

The Feeling Wheel

A Tool for Expanding Awareness of Emotions and Increasing Spontaneity and Intimacy

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Abstract

The Feeling Wheel is designed to aid people in learning to recognize and communicate about their feelings. It consists of an inner circle with 5 sectors and two outer concentric circles. The sectors are each labeled with the name of a primary feeling, viz., mad, sad, scared, joyful, powerful, and peaceful. The outer rings contain names of secondary feelings related to the primary ones. The wheel has proven useful in assisting clients to learn how to identify, to express, to generate, and to change feelings. Suggestions for employment of the Feeling Wheel are provided.

In my work as a psychotherapist I often find people "at a loss" to describe their feelings. Yet it is the feeling vocabulary which increases the quality of communication. I have been especially impressed by Joseph Zinker's ideas about the therapist as an artist. His description of the therapist as an artist includes the idea that a therapist is a "person who uses inventiveness to help people shape their lives. Creative therapy has the same quality as making music or painting a picture; the person becomes an art medium, sometimes discouraging, jarring, stubborn, boring or abrasive; and often humbling and inspiring (Zinker, 1978)."

Others have also done some thinking and writing about the analogy between color and feeling. Robert Plutchick, a professor of psychiatry in New York, has added to the idea of describing feelings by color. His theory "looks upon the emotions as comparable to colors: some are fundamental, or primary, and others

are mixtures of the primaries, or secondary (Plutchick, 1980)."

When I developed the visual aid of the *Feeling Wheel* I used the six primary colors to represent six feelings in the center circle. I based these feelings on four commonly recognized basic feelings: mad, sad, glad, and scared. In order to keep the circle of feelings balanced between what I think of as primarily pleasant emotions and those which are usually unpleasant, I expanded the feeling "glad" to include "joyful," "powerful" and "peaceful." In the *Feeling Wheel* the color red represents peaceful; green represents "mad, orange represents scared; purple represents sad; blue represents peaceful; green represents powerful; and yellow represents joyful. Radiating out from these basic six colors and feelings are words which describe secondary feelings related to the center circle root feelings. The outer circles are colored in blends of the center circles in decreasing shades of intensity. Just as a creative artist, in painting a picture thinks of many different shades and blends of color, so we can learn to think of ever expanding circles of related feelings around basic inner emotions. This concept can help us and our clients communicate about feelings and become aware of the many blends involved.

In my experience as a psychotherapist I have often found that people seem to lack adequate vocabulary with which to describe what they are feeling. Many times in our American families, feeling and emotion are not easily expressed or discussed. As "Racket Theory" (Erskine & Zalcman, 1979) suggests, families tend to have a limited range of acceptable emotions. So, as little children, we learn to hold back expression of certain feelings which in our family we intuitively assume are not per-

missible. Thus we become handicapped in our ability to verbalize or express what we feel. There is for many a vagueness about how to talk about what we feel, so we simply say that we feel "good" or "bad," "O.K." or "not O.K.," "better" or "worse."

I developed the *Feeling Wheel* with some of these things mentioned in my mind. I first created it as a large colored poster which is now framed and hangs on the wall of my office. This provides a ready resource to me in my work with clients as it is positioned where they can refer easily to it in the course of our work together. In addition to the poster I made a handout which duplicates the poster in small size and which people can include with their notes and other handouts they receive during the course of their therapy. A copy of the handout is pictured on the opposite page. Blank spaces are provided in the outer circle in which people can add their own feeling words.

I make frequent use of the *Feeling Wheel* in seminars and workshops and with individuals and families in therapy. Perhaps the richest and most productive use of this tool is in a small group setting where it becomes a facilitator of creative play. I have a small dart gun with rubber tipped darts which we can shoot at the glass-covered poster mentioned earlier. The darts adhere to the glass and people are asked to verbalize messages which they can use to create the feeling on which their dart has landed. A similar version of this is played with another large poster placed on the floor with a game spinner dial which is used to dial a feeling. When the poster of the framed *Feeling Wheel* is not available, a similar version of the game is to have each person pick a number between 1 and 72 and count around the circle from a "given feeling" on the outer layer of the circle and then generate for themselves the feeling which their number identifies.

Another group use of the *Feeling Wheel* is to have the group sit on the floor and color the feelings they are having, using whatever color they choose to indicate their feelings. This serves as a playful and revealing way for group members to express themselves and their needs to other group members.

A further use I make of the *Feeling Wheel* is to facilitate the process of converting feelings. I ask clients to become aware of some of the bridges they experience between their feelings and ask them to use these bridges to change unwanted feelings into desirable feelings. For example, to convert scare into joy, clients might bridge through excitement. To do this, I use the analogy of clients waiting in line to ride a roller-coaster and the mix of feelings this experience creates. To convert feelings of fear about a certain situation into feelings of joy, people can fantasize that they have paid a fee to stand in line to perform the anticipated task just as if they were going on an exciting amusement park ride. In similar ways "sadness" can be converted into "peace" through the bridge of "boredom" or "sleepiness." Anger can be used to help people become aware of their power and enable them to channel its energy into strength and assertiveness.

My hope is that you will find this a helpful tool to creatively develop new ways for expressing feelings and enhancing your ability to find new options in feeling level communication. The *Feeling Wheel* can be a resource through which people can expand their vocabulary to express feelings. With increased vocabulary comes more spontaneity and creativity in sharing emotions. With increased vocabulary about emotions also comes the potential for greater power to interact intimately with other people.

