Understanding the Emotions of Healing

Presented by Mo, Advocacy Specialist, and Aspen, Survivor Advocate

MO: Hello and welcome to the Women's Center's CONVO, a podcast hub that shares helpful insight for survivors, community members and service providers alike. CONVO stands for Creating Opportunities for Non-Violent Outcomes, and we invite you to learn more about this initiative on Instagram at @convo_twc.

The Women's Center is based out of Waukesha, Wisconsin. We welcome and serve all survivors. The mission of The Women's Center is to provide safety, shelter, and support to empower all impacted by domestic abuse, sexual violence, child abuse and trafficking. Each episode will feature instruction on a healing topic. We are your hosts, my name is Mo and I'm the Advocacy Specialist with The Women's Center.

ASPEN: My name is Aspen, and I'm a Survivor Advocate with The Women's Center. Healing comes with a wide range of emotions—that's normal! There isn't a right or wrong way to feel when we are processing trauma and working on healing from it, though there are often pressures to move on as quickly and easily as possible. For example, ending a relationship can be hard and full of emotions even under typical circumstances. But when trying to end an unhealthy one or leave an unsafe situation with a partner, that adds even more complications. Survivors of abuse often feel a mix of different emotions and all of them are valid. Some common ones include but certainly are not limited to hope that things will change or get better, fear of being alone, fear of the other person's reactions, doubt in if what you're doing is the right decision, and grief. It's natural to grieve the loss of a relationship – even if it was unhealthy or abusive.

Any and all emotions you may feel during, while leaving, or after an abusive relationship is normal and being able to be in touch with these variety of feelings can be beneficial for the healing process! Emotions can feel messy and confusing after abuse, and they are bound to shift and change throughout the healing process, again, especially in adolescence when emotions are already intensified as we grow. Be kind to yourself and remember that healing is never linear. This podcast isn't meant to be a lesson on what emotions you should be feeling as you heal, rather it is meant to help you process, accept, and actually allow yourself to feel all of the emotions you may be experiencing.

Figuring out how you feel and how to safely leave a relationship can be daunting, but you don't have to do it alone. It's important to remember that you deserve a relationship where you feel happy, safe, unafraid, and empowered. If you aren't, then you are always allowed to end or leave a relationship. If you feel like you may need help with ending a relationship safely or want to process these emotions more, please call out 24-hour hotline to connect with an advocate who can assist in making a safety plan with you!

MO: Let me echo this point—**any emotion you may feel in relation to your trauma, your experience, your healing, and your journey are real, valid, and so important to recognize and hold space for.** There are all kinds of trauma responses that survivors may experience, and they are often automatic responses tied to our survival instincts—our fight, flight, freeze, and fawn responses.

It can be harder to notice abuse and how our bodies are responding to trauma if we think the abusive behaviors are normal or if we've not experienced a relationship before. As far as emotional responses go, again, a mix of emotions is to be expected. Relief, fear, grief, sadness, anxiety, acceptance, guilt, anger, love, disgust—just to name a few—can all make their appearances either solo or in tandem during your healing journey.

It can be confusing and exhausting, and it's okay if you can't even pinpoint what emotion you are feeling, or that the only phrase that comes to mind is "a lot" or "nothing." Trauma can make us feel overwhelmed or hypervigilant, like something is always around the corner waiting to cause more pain, and it can also make us feel numb or dissociative, or like we are unable to connect to the present moment. These responses can impact the intensity at which we feel our emotions.

It's important to be able to pay attention to your body to notice your emotions and, ideally, name them. This is easier said than done, especially when you are likely feeling a range of multiple emotions at once. It's very common for us to store away our emotions through intellectualization. This is when we use those umbrella terms such as "weird", "upset", "fine", or "okay", or metaphors to describe how we are feeling. An example of a common metaphor we hear or may use ourselves, especially in the presence of trauma, is feeling like we are being "spread too thin."

ASPEN: Keeping that in mind, **intellectualizing feelings** can serve a purpose in some situations to ultimately help us cope or keep us safe. I think of it like a survival tool. However, doing this too often or for long periods of time can make us too distanced from or even unaware of what the deeper emotions we are feeling under those umbrella terms and metaphors. A good way to test if you are intellectualizing your emotions is to look at how you talk about them! When you talk about something difficult or something joyful, do you feel yourself expressing your feelings or does it feel like you're reading them off a grocery list?

An exercise that we like to call "Feeling Your Feelings" may be able to help pinpoint what exactly it is your feeling. We have a worksheet designed to walk you through this exercise that will be linked with this episode.

Start by choosing an activity that you naturally do multiple times a day. This could be brushing your teeth, driving to and from work, grabbing something to drink, etc. Choose something that is easy to remember and is already part of your routine. This activity will be your check-in behavior. Every time you do this behavior, pause for just a moment and notice what is happening in your body and mind. Do you notice your heart beating quickly? How are you breathing, shallow or deep? Do you feel heaviness anywhere in your body?

