Emotional Awareness

The video above helps you increase your understanding and awareness of your emotions. You’ll learn why we have emotions and how we experience them. You’ll also learn how to slow your brain down enough to notice an emotion as you’re having it, figure out what the emotion is telling you to do (or not do), and make an informed decision about how you want to respond to it.

Why do we have emotions?

Not just thunderbolts that zap us for no reason; instead, serve 3 important functions

1. Give us useful information (ex: fear tells us that something may be a threat
2. Motivate us to engage in action that promotes survival (ex: anger motivates us to fight; fear motivates us to fight, flee or freeze)
3. Communicate our needs to others

Natural course of an emotion

Every emotion follows a natural course, and this course is the same for all emotions. If you let yourself experience an emotion (instead of trying to block, suppress, or hang on to it), it will eventually run its course and pass without you doing anything at all. This is true of all emotions, even those that we experience as unpleasant. What goes up must come down.

Sometimes the things we do to cope with an emotion actually keep us stuck in it for longer. For example:

- Trying to push it away, stuff it, or otherwise avoid it: increases its intensity, makes it build up until it bursts through and wipes you out
- Judging it (or yourself for having it) as good/bad, right/wrong, fair/unfair: increases the intensity of the emotion, produces additional layers of emotional distress
- Trying to talk yourself out of it--doesn’t work for several reasons:

When you’re caught in the throes of an intense emotion, you don’t have access to the
rational part of your brain (the brain?flips its lid?). You?re having the emotion for a reason, though there may be a mismatch between the emotion (or its intensity) and the situation that?s triggering it. Telling yourself to stop having an emotion you?re already having is like telling yourself to stop feeling hot during a heat wave.

There are things you can do to get through periods of intense emotional distress without making things worse, and things you can do to make yourself less vulnerable to intense emotional distress in the first place. [1]

There are also things you can do to build awareness of your emotions as you?re having them, step back from them a little, and make informed choices about how to respond to them in real-time.

What is Emotional Awareness?

Using mindfulness to NOTICE your emotion as you?re having it and SLOW DOWN your response to it, so you have more control over how you RESPOND to it.

Teaches you to STOP before you act on the emotion, CONSIDER your options, then ACT when you?ve thought it through.

When to use Emotional Awareness?

In any or all emotion-provoking situations where you want to make an informed decision about how to respond to the emotion

Why does Emotional Awareness work?

- Allows for the suspension of learned behavioral responses and internalized beliefs (because you slow down, observe, and don?t react right away)
- Allows you to consider the pros/cons of acting on your initial urge, doing something else instead, or just ?riding out the wave? 

What skills do I need?

- An internal ?Stop? (or ?Pause?) Button
- Basic Mindfulness skills: ability to observe & describe your experience without judgment (MF). See Mindfulness Handout (go over)

How to use Emotional Awareness, step by step

1.
NOTICE that you’re experiencing an emotion. How to tell? Pay attention to the physical sensations you’re having in your body. Every emotion produces some noticeable body sensations

2. Hit the STOP (or ?pause?) button

3. Use mindfulness skills to identify the thoughts you’re having

4. Use mindfulness skills to figure out what the emotion is urging you to do/not do (behavioral urges)

5. Identify the short-term and long-term consequences of engaging in this emotion-driven behavior and ask yourself

   1. Will engaging in this behavior produce the outcome I want?

   2. If not, what can I do (or not do) instead that is more likely to produce my desired outcome?

6. Choose your preferred response, turn off the Stop/Pause button and GO FOR IT

**Emotional Awareness takes intention and work**

If you’re used to experiencing your emotions and their aftermath as one uninterrupted ?blur,? can be hard to slow the process down. If you’re used to avoiding your emotions, allowing yourself to experience them can also be hard. With practice, it will get easier and more automatic.

