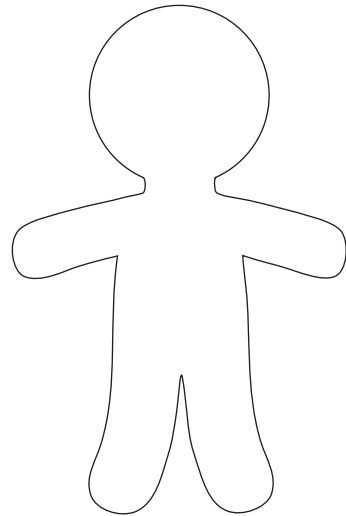


## When I Feel Scared, I Notice...

Replay a scared story in your head. Things I notice about fear:

- My face goes like this (demonstrate and feel it).
- My face and body feel frozen. I can't think at all!
- My fear turns quickly to anxiety.
- My mind races to, "what if this happens" and "what if that happens."

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- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
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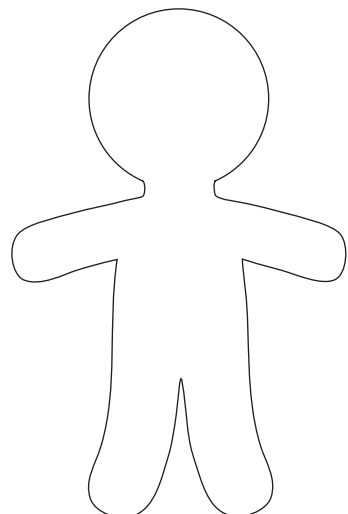


## When I Feel Happy, I Notice...

Replay a happy story in your head. Things I notice about happiness:

- My face is going like this (demonstrate and feel it).
- My body feels strong, centered and energized.
- My thoughts release judgment and I let things be as they are.
- I feel an urge to talk, share, be silly and give of myself to others.

- \_\_\_\_\_
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By shifting our attention from the trigger to the breath, we empower ourselves to notice our inner states. We create a tiny pause that short-circuits our desire to judge, project our guilt elsewhere, blame others or act out our emotions, allowing them instead to bubble up to conscious awareness. With practice, we can observe the trigger thoughts flashing through our brains and observe our judgments without saying things we will later regret.

Noticing allows us to learn so much about ourselves! We can see that no one treats us any worse than we treat ourselves. We can see we still carry around a lot of anger, sadness and fear from the times when we allowed ourselves to become our emotions; times when, instead of getting out of the lake, we tried to pretend, distract or deny we were in it. We can see that we're blocking our happiness in a big way, and that the pause we've created in this step will empower us to name, befriend, regulate and learn from our feelings instead of being a victim to life events.

## Step 3: **I** Feel

**I Feel empowers us to name our feelings.** As this emotion (energy in motion) continues its journey to awareness, the next step is to put a name on all the sensations we are experiencing. Emotions are energetic, physiological constructs consisting of thoughts, beliefs and feelings. We must pull the feeling out of the conglomerate. In order to do this, we must be willing to let go of the story and name the primary feeling represented by the story.

This simple naming process creates a shift that separates us from the emotion. Instead of "I am angry," losing my identity in an out-of-control state, we shift to "I feel angry." When we drop the stories and name the feelings, we create space, a little distance that allows us to feel our feelings instead of become them.

We automatically create space when we name the feeling, however, naming is not as simple as it sounds. Most of us simply haven't had much help or practice with this skill! We often block the process by doing one of four things:

**Block #1: Burying the feeling by believing the story.** Remember, when we are triggered and in the “I am my emotions” state, we block all incoming information that does not support our current emotional state. We create a perception in those moments, a story about how we were victimized in some way and collect all possible data to support it. Creating a story from limited understanding and perceptual abilities (while in the lake) encapsulates our emotions and protects them from change. How many of us carry around stories and emotional baggage from our childhood? Essentially, we trust the perception of a nine-year-old child to guide our current lives and interactions.

**Block #2: Confusing a thought with a feeling.** We confuse a thought with a feeling by saying, “I feel like \_\_\_\_\_,” or, “I feel as if \_\_\_\_\_,” instead of saying, “I feel \_\_\_\_\_,” followed by a feeling word. “I feel like you are not listening” is a thought, not a feeling. “I feel as if you’re just trying to sway my vote” is a thought, not a feeling. “I feel frustrated” is a feeling. Since naming our feelings is new for many of us, start with using the basic core feelings: angry, scared, sad and happy. When you feel emotionally triggered, pick one of these four feelings and give the bodily sensations a name.

**Block# 3: “I feel upset” or “I feel fine.”** We often lump feelings into general categories: “I feel upset” or “I feel fine.” These generalizations block the embedded feeling message from coming into our awareness. Think of trying to get a message to Jason in a classroom full of children by calling out, “Children, children,” instead of “Jason, Jason.” You might never hear from “Jason” because you called out the blanket descriptor, “children.”

The categories of “upset” and “fine” are the same as “pleasant” and “unpleasant.” As I mentioned in the introduction, these are the same categories we began life with as infants. We have grown cognitively and physically, yet our emotional development is stymied at the level of a two-year-old child. Most of us probably need to pause to accurately identify the core feelings of anger, sadness, happiness and fear. Identifying the cousin feelings (frustrated, anxious, disappointed and calm) can be even more difficult. However, accurately naming our feelings is key to freeing ourselves up to feel them, and ultimately to regulate and listen to them.

**Block# 4: Using the language of judgment.** We use the language of judgments like sarcasm, criticism and silence instead of the language of feelings. The language of feelings brings us closer together, building a bridge from the problem to the solution, from rejection to connection. Criticism, sarcasm and silence create roadblocks to communication and connection. Without connection, we are cut off from the higher centers of the brain and once again thwart our attempts at self-control, goal achievement and relationship success.

