



The Road to Emotional Freedom

How to improve your relationships by making friends with your feelings.

I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. Psalm 6:6

Hey there! I am Tanja, and used to feel like I was a slave to my emotions. I tried to deny the unpleasant ones, stuffing them into an already filled to capacity emotional trunk. Every now and then a trigger would come along and the lock on the trunk would fail, and like opening Pandora's box, everything ugly inside me would come out and get all over my husband and kids. Then, blaming myself, I would shut down, and stuff it all back in, vowing to never let that happen again.

It always did.

That is, until I learned a healthier relationship with my emotions. Now they are my friends, not the supervillains in my life, and my relationships with my husband and kids are warm and loving, no longer fraught with contention. You can have a healthy relationship with your emotions, and those you love as well. It won't happen overnight, and it will be messy, but as with any new skill, with practice there is progress! You can begin today to feel more like your emotions are your friends, not your master. Others will see the change in you and want to get in on your secret.

In this mini course you will learn:

1. How to identify your emotions with precision.
2. How to determine the thoughts behind your emotions.
3. How to express your emotions without becoming overly emotional.

What are Emotions?

Emotions are like indicator lights on a dashboard.

They are neither good nor bad, regardless of how they feel.

Emotions are information your brain is giving you about what is going on “under the hood.”

Some indicators on my dashboard tell me how fast the car is going, or how much gas I have in the tank. These gauges tell me how to adjust in the moment.

Other indicators tell me about POSSIBLE problems that need my attention soon. When my tire pressure indicator light comes on, that tells me only that my tire pressure is low in at least one tire. To determine what the issue is, I have to do some investigating. First I drive to the gas station around the corner and use the air compressor that shows me what the PSI is in each tire. If they are all low, it is usually because we have had a sudden drop in temperature. If only one is low, or if it is significantly lower than the others, that tells me I could have a leak in that tire. If the same thing happened last week, then I KNOW I probably have a leak in the tire, and need to head for the local tire center.

If an oil light or check engine light comes on, I know I need to have the car checked by someone with specialized knowledge and equipment.

Emotions function in much the same way. Some let you know you need to adjust something you're doing in the moment. Others call for a little investigation, and often the solution is something you can take care of yourself. If you are having more extreme emotions, you might need to talk to a trusted friend or family member, or even hire a professional like me, a Christian Life Coach.

Emotional Diagnostics

Did you know you can go to an auto parts store and they can plug in an electronic diagnostic tool under your dashboard that will tell you what an indicator light is trying to tell you? I am going to give you some diagnostic tools that will help you investigate your emotional indicator lights.

Name that Emotion

So what are you feeling?

Are you sad, angry, happy, scared, or confused? These are your five basic emotions. They give us a direction to explore, but they don't give us all the information we need. You can find emotions wheels

online for free that expand those emotions, but my favorite tool is thesaurus.com. Say you are feeling sad or maybe even a little depressed. Go to thesaurus.com and type in “sad.” The first 5 words that come up are “bitter, dismal, heartbroken, melancholy, and mournful.” You think to yourself, “Dismal! That’s it! I feel dismal because I will be alone for the holidays.”

Now click on the word “dismal.” The first 5 words that come up are “depressing, dim, discouraging, disheartening, and dull.” You realize “disheartened” describes your mood even better than dismal, because your plans fell through for the holidays, and it seems like lately your plans are more likely to fall through than not.

You can keep going until you have found all the words that help describe the emotions you are experiencing. Developing a broad emotional vocabulary is one of the tools for achieving emotional freedom.

The Thought/Emotion Connection

Now, what do we do with emotional information after we find the right words? Did you notice the thoughts that were connected with the emotions above? Here’s the million dollar secret to emotional freedom. Our thoughts drive our emotions. If we change our thoughts, we can change our emotions.

Yep. That’s right. Even if our thoughts don’t come to us in words, we are thinking something before we have an emotion.

Here’s an example, sticking with the car metaphor.

Say you are a little late for work in the morning. You are already a little irritated because your teenager was mouthing off to you before you left. Someone cuts you off in traffic. You blast your horn at them and come to a screeching halt at the stoplight you would have missed if you hadn’t had to slow down for that idiot. You bang the steering wheel and growl out an expletive. When you finally get to work, you head to the break room to grab some coffee, but the coffee pot is empty, and no one bothered to start a new pot. You bang yourself on the forehead with your palm as you start the coffee maker, angry about your co-workers’ lack of consideration. While the coffee is brewing you charge to your cubicle to log in to your computer, unaware of the scowl on your face. Your co-workers give you “that look” when they see you, and you snap “what?!” They shrug or shrink and turn back to their work. This and that go wrong, and finally at the end of the day you are at the end of your rope. Your spouse calls and asks you to go out of your way to pick up something for dinner because of an unexpected hitch in their day. You shout, “Arg! No one respects my time!” Insert the usual marital spat here.

