


Extracting Needs From Emotions

Awareness of emotions in oneself

 Intervention

 5 min. daily

 Client

 No



Emotions have long been recognized to communicate information to oneself. Emotions provide feedback about whether personal needs are met or not. Simply put, a need is something that is necessary for an individual to live a healthy and happy life. In general, negative emotions indicate that a certain need is not being satisfied. Negative emotions signal to a person that it is necessary to pause and attend to this need (Frijda, 1993; Simon, 1967). For instance, a person who is unexpectedly not invited to a dinner party may feel excluded. This feeling is a signal that he or she has a need for connectedness, a need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Positive emotions, on the other hand, signal that one's needs have been met and that an activity ought to be continued. For instance, a person who is able to complete a complex task without help from others may experience pride. The pride signals that one's need for autonomy and competence are being satisfied. Emotions and feelings thus provide valuable information on need satisfaction. In general, while negative emotions indicate that needs are not being satisfied, positive emotions signal that needs are satisfied. In this step of the assessment, the client is invited to link positive and negative emotions to the satisfaction of personal needs.

Author

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Goal

The goals of this assessment are:

- To identify the personal needs that are satisfied as indicated by the experience of positive emotions.
- To identify the personal needs that are not satisfied as indicated by the experience of negative emotions.

Advice

- Although the most powerful way for clients to do this exercise is by reflecting on personal needs when emotions are actually experienced, it is also possible to reflect on past emotions. The advantage of this latter approach is that it can be used in coaching or therapy sessions and that the practitioner can help to identify possible needs that underlie the past emotional experience.
- Many clients have difficulties dealing with emotions. At the very basis of this difficulty lies a negative relationship with emotions. Negative emotions are typically perceived as inappropriate or unwanted. Consequently, emotions are often avoided or suppressed. This

exercise can help clients to understand that emotions are useful because they contain valuable information about oneself. Rather than suppressing emotions, this exercise explains why it is important to “listen” to emotions. By allowing oneself to connect to emotions, one gains valuable self-insight. Ultimately, this realization may help clients to change their relationship with negative emotions in a more meaningful way.

- Many clients struggle to effectively communicate their needs to others. The insights that result from this step of the assessment can provide a valuable starting point for building empathic communication that takes personal needs and other people’s needs into account.



Suggested Readings

Frijda, N. H. (1993). Moods, emotion episodes, and emotions. In M. Lewis and J. M. Haviland (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions* (pp. 381-404). New York: Guilford Press.

Simon, H. A. (1967). Motivational and emotional controls of cognition. *Psychological Review*, 74, 29-39.

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological bulletin*, 117, 497-529.

Tool Description

Instructions

Step 1: Clarifying the relation between emotions and needs

Emotions tell us something about ourselves. They can provide valuable information about our needs. A need is something that is necessary for an individual to live a healthy and happy life (see appendix A for an overview of common needs).

Negative emotions tell us that a certain need is not being satisfied. For instance, a person who is unexpectedly not invited to a dinner party may feel excluded. This feeling may be a signal that he or she has a need for connectedness, a need to belong.

Positive emotions, on the other hand, signal that our needs have been met and that an activity ought to be continued. For instance, a person who is able to complete a complex task without help from others may experience pride. The pride signals that one's need for autonomy and competence are being satisfied.

Step 2: Daily need analysis

For the next week(s), whenever you experience an emotion, try to identify the emotion. Do you feel joy or relief? Do you feel anger, confusion, disappointment or simply sadness? Don't worry about labelling it 'correctly' – go with your instinct about what you're experiencing.

If the emotion is positive, list the emotion under the first column of Table 1 (p. 4).

List negative emotions under the first column of Table 2 (p. 5).

Next, ask yourself what the emotion is telling you about your needs. If you experience a positive emotion, which need(s) are being satisfied as indicated by this emotion? List the need(s) under the second column of Table 1.

If you experience a negative emotion, which need(s) may not being satisfied as indicated by this emotion? List the need(s) under the second column of Table 2.

Table 1. Positive emotions as indicators of need fulfilment

Positive Experience	Need that is satisfied

Table 2. Negative emotions as indicators of need thwarting

[illegible]

Step 3: Evaluation

What stood out most for you from this exercise?

What did you learn about yourself?

What might you do with what you have learned?

How can you use this exercise in the future?

Appendix A. Overview of the most common needs

<i>Connection</i>	<i>Connection</i>	<i>Peace</i>	<i>Honesty</i>
acceptance	trust	beauty	authenticity
affection	warmth	communion	integrity
appreciation		ease	presence
belonging	<i>Meaning</i>	equality	
cooperation	awareness	harmony	<i>Play</i>
communication	celebration of life	inspiration	joy
closeness	challenge	order	humour
community	clarity		
companionship	competence	<i>Autonomy</i>	
compassion	consciousness	choice	
consideration	contribution	freedom	
consistency	creativity	independence	
empathy	discovery	space	
inclusion	efficacy	spontaneity	
intimacy	effectiveness		
love	growth	<i>Physical well-being</i>	
mutuality	hope	air	
nurturing	learning	food	
respect/self-respect	mourning	movement/exercise	
safety	participation	rest/sleep	
security	purpose	sexual expression	
stability	self-expression	safety	
support	stimulation	shelter	
to know and be known	to matter	touch	
to see and be seen	understanding	water	
to understand and be understood			