Shifting from the language of judgment to the language of feelings requires a pause. This cannot happen if we allow ourselves to remain on unconscious autopilot. The list below contains judgment statements and their corresponding feeling statements. Notice how discovering the feeling words changes the intent of the communication from judging (attacking) to sharing (connecting).

<b>Judgment</b>	<b>Feeling</b>
You are just trying to make this hard!	I feel anxious that we are having trouble.
Look at world politics. We are going to blow each other up!	I feel sacred. I don't know how to make a political difference.
You don't care about me.	I feel disappointed. I was hoping we could have more time together.
Are your legs broken? Look at all that still needs to be done before the party!	I feel overwhelmed. How about giving me a hand with the party stuff? You can set up the drinks and ice.
You keep lying to me!	I feel confused. Please help me understand.

You might think it's a lot of work to change your emotional speech. It is, and it requires vigilance and consciousness. However, this small shift in attention is the difference between, "I'm going to blow your head off!" and "I feel furious." It is the difference between perpetual conflict and world peace. Commit to yourself today that as soon as you feel yourself becoming emotional, you will take a deep breath and find the feeling word. Give that emotion a name so you can begin the process self-regulation and peace.

For years, I have struggled with my own anger issues. When I finally learned to feel anger instead of become it, I was able to manage it better. Read the following lines slowly. See if you can feel a difference within your body.

I am angry.    I feel angry.  
I am sad.        I feel sad.

Could you feel a difference? My body seemed a little more relaxed when I say, "I feel" rather than "I am." Returning to the metaphor of the lake, "I am angry," is akin to jumping into a lake without knowing how to swim. We flail around, fight the process and often strike out at those who try to help us. When we say, "I feel angry," we suddenly become a person who is experiencing a particular feeling and has the power to control it. Instead of jumping into the lake of the emotion, we can choose to sit beside the lake, feel the feeling and listen quietly and patiently for the message and guidance it offers.

The simple shift from "You are angry" to "You seem (or sound) angry" is powerful. It encourages children to look within and name the emotion they are experiencing. The sooner they become aware of the emotion, the better their odds of putting a tiny pause between feeling the emotion and the impulsive action it might elicit. That tiny pause is the difference between hitting someone back or saying, "I don't like it when you hit me. When you want to play say, *Will you play with me?*"

## Step 4: **I** Choose

**I Choose empowers us to befriend our feelings.** Naming a feeling provides the opportunity to tame it and the choice to reframe it. Befriending and embracing the feeling empowers us to act consciously within the realm of choice. The opportunity to choose different outcomes happens

What we resist persists. What we accept evaporates.

with the naming process, but the action itself requires we befriend the feeling we have named. Befriending our feelings can be difficult. Sometimes we fear letting a feeling in; it may act like an oh-too-happy houseguest and never leave. Other times, we may fear our feelings will rule the roost. When we allow ourselves to be aware

of a feeling, we often attempt to keep it quietly off in the distance. In actuality, befriending our feelings is the only thing that allows them to move on.

How do we befriend a feeling? Think of how you develop friendships. The first step is to say, “Hello,” offering a simple acknowledgement. The next step is some form of invitation, “Would you like to join me for a chat?” The underlying message to the emotion is, “Welcome. It’s okay for you to be here, you are safe. I will not condemn you, push you away, deny you, medicate you or stifle you any longer.”

As we learn to welcome our feelings, lean into them and embrace their presence, we allow them to do their job of integration. They integrate our autonomic nervous system, balancing the parasympathetic (pause) and sympathetic (speed up). They integrate our personality by embracing lost parts of ourselves. They integrate our physiology, promoting optimal physical health. They integrate our lower brain systems with our higher brain systems, allowing us to respond instead of react to life events. They encourage us to stop resisting what is and demanding the world go our way, and empower us to move through life with grace and acceptance. In short, they allow us to adapt to what life offers instead of fight it.

Befriending our feelings gives us the opportunity to make a choice, to see things differently. When we are gripped by an emotion, our perception is narrowed significantly in order to support that emotion. Now we can choose to

see a problem from many sides. We are free to rewrite any past story by using positive intent thus creating a happy ending for others and ourselves.

In reference to my story in Chapter 2 about “my dad is killing my mom,” once I pulled out the feelings of anger and fear, I was guided to a new perception. I could feel my anger of being unable to stop the devastating disease that was slowly robbing my parents of their minds. I could feel my fear of being parentless, and the fear of how I might someday have the same devastating disease. As I accepted these emotions and allowed them to be with me, I started to see the love story between my mom and dad. My dad loved my mother, stood by her, and nurtured her throughout the disease.

I also remember the day I discovered my “can’t ever measure up” life story. I wrote this script for myself as I competed with my brother for parental favor. One day it dawned on me that this perceptual lens was created in the mind of a jealous three-year-old Becky. I have been around many three-year-olds and never would I turn my life over to their reasoning skills. Yet, that is what I had done for almost five decades!

Life themes such as “trust no one,” “being right equals being safe,” or “pleasing others equals love” are just as silly. Whatever your story is, only the feeling is true. Name the feeling, befriend it and get busy rewriting!

Think of something in your life you find fearful at this moment. “Scared” might not be the word you would choose, so consider the many cousins of scared (concerned, worried, anxious). Imagine holding the feeling safely in your arms, keeping it in your back pocket or putting it in your purse as you go about your day. Simply allowing the feeling to be with you until its integrative work is done is a gift.

