



5 Key Aspects of Appropriately Managing Feelings:

What is Alexithymia?

“Alexithymia is a subclinical phenomenon involving a lack of emotional awareness or, more specifically, difficulty in identifying and describing feelings and in distinguishing feelings from the bodily sensations of emotional arousal (Nemiah et al., 1976).” –***Alternatively, it is quite often very helpful to learn more about successfully managing our feelings as we move toward making positive changes in our lives related to substance use and mental health***

Directions – As a group complete the following feelings self-assessment, which reviews some key aspects of feeling our feelings. The information in italics helps provide some in-depth understanding of each aspect. As honestly and accurately as you can, try to assess yourself for each item below using the following scale.

- 0 – Rarely ever
- 1 – A little
- 2 – Somewhat/sometimes
- 3 – Often/A lot of the time
- 4 – Almost always

— I can effectively **identify** my feelings

- *I can pause, focus, reflect and think about what I am really feeling then name my feelings in my mind appropriately and accurately.*

— I can **accept** my feelings

- *I can admit and confess to myself what I am really feeling without trying to deny it, hide it or cover it up. By contrast: Imagine a person with fists clenched and jaw tightened yelling – “I’m not angry!”*

— I can **understand** my feelings –

- *I can answer some of the Who, What, When, Where Why and How questions about my feelings so that I can get a deeper grasp of what is really going on with my feelings, where they may have come from and what may be triggering them.*

— I can appropriately **express** my feelings

- *I can let others know how I feel openly using appropriate feeling words and phrases, without acting out inappropriately, or doing/saying something I will later regret, hurting others or losing control*

— I can **cope** with my feelings

- *I can face my feelings and deal with them in productive and healthy ways while avoiding negative reactions, behaviors, words, and habits. This includes avoiding “self-medication” or repression of feelings through substance use or other potentially addictive practices*

Discuss your answers as a group



Breaking it Down Further: Discuss the following **five aspects of appropriately managing feelings**:

Identifying Feelings:

1. Learn and know both the physical and psychological signs of your feelings. For example – “When I am feeling jealous, I get restless and moody, but I often deny it at first which can cause me to shut down emotionally which later turns to anger”
2. Build your feelings vocabulary – The more that you know about different kinds of feelings and what they are like, the better you can identify what you may be feeling

Accepting Feelings:

1. Practice insight building, self-awareness and self-honesty by being able to look inside and explore some of the more uncomfortable feelings. For example, most people can eventually identify and accept anger but some of the deeper feelings like hurt or fear that are often behind anger can be more challenging to accept
2. Learn about why you may avoid admitting some feelings. For example, some people are told from childhood upbringing that it is weak to express insecurity or there may be cultural reasons for avoiding certain feelings (For example: “*Where I came from, a man is not supposed to show vulnerability or fear*”)

Understanding Feelings:

1. Practice asking yourself the difficult questions. To build an understanding of our thoughts and feelings it is essential to learn to probe our own mind to try to figure things out. Questions like “Why am I feeling this way right now?” and “What triggered these feelings?” and “What is really going on here that is bothering me so much?” are examples of insight-building, self-assessment questions to build understanding
2. Practice empathy. Empathy is all about understanding others which can help us to build an understanding of ourselves. For example, suppose someone wanted to learn more about how to understand feelings of grief related to the loss of a loved one. Speaking with others who went through similar experiences and building understanding of their experiences can be a reference point for understanding our own feelings, even if we experienced different circumstances. This is part of the reason why support groups are useful

Expressing Feelings:

1. Learn to take down “the wall” when needed. Some people have built a protective “wall” that prevents them from truly opening up about feelings. To build effective friendships and relationships it is important to learn to be able to take some risks and allow others to really see how we are feeling
2. Learn and practice assertive communication. To be assertive is to be able to respectfully speak openly about what is on your mind and how you are feeling even if it is challenging or intimidating to do so.

Coping with Feelings:

1. Learn to stop and redirect challenging feelings before they trigger negative behaviors, it is essential to be aware of several ways to cope with feelings effectively to avoid a regrettable decision later. Breathing, cognitive reframing, positive self-talk, exercising, reading, listening to music, etc. are all examples of coping skills for feelings. There are many tools and skills that work well with practice
2. Build a support system – One of the best ways to deal with feelings is to have people in our lives who are ready to listen and provide caring support. It can be much easier to cope with challenging feelings with the help of others who care



Final Group Exercise (Optional, if there is time) – Feeling Wheel Discussion:

Directions – Print or somehow display the “Feeling Wheel” – Here is a link to a feel wheel provided by the Gottman Institute - https://cdn.gottman.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/The-Gottman-Institute_The-Feeling-Wheel_v2.pdf -

Take turns as a group allowing one person to share at a time. Using the feeling wheel, select any feeling listed on the wheel and then tell the group a true story about your experience with that feeling at one point in your life. Try to be as detailed as possible while being as honest and open how your feelings were impacted as well as your reactions and efforts to cope. Make sure to select a story you are comfortable with as the group will be asking follow-up questions.

Then, when the person whose turn it is done sharing their story, the group should openly ask questions about the feelings story that was provided, in order to learn more about this person and their feelings. Try to keep in mind the five aspects of appropriately managing feelings: **Identifying, Accepting, Understanding, Expressing and Coping**

An example is provided here to help get the process started - A group member takes their turn and uses the feel wheel and selects **“hopeful”** and then tells this story – *“I had been to rehab and detox at least 10 times with varying degrees of success but usually I eventually relapsed shortly after getting out. However, for some reason, this past time in detox was different. For the first time in a long while, perhaps ever, I felt **hopeful** about long term recovery from addiction. I’ve been doing well ever since I got out of detox three months ago because of that increased sense of feeling **hopeful**. For the first time that I can remember I am really **hopeful** that I can have success with my recovery and actually turn my life around in a new and positive direction”*

Below are some examples of appropriate group follow up questions:

- “Why do you think that this time you are feeling more hopeful? What has changed in your life to make you feel more hopeful about recovery? (Understanding feelings)
- How do you cope with discouragement or other feelings and situations that might take away your hopefulness? (Coping)
- I would like to increase my own feelings of hopefulness, so can you share a little more with us what that is like? How does it really feel to be hopeful about staying away from drugs long term, because I am not there yet myself (Expressing)