Turn Your Emotions Around with Neutral or Positive Thoughts

Okay, let’s retrace this lousy day and see if we can turn it around.

Remember, it started with the mouthy teen. The behavior was likely disrespectful. That is easy to believe. But does it mean your teen doesn’t respect you? What evidence do you have of that? Is there evidence that she does respect you?

What if instead of the thought, “I am not respected,” you intentionally tell yourself a different, but TRUE story? When the teen mouths off, think, “This kid is doing a fantastic job of being a teenager. Can I take

the time right now to help her take a more respectful approach to this conflict, or do I need to make an appointment with her this evening?" You give her a hug and say, "Honey, I can tell you feel strongly about this. I have to leave for work right now, but I have time this evening to work through this with you."

How does that feel? Probably much better than irritation and the seeds of anger and grumpiness.

Let's keep going to see how this new, more accurate narrative changes the day.

Because you are not preoccupied with the mouthy teen, you are more aware of your surroundings and you notice driving behavior in a car slightly in front of you in the next lane that puts you on alert. You let your foot off the gas, and sure enough, the car suddenly changes lanes and speeds through a yellow -no wait, now it's a red light. You think, "That driver must be on their way to a fire." You calmly stop at the light that car just ran, and take a moment to text "I didn't have a chance to say I love you this morning. Let me know if I can do anything to help you this evening," and send it to your spouse. This puts a smile on your face as you finish your commute.

You arrive at work, head for the coffee, discover it's empty and think, "Yay! I get to make a fresh pot!" While it is brewing, you head to your cubicle to log in to your computer, unaware of the smile that still lingers on your face. Your co-workers brighten as they see you walk in. You cheer, "Good morning! I am making a fresh pot of coffee, can I bring anyone a cup?" Sure there are glitches and mix ups in your day, but hey! That's pretty normal, is it not?

Finally you are ready to hop in the car and head back home, and you get the call to pick up dinner. "Of course, I would be happy to do that sweetie! Anything else you need? No? Okay, then I will be home in about half an hour." You are looking forward to a pleasant meal at home. After dinner you say to the offending teen of the morning, "let's clean up the kitchen together and have a chat." She says, "I'm sorry I popped off at you. I was actually mad because I couldn't find the shirt I wanted to wear. You didn't deserve that." You put your arm around her and say, "I know, baby girl. It's ok. Let's start the conversation over." You come to a resolution quickly that meets the needs of all parties.

Doesn't that feel better? In the first scenario you were making others' behavior about you and how you don't feel respected. In the second, you made it about them with positive or neutral thoughts.

The Thought - Emotion - Behavior Convoy

For as he thinks in his heart, so he is. Proverbs 23:7

So did you notice another relationship in the thought - emotion connection?

Emotions can drive our behavior, and our behavior affects those around us. In the first scenario, your irritation, grumpiness and anger drove your harsh behavior, which affected your co-workers and family members negatively, and ended in a spat with your spouse. In the second scenario, you brought a life-giving presence wherever you went, just by changing your thinking.

Do you see how this can be life-changing? And this is just a small taste of what is possible when you start owning your responsibility for your thoughts, emotions, and behavior.

Expressing Your Emotions without Getting Emotional

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs 15:1

Did you notice how, in the second scenario, you didn't even have to ask for an apology from your teen. You showed her unconditional love by giving her a hug when she mouthed off. You paused the conflict and restarted the conversation after your teen had time to think about her behavior. The conversation was productive and everyone came out a winner.

Now, if you had to have a conversation with her about speaking respectfully, it might start something like this:

In a calm voice you say, "You know, when you speak to me in that sarcastic tone, I kinda feel disrespected. What was going on in your head when you spoke to me that way?"

Note you are not saying "You were disrespectful" or "you made me feel disrespected" or "You don't respect me." You are owning your feelings and not making your kid responsible for your emotional well-being. You described the behavior without blame or shame. You gave her an invitation to own her responsibility for her thoughts, emotions, and behavior. It could also open the door to talk about anger or resentment she has for something that *has* diminished her respect for you. Maybe you have been crossing some boundaries with her by making unrealistic demands on her time, or maybe she is not feeling heard. Perhaps she feels she is ready for more freedom and responsibility than you are willing to give her.

Or it could just be that she couldn't find the shirt she wanted to wear.

Expressing your emotions without getting emotional can open up important conversations. It can reveal work you need to do on yourself or in the relationship, or it could pave the way for the other person to develop some self-awareness. It can help you unlock cycles of conflict in a relationship and open the door to more productive conflict.

Put it to Work!

Give the following exercises a try over the next few weeks. Be patient with yourself and with the people close to you. Changing our thinking doesn't happen overnight. If your spouse or partner is willing to do these exercises with you it can help if everyone understands the process.

Play Name that Emotion

Think about a strong emotional reaction you have had recently. It doesn't have to be negative. In fact, when you are starting out, it might be easier to start with "happy." Head over to thesaurus.com and start investigating until you find the right couple of words. Then finish this sentence: I felt _____ because _____.

