

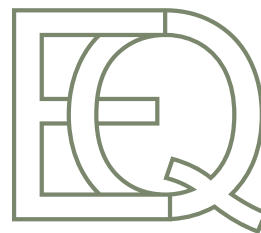
Emotional Awareness Strategies

A companion guide to episode #8
of the Speaking of Teens podcast
(available at speakingofteens.com and on all major podcast players)

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Speaking
of
Teens

It's so good you're here!



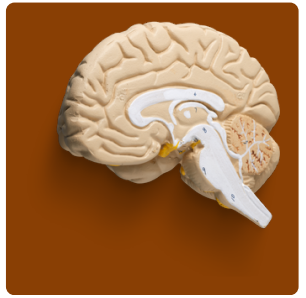
Emotional intelligence (“EQ”) is one of the most determinative factors in having a happy and successful life. And understanding or being aware of our own emotions, at the moment we’re experiencing them is the foundation of EQ.

Our emotions give us direction, tell us what to do next, how to solve a problem or motivate us to feel differently – it allows us to regulate or manage the emotion. So, being unaware of our emotions or only being slightly aware, leaves us guessing, confused, overwhelmed, and directionless.

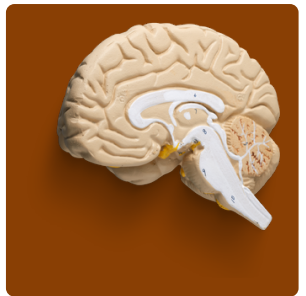
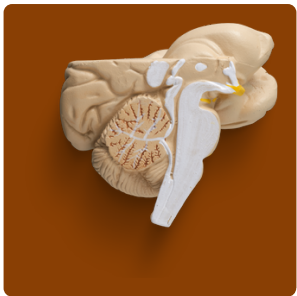
For example, if you know you “feel bad” but don’t know exactly what that feeling means or what it’s telling you, maybe you decide you’ll feel better by having a candy bar or a milk shake. But in fact, you’re not hungry, you’re actually anxious about a phone call you need to make. Or, perhaps when your teenager rolls her eyes at you, you yell at her about being “disrespectful” and feel your face getting hot and want to shake her. But you chalk it up to a bad day at work that has you stressed out rather than the surge of anxiety you actually felt in that moment because of the way your father used to scream and then punish you when you “crossed the line” in that way.

So, without a doubt, our own EQ impacts the way we parent our kids and as they move into adolescence it becomes even more important that we’re able to recognize and manage our emotions. The greater our EQ, the better our relationship is with them, the better adapted they are and the better their emotional development, mental health, and wellbeing.

Disclaimer: I am not a mental healthcare provider and nothing I’ve written in this Guide should be taken as advice regarding your child’s mental health. I have researched and interpreted the information contained in this Guide from various credible resources including scientific journal articles. Please consult your child’s pediatrician or mental healthcare provider if you suspect they may have an emotional or mental health issue or disorder.



Cognitive Distortions



Cognitive distortions, negative self-talk, and automatic negative thoughts...it all means the same thing (as does the common description, “thinking traps”). We can blame these thoughts on that sometimes-nasty little inner voice that yammers at us all day long.

We may not even notice this voice most of the time, but it plays in the background in our brain and impacts our emotions and behavior, nonetheless.

You might have a particularly chatty and negative inner voice that points out all your shortcomings and failures all day long. But you probably only notice the emotion and the behavior that results from these negative thoughts.

Negative thoughts lead to unpleasant emotions, which lead to unpleasant behavior, which leads to more negative thoughts...it can quickly become a negative feedback loop leading to anxiety and depression.

Once you start noticing your thoughts – thinking about your thinking – you’ll begin noticing a lot of the things you tell yourself throughout the day. It’s all very “meta”, I know.

Obviously, this is not a phenomena shared only by adults. Adolescents are very prone to negative thoughts, which surely accounts for many of the mental health issues in our teens, tweens and “young adults”.

But in episode #8 of Speaking of Teens and this accompanying download, we’ll concentrate on how *your* negative thoughts impact both you and your teen.

