



How to Identify and Express Your Emotional Needs

Worksheet

By Nathan Cobb, Ph.D. in MFT, R. Psych, RMFT



Identifying Your Emotional Needs

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Learning to love and be loved is, in effect, about learning to tune in to our emotions so that we know what we need from a partner and expressing those desires openly, in a way that evokes sympathy and support from him or her.

- Sue Johnson, Love Sense: The Revolutionary New Science of Romantic Relationships

Seven Emotional Needs and Priorities

Needs	Related Words
Security <i>(vs. lack of safety)</i>	To be safe. To be safe emotionally <i>(free of verbal abuse, free of being judged, free of being rendered worthless, free of being abandoned)</i> . To be safe physically. To be protected. To have stability, reassurance, and/or support. To be able to count on others to be there for you and to have your back.
Personal Freedom <i>(vs. being manipulated)</i>	To be free. To have personal autonomy; to be able to act for self; to be self-reliant. To have personal agency; to be free from compulsion, control and manipulation. To not have someone else impose their will or expectations on you.
Significance, Belonging and Being Valued <i>(vs. insignificance, isolation, and rejection)</i>	To know that you matter. To be heard and understood. To be validated. To be seen. To be shown compassion, kindness and respect. To be touched. To have self-worth. To be appreciated. To feel that you are someone's priority. To be treasured.



Needs	Related Words
	<p>To Feel a Sense of Belonging. To be needed, wanted and desired. To be included not excluded; to be part of something together. To be touched, to be involved, to be part of a team.</p> <p>To Know that You are Valued. To be affirmed, approved of, shown unconditional love, friendship and respect. To be accepted, recognized, appreciated, respected for one's efforts. To feel self-approval and self-respect.</p>
<p>Learning, Personal Growth, & Self Efficacy <i>(vs. ignorance, stagnation & inefficacy)</i></p>	<p>To progress in understanding & capability. To learn new skills and knowledge. To understand one's world better. To understand oneself better. To become competent. To feel that you are effective, useful, empowered. To be able to turn weaknesses into strengths. To be able to change for the better. To achieve personal goals; to be able to work; to have self-efficacy.</p>
<p>Meaning & Having a Purpose <i>(vs. emptiness)</i></p>	<p>To find meaning & purpose. To feel like you are contributing. To leave a legacy. To make a difference in the world. To live a life of purpose and meaning. To find meaning in trials.</p>
<p>Adventure & Fun <i>(vs. boredom or apathy)</i></p>	<p>To play. To feel excitement. To be stimulated. To be spontaneous. To be creative. To have fun, to feel alive, to laugh. To find romance, passion, and chemistry. To experience sexual excitement. To experience novelty and adventure. To be challenged by mystery. To take a risk.</p>



What Do You Need?

In the spaces below write down one or two needs or wants that you have lately in your relationship. Use the table above to help you identify your needs if you are not sure what they are. Undoubtedly, all of the needs listed above are important, but which one or two speak to you right now? For each need you identify, list a couple of specific ways that this need could be met for you.

1

Need:

Specific Ways:

2

Need:

Specific Ways:

If you find this process of identifying your needs difficult, then you may want to skip ahead to the next exercise, which goes into a little more depth in helping you sort out what your needs are.



How to Identify & Express Your Needs

Think about any situation where your emotional response was more intense than seemed to be warranted by what was happening. In almost all of these cases, you will find that the situation is about an unmet need, such as an unmet emotional need for security and safety, or for a sense of belonging and significance, or for personal freedom, etc.. The trick is to be able to identify the need. It is not always easy, but let's try.

1 Think of a recent situation and describe it briefly:

2 What was it about that situation that seemed to make you feel emotionally off balance? What specifically happened that brought about a negative emotion?

3 When that thing happened, then you experienced an emotion. Can you name the emotion? If needed, see the list of feelings at the end of this handout.