Now look at a feelings wheel, which is on the second page of the worksheet. Using it, make note of any feeling words that resonate with these mind and body sensations. The feelings wheel is designed to help broaden those umbrella words for emotions and figure out more exact descriptions of what it is we are feeling. If you first start doing this exercise and can only pick out words in the center of the wheel, that's okay! It takes practice to uncover those feelings we have hidden away.

MO: Once you've gotten into the habit of practicing identifying your emotions, you will more likely be able to label them more easily, especially as they come up throughout the day. Being able to identify what we are feeling is so important. But so is letting ourselves feel those emotions when we identify them! When you feel more comfortable with just identifying them, you can move onto building your tolerance to sit with them. Continue to be intentional about checking in with yourself and then begin to add in taking a few moments to stay with those emotions once you notice them. The goal of this is to simply experience a feeling and try not to change or judge it. You can continue to use the feelings wheel for these reflections.

Work gradually to increase the amount of time that you can stay with an emotion. Even starting with only a few seconds is excellent practice! Sitting with our emotions for the first time or in new ways can trigger unexpected thoughts and feelings, particularly when we have experienced trauma. If you begin to feel overwhelmed, remind yourself that the feelings do not last forever. Try saying to yourself, internally or out loud, **"I am safe in this moment, even if I am experiencing discomfort."** The most important thing with these sorts of exercises is to take care of yourself. It's okay to utilize coping or grounding strategies that work for you if you need them while feeling these emotions.

As we uncover true feelings and the waves of emotions or memories that may come up with them, it's good to practice talking about them with someone you can trust. This could be a professional, a friend or family member you feel safe with, or even utilizing community or group spaces either in person or online.

Talking about our feelings can be scary and uncomfortable, especially if you aren't used to it. If even expressing them to another person feels like too much at first, try writing about how you're feeling to get used to putting them elsewhere, rather than just inside your mind. It's okay to start small and practice!

ASPEN: Absolutely. And as we begin practicing all of this and start going face-to-face with our true feelings, it's crucial to remember not to be scared or judge the things we are feeling. For teens in particular, it's not uncommon to have feelings be minimized by our culture, saying that you may be too young to experience "real" pain or heartbreak. That is absolutely false and ultimately serves to shame survivors for their emotions rather than abusers for causing the pain, heartbreak, and trauma.

It can be easy to feel bad for having "negative" emotions. But the idea that some emotions are "negative" or "bad" just simply isn't accurate. All emotions serve a purpose and all are productive. Here are a few examples of how "bad" emotions can be helpful for us: anger can help us process injustices or take action, sadness allows us to mourn losses and take time to reflect, fear acts as a motivation to keep ourselves safe from dangers, and disgust can help us distance ourselves from unwanted interactions.

Remember that you are the only one who can take the necessary actions to move forward, and you are the only one that can make progressive changes for yourself. You are allowed to feel your feelings. And you are allowed to make changes in your life to help you honor those feelings! You are allowed to say "yes" to you. You are allowed to set boundaries and schedule time for you. You are allowed to take breaks in your processing to give yourself joy or rediscover the things that make you happy.

Developing a fresh outlook about your own self and unlearning negative self-talk or doubt about your own abilities can be hard. But being able to identify what makes you happy can be extremely empowering and help recreate your positive identity. You are worth the time and the energy to focus on yourself. Lastly, always remember to give yourself credit for all of your successes, big or small. You are taking steps in the direction of healing and that is such an amazing thing. It's okay to remind yourself that you are working hard, and you are deserving of praise for doing that work.

Thank you so much for joining us on this episode. Learn more about The Women's Center at www.twcwaukesha.org.

If you would like to talk about your own experience with abuse, please call our 24-Hour Hotline at 262.542.3828. Thank you again for listening, and be well.

Feeling Your Feelings Exercise

1. Think of an activity you naturally do multiple times a day (e.g., brushing your teeth, driving to and from work, drinking water, getting out of bed, etc.). **This is your check-in behavior for the week**.

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2. When you do this behavior each day, pause for a moment. **What is happening in your body?** (e.g., heart rate, breathing, heaviness or lightness in body, etc.)