**Homework**

Practice observing and describing your emotional experiences without judgment. Start with neutral stimuli (what you see when you walk across campus, listening to music) or with lighter emotions (a little anxiety vs a panic attack)

Practice using Emotional Awareness to slow down your emotional experiences and make informed choices about how to respond to them. Start using the worksheet
retrospectively? to analyze an emotional experience you've already had. When you get good at this, try doing it in real time (as the emotional experience is occurring).

Hi everyone. My name is Mirella Flores and I am a Counseling Psychology intern here at UNC CAPS. Welcome to this video. This video is one out of four for the workshop called Retrain your Brain. So if that's what you were looking for, you're in the right place. In this video in particular, I'm going to cover some material regarding emotional awareness and that's the skill we're going to be focusing on today. So for this I'm going to use a PowerPoint and guide you through some material.

So as I mentioned here, I'm going to be talking about emotional awareness. And a few things to expect for today is

1. Get a better sense of what emotional awareness is and what are we referring to when we use this term.
2. The functions of emotion - so why do we experience a wide range of emotions. And also share a bit of the natural course that our emotions go through that sometimes we may not be as attuned to or aware of that can begin giving you a better understanding of your emotional experience as it's happening.
3. The skill of emotional awareness
4. Steps to engage and practice.

Emotional awareness is a practice of noticing our emotions as we are having the emotion and learning to slow down our responses. A lot of times when we experience emotions there's a drive to do something or a drive to avoid doing something or not to engage with certain things. So the practice of emotional awareness is recognizing that emotion and recognizing the urges coming up for you and slowing down the time between you experiencing the emotion and the behavior that may be associated with it to consider: "How do I want to choose to respond in this situation?" And we'll come back to this.

We experience a wide range of emotions from anger, sadness, disgust, fear and happiness. Have you ever seen the movie "Inside Out"? I think that's a really great movie that gets the message that all of our emotions are important and they all function and have a certain role in helping us. It's very common that people say, "I just want to feel happy," and no one really says, "I want to feel sad" or "I want to feel anger," and yet the emotions of sadness and anger or any emotion that is challenging for you individually to experience has a reason, has a message that it's trying to communicate to you as well as to others.

Emotions are means of communicating - communicating to others, communicating to yourselves, and driving our behavior. So if you recognize that you are anxious, you may have that drive to want to move away from something that's creating that anxiety. And in
some cases this can be really helpful in that you’re potentially preventing risk or being hurt in any way, and that’s important. And other times we have the experience of fear and anxiety in situations that are not really a threat to us. So here in that will be an example where practicing emotional awareness can give you a better control of how you choose to respond in a situation.

One other point I want to highlight here is that with emotions serving to communicate to ourselves, there’s also the communication to others. And the skill of emotional awareness is going to be more focused on the internal communication that your emotions are having with you.

My guess is that most of you are familiar with the bell curve. Here I want to talk about the natural course of emotions. A lot of times I hear people talking about challenging emotions being distressing when they are in this circle. So that is when your emotion whether it be happiness, anxiety, sadness is at its peak. Here’s when emotion feels really intense. Sometimes you may have physiological manifestations of the emotion like heart palpitations or a slowing down of your physical reaction time. That is when our emotions are at its peak and I want to put this in perspective across time. So you could you can see from this graph that we experience our emotions at its highest intensity usually halfway through the natural course of an emotion. So the "natural course of emotion" - when I’m saying that I’m getting at that our emotions don’t go from zero to ninety or a hundred. There is a buildup on that happiness. There’s a buildup on the sadness across time before your emotions reach it’s peak of like 90 to 100. And same as there is a gradual increase there is a gradual decrease, so what goes up is going to come down.

The skill of emotional awareness is helping you build that attunement and the awareness of your emotions before they get to like 80 or 90 or 100, when the emotion feels really overwhelming. Recognizing where and when you're having baby fear or there's a sense of uneasiness, and recognizing that as the build-up of fear so you can decide how to intervene and how to proceed. And sometimes that emotional awareness will mean that you’re still riding out the wave of the emotion. You may reach a point where the emotion feels really intense and sometimes it can be good to know this peak - this intensity. Our body can only sustain those high levels, for instance, hyper awareness, for so long that it eventually is starting to calm down.