Name the emotion(s) you felt:

4 Now let's try to use the emotion you identified as a starting place for identifying the unmet need you have that lies embedded in that situation. For example, if you were feeling alone and sad when your partner goes out at night with friends, what does that tell you about what you might need or want? If the emotion was loneliness, perhaps you need your spouse to give you some caring, undistracted attention and time.

It is best to use your feelings to help you figure out what you need rather than focusing only on whatever event stimulated those feelings. For example, in the scenario I just suggested your partner going out at night with friends is the stimulus. If the resulting emotion is that you feel lonely, and this feeling is something you are experiencing in the relationship overall, perhaps you would like your partner to plan a date with you in the future or set aside an evening at home with you to relax with a card game or a movie. Being responsive to this need doesn't necessarily mean your partner needs to say no to his friends that specific night, in which case you might willingly support your partner to go out. If the resulting emotion was anxiety and concern because your son or daughter was in trouble in some way, perhaps you need your partner not to go out that night so that he or she can be present to help you solve a problem.



If, instead of using your feelings as a guide, you use only the triggering event to determine what you need, then you might end up insisting that your partner does not go out that night at all, which might unnecessarily cause friction and conflict, when that may not necessarily be the real problem. And, without each of you understanding your feelings, if you were to ask your partner not to go out that night—which might be what you really do need—your partner might feel controlled and not have any other context for understanding why you have that need.

So, take your time with this. It will help you and your partner if you can be clear with yourself as to what it is you want. It is okay if your stated need is general for now. We will get more specific in a moment. In the space below, try your best to name the need you have, using your emotion as a guide.

- 5** Now that you can name the need, can you try to be even clearer by thinking of a couple of specific ways that your spouse could meet that need?

- 6** Now that you can name the need and can be specific about ways it could be met, perhaps you could try expressing your need to your partner. Help your partner see how your need is related to your emotion.

For example, you might say, “I was triggered when I heard that you had plans tonight with your friends. I had to think about why that bothered me, and I realized that I am feeling lonely and disconnected from you lately. I miss how we used to go out together. It’s not that I don’t want you to go out with your friends tonight. I want you to unwind and have time with them. I want that for you. What I would really like is that we spend time together that isn’t just watching TV or helping the kids with homework or to have some time in the evening a few nights a week when we can just focus on each other for a half hour before we go to sleep. I’d also really like us to plan a weekend together soon without the kids.”

- 7** Be sure to ask for what you want or need stated positively rather than what you do not want.

It is much easier for your partner to hear you without feeling defensive if you can ask directly for what you need or want rather than pointing out only what you do not want. For example, “I would like us to set aside an evening together to go on a date” is better than “I don’t like it when you go out with your friends and leave me alone here.” The latter will likely lead to some form of conflict.

Focusing only on what you do not want can often sound like complaining that your spouse is doing something wrong and needs to change their “incorrect” behavior. Focusing on what you do want helps your spouse understand you better and see that there is a productive, solution-oriented way forward.



A List of Feelings, Emotions and Affective States

Sad / Grieving	Fear / Scared	Shame / Ashamed	Joy
Lonely	Threatened (fear)	Alone / Shut Out	Elated
Rejected	Anxious	Unimportant	Secure
Abandoned	Inadequate	Embarrassed	Loved
Dismissed	Confused	Like a Failure	Reverent
Insignificant / Small	Insecure (fear)	Like I Don't Matter	Reverent
Lost	Worried	Despairing / Hopeless	Hope
Excluded	Envious	Helpless	Empowered
Unloved / Unwanted	Jealous	Inferior	Grateful
Distant	Resentment	Defective	Awe
Disappointed (sad)	Angry	Shy	Surprised
Withdrawn	Bitter (anger)	Guilt	Connected
Dismayed	Frustrated	Worthless	Excited
Numb	Irritated / Annoyed	Valued	Optimistic
Empty	Betrayed	Confident	Wanted
Craving	Hurt	Curious	Peaceful
Bored	Playful	Eager	Calm
Overwhelmed / Stressed	Inspired	Amazed	Assured

