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Emotions are Signals to Approach (Not Avoid)



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Many of us have come face-to-face with some version of the following scenarios:

- Your mother asks when you're coming over for dinner because "it's been too long," and your mind and pulse begin to race, searching for excuses to avoid tensions of a family dinner.
- A new email arrives from a cranky colleague, and you instantly sink into your seat, feeling drained before even reading the message.
- A friend keeps calling to figure out why you skipped coffee together last week, and you feel embarrassed hoping they'd they forget it ever happened.

Emotions are signals, and each of these scenarios are chock-full of them. Yet how often do we allow ourselves to process our emotions as *information*, especially when the emotions are triggered by challenging circumstances? How often do we mistake the act of judging our emotions as weakness? This is a message society teaches, implicitly and explicitly, from kindergarten classrooms to corporate conference rooms. We either 'get over' our emotions or get left behind. Individuals are too often rewarded when they suppress emotions that trigger discomfort, rather than being taught to listen to the signals they offer up.

But like it or not, we are emotional beings *first*, and rational ones second. As Brene Brown reminds us, "When something difficult happens, emotion is at the wheel. Cognition and behavior are bound and gagged in the trunk and emotion is driving." When we experience loss or death, the sadness that clouds our days cues us to seek out ways to cope, connect, and ultimately heal. Disgust prompts our gag reflex to protect us not just from the consequences of toxic food, but toxic people and places.

Emotions are always telling us something. So how do we listen to our emotions and learn?

Recognizing and understanding what emotions you are experiencing — when, where, and why — are the first two steps to unpacking them. At the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, these are the first skills of "experiencing' emotional intelligence that we teach through RULER, our evidence-based approach to social and emotional learning. (The framework covers Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating emotions).

Pausing to recognize and understand your emotions can feel like a sacrifice of time as well as comfort at first. We either know someone or *are* that someone who would do anything to avoid constructive discomfort. In the context of our emotional lives, we refer to constructive discomfort as leaning into uncomfortable emotions in order to gain a deeper understanding of them.

For example, let's go beneath the surface of our scenario with the cranky coworker. Ask yourself: What can these emotions tell me about my relationship with my colleague or my workplace in general? Are there changes I can advocate for or tasks I can switch to disengage with this person and the negativity they manifest? Or are these emotions clues to how I feel about my work altogether?

Remember: you don't *have* to feel drained and depleted, and you shouldn't. When emotions are interpreted as data instead of distractions, you can unlock opportunities to understand them more deeply and if you want to, work to change your circumstances.

While emotions are information, they are not imperatives. Or as Susan David says, "Emotions are data, not directives." While culminating feelings of drain and exhaustion may serve as motivation for one person to pursue an entirely different workplace or career, they do not demand such dramatic change for everyone.

With this in mind, we challenge you: Over the next week, before you go into important meetings or have conversations with colleagues, before you make any big decisions at work or at home, ask yourself: *How am I feeling? What might be causing my feeling? And, how might my feeling influence my thinking and decision to approach (or avoid)?*

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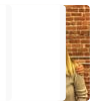
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