For example:

I felt disrespected because my teen mouthed off to me and someone cut me off in traffic.

-OR-

I feel exultant because I finished this article!

More



Investigate Your Emotions

Use the chart at the end to investigate your thoughts, emotions, behavior, and results. You will notice that there are four columns labeled “Thought,” “Emotion,” “Behavior,” and “Result. It is arranged this way to show the progression from thought to result from left to right. However you will work the first step from right to left. You will also notice that the rows are paired by shading. That is because this exercise has two steps and the second row in the pair is there to practice thought changes.

Usually you will start with the “Result” or “Behavior” column, and backtrack to the thought. Sometimes you might notice the emotion before you act on it. (Hey! That’s a win!) In that case you would start in the “Emotion” column. For the “Behavior” and “Result” you can write what might have happened if you had acted on your emotion.

Now it is time to replace the negative thought with a true, often more accurate thought that is neutral or positive. In the second row, write a new thought and see how it feels. Try on a couple different thoughts and check your emotions. As long as it is true, a more neutral or positive thought is generally going to produce the emotions you would rather have.

I will use the two stories from above as an example.

Thought	Emotion	Behavior	Result
<i>“No one respects me.”</i>	<i>←I was a grumpy-but all day.</i>	<i>←I snapped when asked to pick up dinner.</i>	<i>←I had a fight with my spouse.</i>
More accurate thought: <i>“My teen is really good at being a teen.”→</i>	<i>Contentment→</i>	<i>I treat people with kindness.→</i>	<i>We had a nice evening and I had a productive talk with my teen.</i>

Talk About Your Emotions Instead of Acting on Your Emotions

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. James 1:19

Sometimes we do need an emotional release, and if you are in the middle of some conflict when your emotions are rising, it could be helpful to take 5-10 minutes to cool down and see if you can identify the thoughts driving the emotion. Just make sure you come back to the conflict and get it resolved.

After you have had a chance to cool down, resume the conversation by following this model:

1. Describe the situation.
2. Name the emotion that was coming up.
3. State the thought that preceded the emotion.
4. Ask for clarification, or admit what you know to be true.
5. Invite collaboration in making the conflict productive.

“When you yelled at me, I felt hurt because I thought ‘why does everything have to be my fault?’ What was actually going on for you when you raised your voice? (Pause for the answer and really listen.) Help me understand how I can respond in a way that would be helpful to you in these moments.

“When I saw that the dishes still were not done, I felt completely deflated. I was thinking ‘You don’t care as much about this home as I do.’ I know that is not true, but it seems like communication is breaking down somewhere. Would you work with me to improve our communication?”

Use this worksheet to help as you cool off and plan for resuming the conversation (you will find a clean copy at the end). This is similar to the emotional investigation chart, but this exercise is to help you plan a better start when you come back to the conversation.

Describe the situation:	When you yelled at me
Name the emotion that came up:	I felt hurt
What were you thinking? Is it true?	I thought, “Why does everything have to be my fault?”
Will you state a positive or neutral thought, or ask for clarification?	What was actually going on for you when you raised your voice?
What is the invitation to collaborate?	Help me understand how I can respond in a way that would be helpful to you in these moments.

Keys to making this strategy successful:

1. Be quick to listen and slow to speak. Listen to what the other person is really saying, not just for the gap in the conversation where you can start talking.
2. Invite silence into the conversation. Give yourself and the other person time to think.
3. Ask clarifying questions. “Tell me more about that” or “Help me understand what you mean when you say_____”
4. Summarize to make sure you understand the intended meaning. “What I hear you saying is (restate what you heard in your own words).”
5. Choose patience and show grace with each other.
6. Ask for do-overs and restarts.

Wrapping It All Up

In this mini-course you have learned that emotions are indicators. When an emotion calls for further investigation, you know to go to [thesaurus.com](https://www.thesaurus.com) to fine-tune your emotional vocabulary. You have learned how to identify the thoughts behind your emotions, and how to change your thoughts to more true neutral or positive thoughts. You understand the connection between thoughts, emotions, and behavior, and you have a strategy for talking about your emotions without acting on them. You are well on your way to emotional freedom and improved relationships. Now get out there and make friends with your feelings!

Let's Connect!

After a few weeks of using these exercises, let me know how they helped. The best way to connect with me is in my [Facebook Group](#), [email](#), or if you think you would like to go deeper with healing your relationships, [book a free call](#), and we can talk about how coaching can help. I have a “try before you buy” plan if you want to give coaching a try without obligation. What do you have to lose?

Talk to you soon!



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Find me on Facebook in the group Christians Breaking the Chains of Generational Trauma and Abuse

Emotional Investigation Chart

Thought	Emotion	Behavior	Result

Describe the situation:	
Name the emotion that came up:	
What were you thinking? Is it true?	
Will you state a positive or neutral thought, or ask for clarification?	
What is the invitation to collaborate?	

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