You might notice that these cognitive distortions overlap quite a bit, and actually I think you could put them all in the jumping to conclusions category. It’s not that important to recognize the exact *type* of negative thought you’re having as much as it is to notice you’re having a negative thought that isn’t a fact – isn’t the truth - and isn’t part of you.

Jumping to Conclusions

This is when we assume a negative conclusion without any real facts or evidence to back it up. We jump to conclusions in a couple of specific ways – either by *fortune telling* or *mind reading*. Fortune telling is when we jump to the conclusion that something in the future is going to turn out bad. Mind reading is when we assume we know what the other person is thinking, which is always something bad about us.

"There's no way I'm going to get a good review next week."

"She's not studying enough. She's never going to get into college,"

Overgeneralization

It's when we take one negative thing and turn it into a universal truth. We use one mistake, defeat, or negative event and turn it into an ongoing failure.

"I couldn't think of a thing to say. I suck at small talk."

"He completely bombed this algebra test. I don't know how we're going to get him through the rest of high school with no math skills."

Catastrophizing

This is when we either expect the worst thing to happen or we believe something is worse than it actually is. It could be a current situation or even something happening in the future. You could call it "making a mountain out of a mole hill" or "blowing things out of proportion."

"I'll never be able to get this report finished on time with this cold."

"If he's smoking weed, he has to be doing other drugs too. He's going to end up dead in a ditch!"

Labeling or Mislabeling

This is when we take one negative quality about ourselves and turn it into our label – our identity. It's an extreme version of overgeneralization – we define ourselves with this descriptor of our one big fault.

"I completed froze when the team asked me those questions. I'm such an idiot."

"He's so lazy he can't even take out the trash without me asking over and over."

Shoulds or Should Nots

This is when we think, "I should be able to do this" or "I shouldn't have to do that" or "I must do it this way." or "I can't do it that way."

"I shouldn't have to study parenting. I should be able to do this."

"She should be able to make better decisions at this age. She knows better."

Personalization

This is when we blame ourselves for whatever goes wrong if it happens in our vicinity - even if it's totally out of our control. If it happens near us, it's our fault.

"No one like their meal at the restaurant tonight. I should have never suggested it,"

"She seems annoyed. I wonder what I've done."

Mental Filter

This is when we filter through all the positive things and concentrate only on the negative. It's like have blinders on for all the good that happens around us.

"Yes I was able to have a good conversation with her today but I still don't feel like she truly cares."

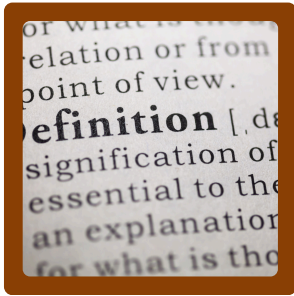
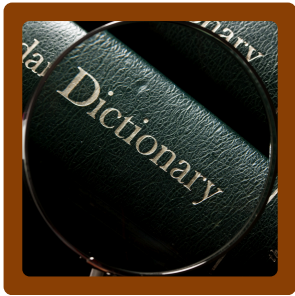
"Sure, I managed to get that raise but I'm still so far from where I want to be."

Black or White/All or Nothing

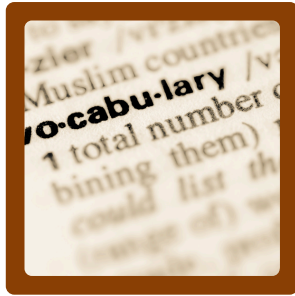
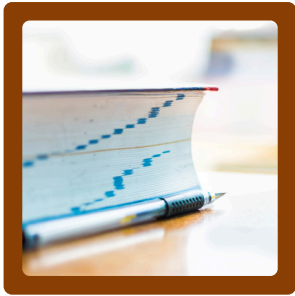
When we see things, events, people, or ourselves only as either good or bad, right or wrong, perfect or horrible, all or nothing, etc. There is no in between or just right. Anything less than 100% = 0%.

You made one mistake in the presentation and think, "That was a total flop!"

Your daughter was not hugely enthusiastic about your day together, "I should just forget asking her to do anything."



Emotion Differentiation



"It's been scientifically shown that the more specifically we can differentiate between our negative emotions, the better we are at managing those emotional moments."

