

Emotional vocabulary

What it is

There is growing evidence that having an extensive emotional vocabulary supports mental health and wellbeing¹. There are many lists² and visuals³ designed to help you find the term that captures how you're feeling at a given time so you can think more clearly about the implications of this and how best to proceed. But most of these are in English and capture predominantly Western ways of conceptualising feelings; they also have a tendency to be generic – e.g., the word 'anger' doesn't indicate what you are angry at or why. Psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett writes about how illuminating it is to expand our emotional vocabulary to include terms and ideas from other languages, or even to make up our own words to describe sensations unique to our own experience⁴. For those who express themselves more visually, these feelings can even be conveyed in images rather than words⁵. Both options are provided below.

Testimonials

This activity has not yet been trialled by Creative Toolkit collaborators (though it has been well received in mindfulness sessions for students). Give it a go and let us know how it went!

Materials needed

This activity could be completed in many different formats, depending on what supplies you have to hand, how much time you have, and what best suits your needs.

- No-supply option: Just do it in your head!
- Minimal-supply option: Jot down your ideas on paper (loose-leaf or in a notebook) using pen or pencil.
- Some-supplies option: Use something like colouring pencils or markers to create visuals. You could do this on paper, as above, or consider purchasing some blank playing cards or index cards so you can create a more permanent collection of your bespoke terms.

Suggestions

While this activity can be done independently, you may also find it helpful (and even amusing) to do with others – for example, with patients or students that you are supporting, with colleagues with whom you are commiserating, or in reflective conversations with supervisory staff.

- Think about a very specific experience that you have regularly. Can you coin a new term that captures and evokes the detail of this? (For example, Lisa Feldman Barrett uses the term 'crispless' to describe 'the feeling of disappointment when you think

¹ <https://www.verywellfamily.com/feelings-words-from-a-to-z-2086647#:~:text=An%20emotional%20vocabulary%20is%20one,be%20better%20adjusted%20and%20stable.>

² <https://tomdrummond.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Emotion-Feelings.pdf>

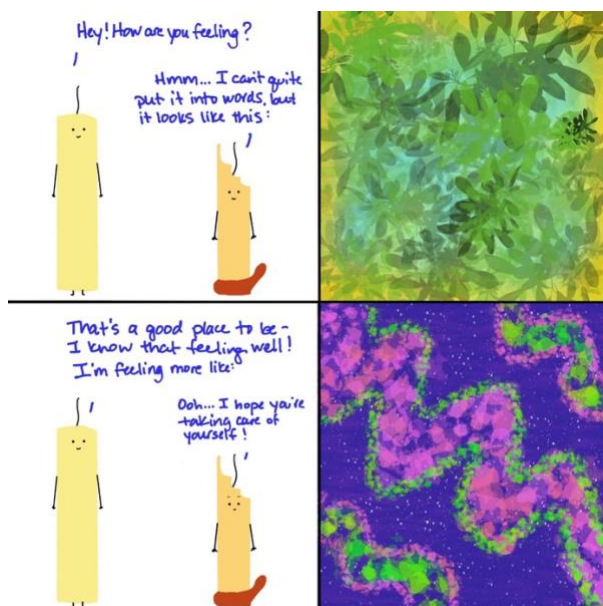
³ <https://flowingdata.com/2020/03/20/wheel-of-emotional-words/>

⁴ Barrett, L.F. (2017). *The secret life of the brain*. Macmillan.

⁵ Smith, T.F. & Vandling, T. (2020). *The box of emotions*. Laurence King Publishing. See also Smith, T.F. (2016). *The book of human emotions: an encyclopedia of feeling from anger to wanderlust*. Wellcome Collection.

you have a crisp left but realise the packet is empty'⁴.) You might try to generate a selection of new terms, including some associated with:

- Negative feelings
 - Positive feelings
 - Certain people
 - Particular places
 - Different activities
- Once you've identified your new term, think about what it feels like to experience that sensation. How and where does it manifest? How do you distinguish it from other similar feelings? You could add some notes on this to your definition – or if you are making a card, you might put this information on the reverse side. You could use a diagram of a human body (even a rough stick figure would do) and add arrows to show where this emotion is felt.
 - Continuing to think about how this feeling is experienced, consider whether it evokes any images in your mind. These might be identifiable objects – e.g., in the case of 'crispless', above, you might envision a balled-up empty crisp packet. Alternatively, you might strongly associate this feeling with particular colours, shapes, or patterns. See if you can use these images to convey the mood visually (see example below).
 - Once you have begun to create your new list of emotional vocabulary, you may find it useful to consult if you are struggling to put your finger on how you are feeling – which is often the case when we are most agitated. This is one of the reasons it can be helpful to create a deck of emotion cards to flip through. You could also put the information in a format that is easier to display in a public place – e.g., you could print it up as a chart or poster – and this would give you a way to warn others (even in a tongue-and-cheek way) about how you're feeling, or to capture the mood in your office or amongst your team.



(This cartoon captures how hard it can be sometimes to describe our emotions in words – but shows how sometimes colours and patterns can make it easier to express how we feel.)