Sunday: _____
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Tuesday:
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Wednesday: _____
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Thursday:
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Friday:
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Saturday: _____
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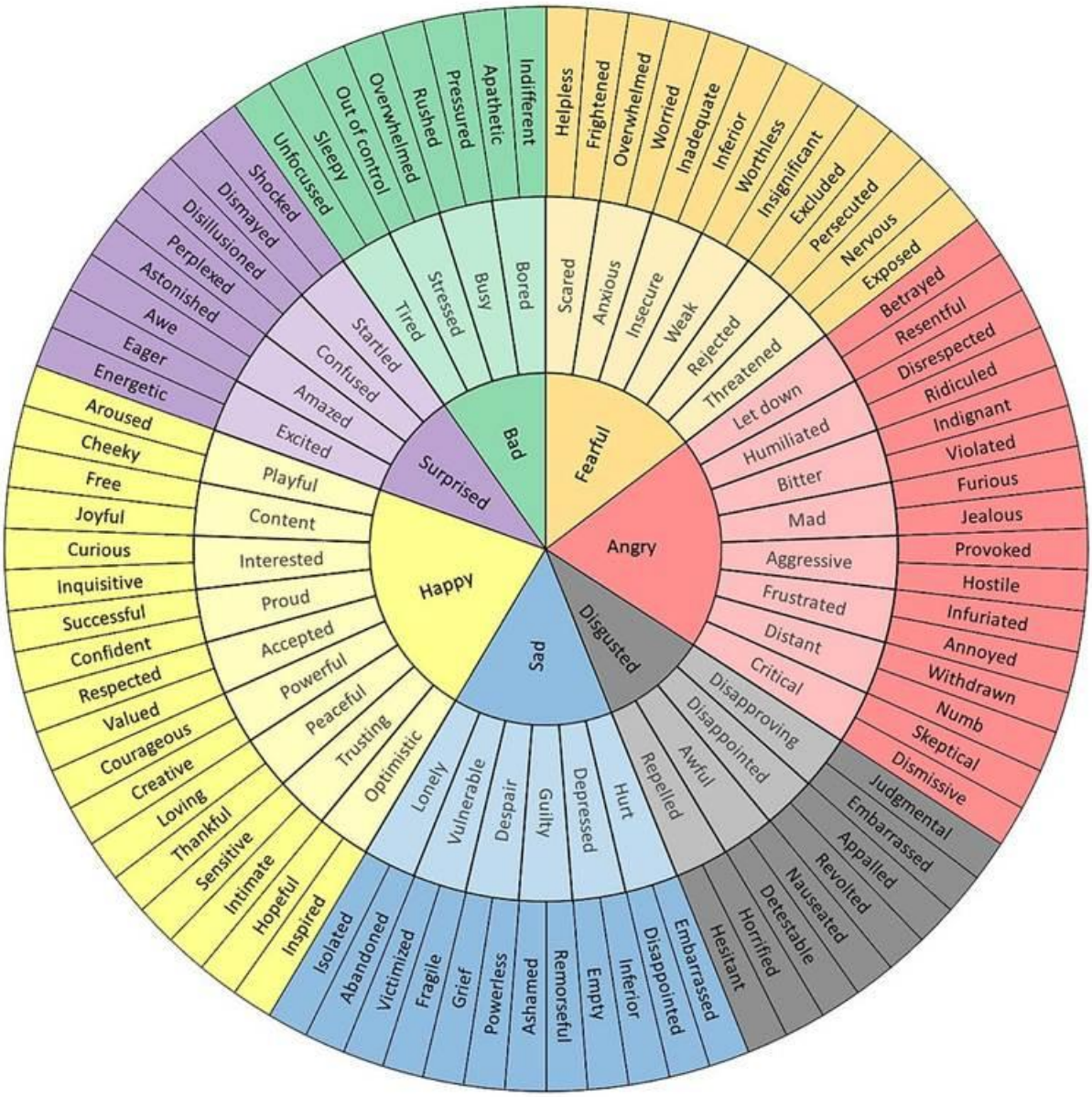
3. Look at the below Feelings Wheel. Using it, **make note of any feeling words that resonate with these mind and body sensations**.

Sunday: _____
Monday: _____
Tuesday: _____
Wednesday: _____
Thursday: _____
Friday: _____
Saturday: _____



*The Feelings Wheel was developed by Geoffrey Roberts, adapted from the work of Dr. Gloria Wilcox. ***

***The feelings wheel is designed to help broaden those larger umbrella words for emotions and figure out more exact descriptions of what it is you are feeling. If you first start doing this exercise and can only pick out words in the center of the wheel, that's okay! It takes practice to uncover those feelings that may be more hidden away.*

4. After you've completed your check-ins for the past week, **take time to reflect on the experience.** Did you notice any patterns between your mind-body responses and emotions? Was it easy or difficult to name your emotions during the exercise?

5. If you feel comfortable doing so, **share your results with a trusted support person, whether they are a friend, family member, or professional**. Is there anything you learned about yourself and your responses from this exercise? Do you want to repeat the exercise at a later date?

For more information and resources on feeling your feelings, please go to www.twcwaukesha.org/podcasts for our podcast episode, *Understanding the Emotions of Healing*. If you would like to talk about your own experiences with abuse,

please call our 24-Hour Hotline at 262.542.3828.