

A TEEN GUIDE TO DISCOVERING WHAT YOU FEEL

In My Feelings

SO YOU CAN DECIDE WHAT TO DO

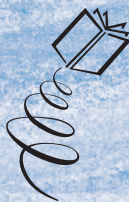
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Vidal Annan Jr., Ph.D.

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Introduction

If you are a teen who has picked up this book by your own choice, thank you. I appreciate you taking the time to learn an important skill on your journey to adulthood: understanding your emotions. I have worked with teens for most of my career as a clinical psychologist, and despite what some adults may say about you and your peers, I know that you are in fact interested in learning and growing. Your choice to read this book shows that you are.

If you didn't choose this book yourself, but someone is encouraging you to read it, I thank you too! The person who gave you this book—hopefully a caring adult—probably sees promise in you and knows that with the right information, you can take your life to the next level. This book is for you as well.

Regardless of why you are reading this book, it will help you better understand the feelings that you are having and use them to set and reach your goals. As a teenager, you are likely experiencing new feelings or old feelings in new ways. And you are probably trying to figure out what the heck is going on inside you!

Whether your feelings are pleasant (such as love, joy, or excitement) or unpleasant (such as loneliness, anxiety, or envy), you're trying to decipher them and determine what to do with them. This is a normal part of being a teen. I hope as you read on, you will see that emotions are more than just weird feelings you have in reaction to situations. They are important bits of information about yourself, others, and the world that you can understand and use to your benefit.

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At its core, this book is about emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence refers to how smart you are about emotions. It describes how well you interpret, manage, and make use of feelings in your life.

People with high emotional intelligence are often good at understanding their own and others' feelings and making helpful or useful decisions based on this emotional information. Some people think emotional intelligence may be more important for a successful life than cognitive intelligence, the ability to learn, remember, reason, and solve problems. Emotional intelligence isn't something you either are or aren't born with; you can learn and develop it.

That's where this book comes in. I wrote it to help you improve your emotional intelligence—especially one of its key elements, emotional self-awareness. Emotional self-awareness is your ability to recognize a feeling you're experiencing, label it correctly, and then figure out what it means to you and your current situation. Let's say you have to make a decision, and your stomach is tight, your heart is racing, and your hands are sweaty. What would you call the emotion you're feeling? It does not feel great, and maybe you'd like it to go away, but could you study this feeling to better understand it and use it to help you decide what to do?

The answer is yes. But sometimes emotions are hard to figure out. In fact, many adults still struggle with this process! But with a little help, you can learn to be more emotionally aware.

This book is designed to be read by teenagers like you. Caring adults may get their hands on this book and use it to understand and help you, but I'm not talking to them; I'm talking to you. This book is meant to interest *you* and give *you* information you can use right away. It's organized so you can find what you need easily. The first four chapters explore what it means to be a teenager, what emotions are, and why you have them. The following eight chapters delve into specific, individual emotions that you may be experiencing daily. You don't need to read this book from front to back unless you want to. Please feel free to jump right into the chapter of your choice! You can read some or all of this book and read it in whatever way helps you get the information you need to understand your feelings and use them to improve your life.

CHAPTER 1

The “Emotional” Teen

This book is about emotions—specifically, emotions experienced during the teen years. Compared to other stages of human development, these years tend to bring more intense emotional experiences. Movies, music, literature, and other forms of art and media are filled with images and stories of teens displaying strong feelings. These characters are often portrayed as absorbed in and overwhelmed by their feelings, to the point of disregarding their own and others’ well-being. Whether feelings are pleasant or unpleasant, they may seem to dominate the lives of teenagers and dictate their actions and choices. The teen years aren’t actually that turbulent, but people your age do experience new emotions, along with old emotions in new ways. These emotions are a natural result of all the changes that happen when you’re a teen—in your body, school, family, relationships, and other areas of your life.

Has an adult ever asked you “What is wrong with you?” or “Why do you act like that?” If so, and if you find such questions annoying, it might help to remember that often these adults just want to understand and maybe help you. You may shrug or answer “I don’t know” because you truly *don’t* know what’s wrong or why you did something. You’re simply trying your best to adjust to all the changes that seem to be happening to you all at once. The constant flurry of feelings can leave you wondering “Who am I?” and adults wondering “Who are you?”