That calm down happens whether you do something or not, but a lot of times people get scared - rightly so - when the emotions feel really intense. Sometimes - I'll come back to this - but sometimes we do things to try to deal with that challenging emotion that actually prolongs a time of suffering. Ok? So as I was just saying, sometimes when we're trying to cope with a challenging emotion we may do things that keep us stuck in that situation. For instance, I'm gonna use an example with sadness. Say that you found out that you didn't get an internship or that you didn't get a job that you were really hoping for and were really excited for. You may have even felt like that interview went
well and you were kind of hoping that this is going to happen. You just found out that you didn't get it and feeling disappointed, feeling sad. These are normal emotions that we may have in this situation.

A thing that sometimes people do when noticing that sadness is to try to push it away. And this can look like "Oh I just got this bad news. I'm just going to distract myself. I'm not going to look at this email. I may delete it. I may choose to not share with anyone this news. Just pushing it away, pretending like that emotion is not coming up for you and it’s not happening. What this does is creates an emotional bubble within you - just pushing something away doesn’t make the emotion go away. So the message that you are sad, that you're disappointed about the news is still there. That emotional message is still within you and by pushing it you're just making that bubble get bigger and bigger and eventually it may pop. A lot of times it pops and that can add more distress to already hurtful experience such as not getting a position or an internship that you were really excited about.

Another thing that we commonly fall into when experiencing challenging motions is to judge it. So with following the same example of not getting an internship, judging that sadness will be like, "Well, now you're just being stupid for feeling sad about this. You still have another consideration on the table." It's just basically saying like, "this is stupid," or "I'm stupid at times for feeling a certain way." What does that do? If you are considering a time that you perhaps have fallen into this, it just adds more distress. So what may have started like a very normative response to getting bad news now may be added with layers of self-criticism and self-blame or blame towards others or more feeling of despair and that as a distress that now you're experiencing. In that sense when we bring judgment into an experience that is already hurtful, we run a very high risk of increasing our distress.

One last thing I want to point out here that sometimes we may do that's also detrimental to allowing our emotions to just go through the natural course is to try to talk ourselves out of it. So with the example of the internship, this may look like: "It's ok." "It's not a big deal." "You weren't that excited about it anyway." "There were things that were kind of uncertain how you work with your other commitments." It's not about you. or "It was not a good fit." And all of this - some of these things - may be true and it may be a reflection of what's happening for you, but when we're feeling an intense emotion here, so here I'm talking about when the emotions are probably like around the 75 or higher, our "more rational part of our brain" is not really easily accessible, so trying to use logic to address an emotional experience is not constructive.

There are really helpful ways of managing our emotions - either when they're really at its peak or as they're building up - and as they're taking just a natural course.

When emotions are at the peak - so that circle there - emotional awareness may not do it for you. If you find yourself having a lot of fear, a lot of anxiety, the emotional
awareness skills I’m going to show you today may not be what you need. If you’re someone that is interested in that, I encourage you to look at the videos and materials for distress tolerance - so this will be covered in a different workshop but this will be skills to help you write out very intense emotions and without making things worse. Your emotions are just going to start declining after time because that's just a natural progression. That's one skill that I encourage you to look into.

And then emotional awareness is a skill that can help you identify when your emotions are starting to build up, and perhaps if it's a bit more manageable you can have a little bit more control of how you’re responding once you have the understanding of what's coming up for me, what am I trying to, what am I driven to do, what I've been driven to avoid right now, and considering what are the consequences of any of that. Now we're moving into - I'm talking about more of the specifics of emotional awareness. As I mentioned earlier, emotional awareness is the practice of noticing our emotions as we're experiencing them.