For the most part, we have no problem dealing with our pleasant emotions. It's the unpleasant emotions we must pay attention to and try to regulate. The more intense the emotion, the more regulation needed.

For example, if you're a little nervous about an upcoming presentation at work, that's just good information to have. Being nervous tells you that you need to prepare and practice more to feel more confident. It's not something you need to manage or regulate really - it's just useful information and it gives you direction.

But if you're distraught that a friend is mad at you, that emotion tells you the friendship is very important to you and to do something to work it out. Additionally, because being distraught is an intense emotion, you must pay more attention to your actions, manage them better. Being aware of that, you can decide calmly what to say rather than crying and pleading for forgiveness.

The greater the level of intensity of an unpleasant emotion, the more important it is to be very aware of the specific emotion you're experiencing. That's because it's those intensely felt emotions that we need to be able to regulate better in that moment. And if we don't know what it is we really feel, not only do we not know what to do about it, but the less likely we'll be able to manage our response.

So, learning to be aware of and differentiate between whether you're just annoyed or are furious is critical to your emotional regulation. If you know you're furious you can take steps such as walk away for a minute, breathe, or think.

It's been scientifically shown that the more specifically we can differentiate between our negative emotions, the better we are at managing those emotional moments. So, gaining a deeper understanding of as many emotion concepts as possible is obviously paramount here. You need to develop your emotional vocabulary and learn as many words as possible for various emotions. Having these emotion words in mind will help you notice more when you actually experience these emotions.

Not only will more knowledge of emotion words help you personally, but it will help you when you're talking to your teen about their emotions. You'll be better able to help them label their own emotions and gain more awareness and regulation.

That's what the following vocabulary list with definitions is for! Review them closely and make sure you have these emotion words (and others) at the ready to be able to label both yours and your teen's emotions accurately. Start using them out loud to describe your emotions in front of your kids - they'll pick them up by osmosis. And when they have a hard time, help them by offering, "It sounds like you're totally exasperated with your teacher." or "I know how frustrating this is for you." You wouldn't believe how powerful that acknowledgment is to them - how much they will appreciate it and how far it goes in helping them calm down.

I know that memorizing "vocabulary words" seems like a meaningless task, but I assure you, I've read the studies and it's remarkable how this helps people regulate their emotions...just give it a shot. You can even tape them to the frig for the whole family!

ANGER

annoyed - any persistent (usually petty or small) thing that gets on your nerves

exasperated – greatly annoyed or completely out of patience

frustrated – a feeling of disappointment over being unsuccessful at something

angry – worse than annoyed or aggravated and not as bad as furious

furious – extremely angry; blood boiling kind of anger

vengeful – a strong desire to get back at someone for something they did to you

SADNESS

disappointed – feeling of being deprived of something we planned for, expected, or anticipated

discouraged – the feeling of not getting the results we want

crestfallen – type of sadness usually associated with getting sudden disappointing news like losing a ballgame or getting a bad review

despair (synonymous with hopelessness) – a deep feeling of having lost all hope

devastated – to feel devastated is to feel completely destroyed or crushed - usually by some sort of horrible event or news

heartbroken – to be so sad you feel like your heart will break apart - usually associated with losing a loved one or being dumped by a girlfriend or boyfriend, but many things can break your heart

FEAR

afraid – reluctance due to fear of the consequences or worried that something bad may happen

anxious (synonymous with nervous, and worried) – remember that anxious can have two almost opposite meanings; a) uneasy and worried, or b) interested and eager to do something

distraught – upset, anxious and confused all rolled together

horrified – an intense feeling of fear, shock, or disgust – so you can be horrified because something really terrified you (someone screaming in your ear in the dark), horrified a little differently by something that was completely shocking (witnessing a terrible accident) or horrified by something totally gross, (opening a cabinet and finding a dead mouse)

panic – an overwhelming state of fear and anxiety; totally freaking out and can't think straight

terrified – as afraid as you can possibly be

DISLIKE/DISGUST

distaste – a bit more than mere dislike - “I have a true distaste for people who brag about their money or possessions.”