As a clinical psychologist, I often have the opportunity to talk with teens at moments when they are open and vulnerable about their feelings. In therapy, they may let down their guard and show that they are struggling to figure out their lives. One of the strategies I use as a therapist is helping teens become more emotionally self-aware. When they're experiencing a range of feelings, it is valuable to identify those feelings and explore them to gain more information.

WILL'S STORY

One teen I worked with, Will, faced a unique and puzzling social problem. He felt confident and comfortable around strangers, but nervous around people he knew well, such as close friends and teammates. He could not understand why. "Isn't it usually the other way around?" he asked me. After all, he pointed out, most people are comfortable with familiar folks and nervous around new ones. He described being able to talk easily with people he'd recently met. He could introduce himself, talk about his interests, and ask friendly questions. But when it came to calling a longtime friend to hang out, he would find himself freezing up, overthinking the situation, and sometimes talking himself out of it. This was becoming a problem because on weekends, if his friends did not reach out to him, he was often home alone feeling bored. Will and his parents were starting to think there was something wrong with him. Did he have some kind of strange mental disorder that was affecting his social behavior?



After listening closely to Will and thinking about it for a while, I realized that he was confused about what feelings he was having and what they meant. I thought that if he could identify his feelings, it might change how he felt about himself and his experience. First I gave Will's feeling a name. His face showed surprise and relief when I used the word *anxious* to describe his experience. He seemed happy that his emotion had a name and that it wasn't *crazy* or *weird*. I explained that anxiety is a natural human response to uncertainty and doubt. As you will see in chapter 7, anxiety is an emotion that warns you when you might be in danger of an emotional wound, like rejection. In Will's case, when he wanted to invite friends over, he would often start to think about whether they *really* wanted to hang out with him or might agree to come over just to be nice. Maybe he was bothering them, he thought, and they had better things to do. If these thoughts were true, it could mean that his buddies didn't actually like him. That's what really worried him. His anxiety around potential social rejection was more intense with friends than with strangers because the rejection of friends would be more painful. With strangers, there was no serious emotional investment, so a rejection would not hurt as much.

As we talked, I could see Will gradually relax. Now that his feeling had a name, it also had *meaning*. He started to understand that his emotion was not just a "bad" feeling messing up his social life and his mental health, which therefore had to be "treated" in therapy. Rather, his anxiety was reflecting how close he felt to his friends and how much their opinions mattered to him. Of course, identifying the emotion and increasing his understanding was not the end of the story. He still had to figure out how to invite his friends over when he wanted to. But he became much more open to finding solutions once he had some emotional self-awareness.

Will's experience is just one example of the emotional challenges teenagers may face. He will probably have more confusing and bewildering situations to figure out, but he has an advantage now. If he does feel anxiety again, he will likely recognize it, call it by name, understand what caused it, and be able to use this knowledge to make good decisions.

Most people do not know why emotions exist or what purpose they serve for humans. Everyone has emotions, but they don't come with a user's manual to help people understand what causes them or help people figure out what to do with them. Most of the time, emotions just seem to happen to you. You might feel like you are a victim of your emotions. This can be particularly challenging when you are a teen. You are in the midst of important life changes and may still be coming to grips with them. Strong emotions may leave you feeling powerless and uncertain. You may also feel that others have a much better handle on their feelings. (This isn't usually true, by the way.)

Tackling Emotional Challenges With Emotional Intelligence

Although emotions have no user's manual, knowledge on the topic is vast and growing. Scientists have been hard at work for many years trying to figure out what emotions are, why humans have them, and how they affect people. This is critical work because people who are knowledgeable about emotions in themselves and others have an advantage in the quest for personal and social success. In other words, people who are more emotionally aware tend to connect more effectively with others, make better decisions, and feel less "crazy" when

dealing with stressful situations. Scientists describe someone's level of emotional awareness as their *emotional intelligence*. They say that emotional intelligence is just as important to successful human functioning as cognitive intelligence is.

Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize, control, and use emotions for effective decision-making. It's made up of five basic elements:

- **self-awareness:** the ability to recognize and understand your own feelings
- **self-regulation:** the ability to control your own emotional reactions and express your emotions appropriately
- **self-motivation:** the ability to set and stay committed to goals on your own
- **empathy:** the ability to understand other people's emotions and reactions
- **social skills:** the ability to relate to and engage well with others

People who are more emotionally aware tend to connect more effectively with others, make better decisions, and feel less "crazy" when dealing with stressful situations.