So part of noticing emotions in society include slowing down. Some of us may be running from one place to another assuming to another or managing multiple tasks at a time. And the practice of just slowing down and checking in with yourself internally can be more of a newer thing so I just want to acknowledge that piece. So with emotional awareness you are being intentional and slowing down, noticing what emotions you're having. Sometimes you may be able to name it. Sometimes you may be able to describe that feeling. Sometimes you may notice a physical sensation like, "I feel a nut in my stomach," or "I have a heaviness in my shoulder or heaviness in my chest," or "my head is pounding," and you may not be able to name the emotion. Where you are aware of this physical sensation and that's also helpful. If you're someone that generally struggles with naming emotions, I'll encourage you to pull up a emotional wheel. You can just do a quick google search for that. That gives you some words that you can look at and see which ones are resonating with you and capturing your experience. So you're slowing down. You're noticing the emotion and then you're coming back to, "Okay. So what is this sadness driving me to do? It's driving me to just seclude myself, to cancel my plans." In the short term, the benefit could be that perhaps I can stay in my place and really let myself grieve the loss of this opportunity or am going to just miss out on connecting with friends and having a really positive experience I was looking forward to. And also what would be the longer consequences? Long term if I stay in, perhaps, right now, I really do need to give myself the time to grieve and considering this - considering what am I choosing to do right now and how would it impact me and my well-being more in the long term.

As I said that I will show you three steps um that you can keep in mind and walk yourself through and just a resource associated with this video that I'll come back to and speak to that can help you, but the first thing that I'll encourage you to do is create a big stop sign visualization within your imagination whether it be a big driving stop sign, it could be your favorite color, it could be a red, it could be rainbow, it could be a hand
that's telling yourself - whatever visual image works for you just to get yourself to pause, to slow down, to disengage with that situation that's in front of you. And by disengage I mean not avoid - just pausing and becoming more attuned with yourself and your emotional experience and being in that moment. So pause.

And then second drawing from some basic mindfulness skills, I invite you to describe what's happening. So for instance I'm sitting in front of my computer and I read an email saying that I did not get this position. I feel tearful. I feel a knot in my stomach. And then by naming the physical sensations then I am observing what's happening for me. I'm noticing. I'm observing that my eyes may get teary, that my stomach is feeling funny. And here when I point out that in all of that I'm naming things that are not judgmental. I'm not saying, ?I'm very disappointed? but in the description piece I can feel disappointed but I'm not judging it in that. ?Oh, I feel disappointed. You're a failure.? That is kind of like what judgment feels like. Or I feel really tearful. Crying is stupid. What should I be crying for?? This will be judgment. And you're trying to just describe and observe what's happening for you and describe the situation that you may be in.

So once you are able to recognize what is coming up for you in that situation, now you're at the point of considering short-term and long-term consequences. Let me give you a different example. Say anger. Say that you got into an argument with your partner. What emotional awareness can look like is noticing whatever sensations you have when you're experiencing anger. So feeling like seeing red, or feeling really tense and noticing that your voice is getting increasingly louder and louder. Picking up on any of these cues can be helpful identifying, ?Oh I'm really mad. Okay.? I can choose to berate my partner right now and really let them have it because I'm that angry. Short term what would that do? For me, I get to say my piece. I may feel more happy with just saying what I have to say and showing them that they're wrong or they weren't considerate or whatever it may be. Okay so if I do that what may be the longer term consequences for my relationship? This might be an argument that is blown up out of proportion. What are we arguing about? Is it really meriting having tension in a relationship or is this something that may create a dent in our relationship that we'll have to work more to heal from?

That's kind of considering, okay what is the benefit of what I'm trying to do right now and how would this impact me and my relationship in the future.

So part of noticing that is and then you can decide what feels appropriate for you in the situation. Still with the pause but the button - you still pause. You're not acting on that emotion and you're trying to just observe and create a little bit of distance from that emotion so you can have a bit more access to the more rational parts of our brain, and then choosing how you decide to respond.

So perhaps you notice that right now your emotions are very intense. You may not be in a place to say okay, let's call it or apologize or say anything like that, but you know that
blowing in the face is not what you want for your relationship. So you may ask I'm going to leave or I'm going to take a breather because I really don't want to say anything hurtful right now that I don't mean. And that can be how you choose to respond in that situation.