disgust – a strong feeling of aversion – to the point wanting to vomit!

contempt – feeling that someone or something is “beneath” you and not worthy of any respect whatsoever; as a matter of fact, to hold something or someone in contempt is to despise it/them

hatred – intense dislike

animosity – filled with hatred or ill will for someone

revulsion – a strong feeling of aversion (but not going to get nauseous about it)

Mindfulness is one of the single best ways to reduce stress and become more aware of and better at regulating emotions. Before reading further, I would love for you to watch this [TEDx \(Mile High Women\) Talk by Kristen Race](#) on mindfulness and parenting. She does an excellent job explaining the significance of mindfulness in the family and how to practice mindful breathing, mindful listening and mindful gratitude.

And if you need convincing on a scientific level or you're just interested in a bit of the neuroscience and how mindfulness meditation positively impacts the brain and our mental health, have a look at [this video](#) from University of California TV from April 2020. The UC San Diego Center for Mindfulness they mention in the video is an excellent resource for free live practice sessions. I'll give a list of additional resources at the end of the document.

There are many ways to practice Mindfulness but one of the most common is through guided mindful meditations like listening to an audio file of a meditation or even watching a video. These meditations can focus on relaxation, gratitude, emotion...but meditations that focus on the breath are the easiest and most accessible way to practice mindfulness.

Once you learn and feel comfortable you can always try it on your own without guidance (self-practice). As odd as this may sound to you right now, I can't tell you what a difference mindfulness has made in my life. It can literally be life changing for you, your kids and your spouse or significant other.

People often think of meditation as some guru sitting in a funky pose with incense burning while he chants. And some practices may include just that. But mindful meditation can be as simple as sitting in a chair and focusing on your breath for 1 minute. It's all about learning to simply be present in the moment with a non-judgmental attitude – that's it.

In addition to meditation, we can practice mindfulness during everyday activities. If we slow down and really notice things we see, hear, taste, smell, or touch, we train the synapses in our brain to focus on one sense at a time. This mindful practice helps strengthen our prefrontal cortex, ultimately allowing us to manage our emotions better.

For example, mindful eating would include looking at the food, smelling it, noticing the texture of it in your mouth, how the flavor opens up as you chew, the taste in your mouth after swallowing, etc.

A mindful walk through the forest could include feeling the leaves and twigs beneath your feet, listening to the sound they make as you put one foot in front of the other, noticing the other sounds of the forest, noticing the colors of the leaves in the trees around you, listening to the number of different birds you hear, how the wind or air feels on your face, the smells in the air, etc. Obviously, this would mean leaving the phone at home!

SEE RESOURCES ON FOLLOWING PAGE

Mindfulness Resources

If you want to learn more about mindfulness, the science behind it, the benefits and access free guided meditations, the [UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center](#) has it all covered. You can download their app for guided meditations in the app store (search “UCLA mindful”) or access them at the website on your PC. I highly recommend the website to learn everything you need to know about mindfulness and the app is excellent!

UC San Diego also has a [Center for Mindfulness](#) and the website has guided audio and video and even free live practice sessions.

[InsightTimer](#) is a website with tons of good information and free videos regarding mindfulness, meditation, yoga, etc. Their app of the same name is highly regarded and apparently has 100,000 free meditations or a paid subscription. On the website they also feature live online events with expert speakers (likely for paid members but it looks great!)

[Healthline](#) has a great article that lists the Best Meditation Apps of 2021. My favorites are [Headspace](#) and [Calm](#).

Now, go out and try a little mindfulness meditation!!

Hey there!

I'm Ann Coleman and struggled parenting my son during his teen years. After turning things around, I continued studying the science of adolescence and of parenting adolescents. I made the switch from attorney to parent educator and podcaster to help you avoid the mistakes I made.

What's contained in this Guide are just some of things you'll learn in **PARENT CAMP** to strengthen the relationship with your teen, decrease the conflict and improve their behavior. Check out the **PARENT CAMP** membership and learn about the course, the weekly meetups with me, the monthly expert Q & As with subject matter experts who cover everything from drug use to self-harm, and the community forum, weekly challenges, and more.

Ann Coleman



Speaking *of* Teens



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