ELLA'S STORY

Ella is an ordinary teenager. Consider the following scenarios from her life:

- Ella's best friend gets upset when she hangs out with other friends.
- Ella's younger brother always seems to be angry at her.
- Ella shared some important news with a friend, who responded, "I don't care."
- Ella feels like throwing up every time she takes a test in school.
- Ella's boyfriend doesn't post photos of them together on social media.
- Ella can wake up on time for soccer practice but not for school.

What is Ella's brother's problem? Why isn't her boyfriend posting photos even though she does? And those exams—ugh!



These scenarios are very confusing if you don't understand the emotions that motivate them. Imagine if Ella had some insight into her brother's anger or her best friend's jealousy. Would she be able to handle the situations better? She probably would—and that is the benefit of emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence isn't inborn. It is a skill that anyone can learn by taking the time to study and practice it. This means that if you struggle to understand and make use of emotional information or deal with emotional change, you can improve! You can learn how to better recognize emotions in

yourself and others and use that information to reach personal goals and build stronger relationships.

In fact, now may be the best time to learn about emotions. As a teen, you can vividly recall the simpler feelings from your childhood as you begin to experience the more complicated range of emotions that you'll take with you into adulthood. You also are intellectually mature enough to understand feelings in more sophisticated, abstract ways. You can use these abilities to strengthen your emotional skills and use them to address both current and future challenges.

The Importance of Self-Awareness

This book focuses mainly on emotional self-awareness for two reasons. The first is that self-awareness is the core of emotional intelligence. If you cannot identify and understand your own internal experiences, you will not be able to understand others. There is a Buddhist saying that captures this idea: *To conquer oneself is a greater task than conquering others.* The second reason is, in my experience, most teens can figure out what to do once they figure out what they feel. In other words, it is understanding the emotion that may be your biggest challenge, not necessarily knowing what to do with the emotion. Like Will, you might not have the words to describe your feelings—especially if they are new, unpleasant, or overwhelming. You might know only that you're having a strong emotion and it feels weird. Your actions might be based more on trying to avoid or control the emotion rather than on what you can learn by paying attention to it.

Most teens can figure out what to do once they figure out what they feel.

Emotional self-awareness can be daunting at first because there are so many emotions, each with its own unique experience and function for you as an individual. My goal is to give you basic information about several key emotions so you can recognize them, understand them, and then figure out how to use them to your benefit. If you can tell your feelings apart and have a sense of what each feeling means, you will be in a better position to cope with your emotions and use them wisely.

Imagine, for example, that you and your best friend are both into soccer. You have played together for the past few years, and you both try out for the best team in your town. You find out two weeks later that your friend made the team! You haven't heard yet if you were selected. Your mind begins to race with thoughts of your friend playing on the team without you. Your stomach tightens and your mouth goes dry. Your fists clench and your teeth grit. When your dad asks you what's going on, you can't find the words to answer him. What are you feeling? Envy? Anxiety? Anger? Competitiveness? All of these feelings all at once? What will you do if you don't make the team?

What if you didn't just *know* that you were having difficult thoughts, feelings, and body sensations as you waited for your acceptance or rejection, but also had a deeper *understanding* of those emotions? Some adults say that if they had had a better sense of their emotions when they were younger, they might have avoided difficult situations or handled them better. Emotional self-awareness doesn't necessarily lead to a confusion-free, low-conflict life, but it can make it easier to cope with challenging situations. In the soccer scenario, you may or may not make the team with your friend, but understanding what's going on

inside you emotionally may help you seek support from others, stay connected to your friend, and keep striving for your goals.

This book will not cover every single feeling that you will experience in your teen years, but it looks at some of the most common emotions. These are love, anger, sadness, anxiety, and happiness. It also considers other emotions that are sometimes confused with each other, such as envy/jealousy and guilt/shame. But first, let's define two terms that you'll see frequently: *teenager* and *emotion*. It will be helpful to understand these two ideas in depth before you consider how they interact.

Thinking About Feeling

Emotional intelligence is a skill you can improve. One way to strengthen this skill is to reflect on times when you have had strong emotions. Think of a time when you felt especially emotional. Do you know what specific emotion you were feeling at the time? Was the emotion pleasant or unpleasant? Did the emotion help you in the situation or make things worse?