

Feelings

by Sandra Felt, LCSW

Feelings are completely natural and normal and serve some very helpful purposes. They are the link between our body and our mind. They help us integrate body and soul, the rational left brain and the creative right brain. They help us experience our environment by showing us how we respond to changes. They bring us information, like our eyes and ears do, to guide us through life to help us know what fits us as well as what doesn't. Feelings tell us what is dangerous and make it possible to fall in love.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with our feelings. However, many of us have not yet sufficiently developed the skills necessary to deal with them safely and effectively. We likely learned early to hide them or shut them down to be "good" girls and boys, as if we created a garbage can for our unwanted feelings and grew to pretend they didn't even exist. That plan worked quite well—at least until that garbage can got too full to get the lid back on.

At some point, it becomes critical to develop more effective ways to cope with feelings. We need to learn to release them safely in ways that don't hurt either us or others. We need to empty that old garbage can.

The first step is to learn to distinguish feelings from thoughts and behavior. Thoughts are ideas that come to us in words—beliefs, opinions, and judgments, such as "I really like strawberries." Feelings, in contrast, are sensations that we experience physically, such as fear, love, anger, and joy. Feelings and thoughts can affect each other but are distinct experiences. We don't control either the thoughts or feelings that flow through us. We do, however, have choices over our behavior. Thus, we choose what to do with our feelings. For example, when we feel angry, we can choose to hit someone, run hard, write an angry letter we do not mail, or scream. All these behaviors might release our anger, yet some work better for us than others. We also have an amazing ability to choose whether to release our feelings at the moment they arise or later, perhaps much later, when we are safe or when we can be more socially appropriate.

Learning to release feelings after shutting them down for years can be quite a challenge. Start with noticing when you are feeling something. Name the feeling if you can, starting with the four choices of sad, mad, glad, and scared to keep it simple. Practice staying with a feeling a little longer than usual to develop your tolerance for feelings. Notice where you feel it and what your body wants to do with that feeling. If necessary, get away from who or whatever triggered the feeling. If you can, learn to stay with your feelings until they are completely released and you feel calm again. If you need to shut a feeling down, notice how you do that, too.

There is always room for your feelings. Always. If you need assistance to develop the skills and courage needed to release your feelings safely, be sure to ask for support from others, perhaps from a professional psychotherapist.