So those are three steps but I want to highlight the point that these are three steps that take time and take practice to for it to become like second nature. For those three steps to flow into one another.

In the beginning as you're practicing, your emotional awareness is going to likely take you time. Although this emotional awareness process can be very much in the future done in the moment as you're having an emotionally intense situation, and someone that has a lot of practice and is well practicing emotional awareness may be able to do it in a matter of seconds or even a minute. But in the beginning for most of us it's going to take minutes to learn to really check in with ourselves in such an intentional way.

The worksheet that I'm going to come back to in talking to the next slide is one that I really recommend that you use. It walks you through the different steps of recognizing what am I feeling? What am I driven to do in this situation? Why are those short-term and long-term consequences? How do I want to decide to proceed in the situation?

So you may be wondering, Am I going to pull out a worksheet next time I'm in an argument?? No you're not. Where I will encourage you to start if this is very much a new skill is by doing it retrospectively. This could look like at the end of your day picking something that was a bit distressing. To begin with I would encourage you to pick a situation that um has some distress but it will fall between like the 25 to like 50 percentile of the intensity of your emotion that's distressing. The point is that when the situations are a bit charged but not too charged. You're able to start building up this skill retrospectively and learning, Okay what are some cues that I can sense in my body when I'm feeling anger?? or What are some cues I'm starting to now recognize that I feel or experience when I'm feeling anxious?? and all of that. Just getting you through the practice of doing the steps so that with time you're bringing the steps into your own real time experience and interactions.

The russian dolls that I have in that image is to frame this as scaling. Ao the goal is in the future you're going to be able to do your emotional awareness skills in the moment during an agitated situation. That's the goal and if you start with shooting for, Okay I'm going to hit my mental path, notice my sensations, notice and describe my experience without judgment, consider the consequences and decide what to do? as you're in a situation, most of the time you're setting up yourself for failure and that's not conducive for people to learn new skills or to keep their motivation to do things across time. So that's why starting with this sheet or starting with pieces that feel more accessible. It may feel like, Okay I can easily do that. Okay - so you can easily do it. Give it a try! If it feels too easy, then add up a bit more challenge the next time, but starting with something that
feels really tiny and super accessible and then building up across time for the big goal.

As part of this video, I mentioned that there's a skill - there's a worksheet for emotional awareness that encourages you to consider a situation. If you're newer to this practice, as I said earlier, I encourage you to pick a situation that had some intensity to the emotion but was not higher than a 50 or even a 60. But there's still an intensity of the fear, of the nervousness, of the sadness or whatever it is that you're perhaps wanting to work on, and then walks you through some questions of identifying what you were feeling, what sensations you were noticing in that time. That piece that can feel also very new in this worksheet is what you were noticing. This is where you were. This is what was happening. What are the short-term and long-term consequences of what you were wanting to do. And since this is retrospectively you already might have already done it. There might be some consequences. But it can be really eye-opening to even consider other consequences that may not have happened but that now that you're in a calmer, more rational place, you can see, ?oh by me throwing something across the room, I could have hurt someone or I could have gotten suspended or whatever it may be.? That perhaps in the moment you weren't accessing because of the emotional state that you were in. Then considering potential alternatives of how you may want to handle that situation that can be drawn from when you find yourself in a similar situation in the future.

That's all I have for you for emotional awareness. I encourage you to print out the sheet or somehow make it accessible to you in a journal or in a book that you have around and really commit yourself to practicing this as if you were practicing and learning how to play an instrument or do a game. In the beginning, it?s going to feel forced because you're pushing yourself to do something new, and I encourage you to just notice that and understand that's part of the process to this larger goal of having more emotional awareness and control over your emotions.

Source URL: https://caps.unc.edu/services/retrain-your-brain-workshop/emotional-awareness

Links
[1] https://caps.unc.edu/services/retrain-your-brain-workshop/distress-tolerance