

# Emotion Regulation: Observing and Describing Emotions

By Karyn Hall, PhD

As a child, you learned the labels for what you were feeling from your caregivers. Is that tightness in your throat fear or excitement? Is the tension in our muscles anger or fear? Those around you gave you labels for what you were experiencing in your body with statements like, “You’re such a ball of nerves today,” “Stop crying, you’re just mad you didn’t get your way,” or “I’m guessing you’re pretty mad at your mom.”

Sometimes your caregivers may not have been accurate in giving you labels for what you were feeling. Perhaps they guessed wrong or made assumptions that weren’t accurate. Maybe those around you weren’t comfortable with happiness or anger or sadness and so they would tell you that you were feeling a different emotion. In these situations you may not have learned how to label your emotions accurately.

As a child, you didn’t know how to label what you felt, so you didn’t know if the label others gave you was accurate. Think about your experience. Is it possible that you label excitement as fear? Maybe you label excitement as happiness? Perhaps when you’re afraid you express anger and don’t recognize the fear? These are just a few ways that you may have learned inaccurate labels for your emotional experiences.

Caregivers and those around you also taught you how to think about emotions. If your family was uncomfortable with emotions, then you probably learned to avoid them as much as possible or to push them down. If your family was comfortable with anger but not with sadness, then you are likely to express anger easily and hide other emotions. What was the message you were given about emotions?

Part of coping effectively with emotions is accurately labeling your emotions. Just knowing what you are feeling acts like a brake on the emotion. It’s difficult to regulate emotions if you’re pushing them away most of the time. In fact, pushing emotions away and trying not to feel will make it more likely that you’ll act impulsively or experience depression or anxiety.

An important skill to help regulate emotions is to **Observe and Describe Emotions**. If you can observe and describe your emotions you will be better at regulating them. You’ll also learn that you are separate from your emotions. If you can observe what you are feeling, then you are separate from that emotion. When you are separate from your emotions, then you can make choices about whether to act on them or not.

You can also choose to be at one with your emotions. This means that you accept your emotions as part of you. When you are participating in pleasurable activities, this is important. You want to throw yourself into the activity and fully enjoy it.

You can learn to accurately observe and describe your emotions. Being able to observe and describe your emotions means to be able to describe all the components of emotions: the prompting event, any interpretations or judgments or assumptions that occur, the physiological changes in the body, your facial and body expressions of the emotion, the aftereffects of the emotion and the name of the emotion. If you have a secondary emotion, label that too.

## Practice

Think of a time recently when you had a moderately strong emotion. Can you answer the following questions about that emotion?

1. What prompted the emotion?
2. What was your interpretation of the prompting event? Did you judge the prompting event? Did you make assumptions? Are the facts of the prompting event different from what you assumed or thought? How did that change your emotions?
3. How did your body feel when you experienced the emotion about the event? What expression did you have on your face? What was your body posture?
4. What were the after effects of the emotion? After you experienced the emotion, what happened? For example did you feel angry that you were scared? Did you have thoughts about the emotions you felt?
5. What action urge did you have when you experienced the emotion?
6. Did you have a secondary emotion?

Practice answering these questions about different emotions that you have experienced. The more you practice the more you'll naturally observe and describe your emotions and improve your ability to cope with emotions.

## About Karyn Hall, PhD

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<http://blogs.psychcentral.com/emotionally-sensitive/2016/09/emotion-regulation-observing-and-describing-emotions/>