

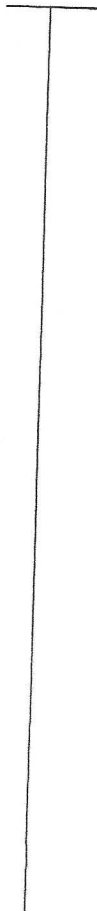
CHAPTER 5

FEEL

SOAKING SESSION

King of My Heart by John Mark & Sarah McMillian

Amazing by Todd Warren



When we ignore, numb, or invalidate emotions, we pay a heavy price.
 But when we feel and work through emotions, we receive their priceless gifts.

All of our emotions, yes, all of them, offer us gifts. Look at this chart of the most common emotions and their surprising gifts.

THE GIFTS OF EMOTIONS

ANGER STRENGTH

SHAME HUMILITY

FEAR WISDOM

PAIN HEALING

LONELINESS REACH OUT

GUILT AMENDS

JOY HEALING

SADNESS COMFORT

ANGER

Anger can become one of the most powerful fuels to propel us toward hope and strength—not an aggressive, offensive, or defensive kind of strength. Instead, it's a deep confidence—a sense of healthy control to make good choices.

Essentially, anger alerts us to examine who or what is in control. The *feeling of anger* isn't a sin, and it's not wrong, but *our actions* that are fueled by anger can be right or wrong, productive or destructive. We miss out on anger's gift when we are controlled by intense feelings of bitterness or resentment, lash out at others, or turn the anger inward to hurt ourselves. This is what the scripture encourages us to do: "And 'don't sin by letting anger control you'" (Ephesians 4:26 NLT). Another translation explains, "Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry. Don't give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life" (verses 26–27 MSG).

We also don't experience anger's gift of strength when we deny it or stuff it. *Nice people* often have difficulty being honest about their feelings of anger. They've concluded (or they've been taught) they should never be angry, hurt, or afraid, so they stuff these emotions under a blanket of spiritual nobility—false and destructive spiritual nobility. Allow me to illustrate this for you with a metaphor:

If a woman in heels walks in the room and steps on your foot, you'd say, "Ouch!" The woman might say, "Oh, I'm so sorry." And you answer, "That's okay." What if the

woman steps on your foot the next day and quickly apologizes? Would you say, "Not a problem"? How about the next day and the next? Sooner or later, saying, "It's okay" isn't an appropriate response to the reality of the situation. One of our problems is that we let people trample on our boundaries so often and so long that we think, *Well, one more time won't matter*. But it's never one more time.

The sooner we can speak up, the less dramatic it will be. Do we take a risk by speaking up? Yes, but we take a bigger risk by *not* speaking up. We risk losing our dignity and ourselves. When we remain quiet, we create an inner world of assumptions. We think we can't speak up, we don't know what to say, and we believe the world will come to an end if we say anything. It's not noble, right, and good to remain quiet when a boundary is repeatedly crossed. Jesus was the most loving, secure person who ever lived, and he spoke up. So can we. He spoke truth to the religious leaders about being unloving, unkind, and hypocritical.

Allowing ourselves to feel repressed anger often reveals an unmet need or a crossed boundary. Honoring our anger prompts us to take steps to speak up and address the specific need or boundary. The more we set healthy boundaries, the stronger we feel as we take personal responsibility to guard our well-being. (We will explore how to set healthy boundaries in Chapter 8.)

SHAME

Underneath our feelings of shame is a deep desire to be known and loved for who we truly are—with nothing to hide. The thoughts connected to feelings of shame come in two painfully accusative forms: “You’re not good enough.” and “Who do you think you are?” Shame creates a type of *false humility*, which appears virtuous but is actually very harmful. This counterfeit humility keeps us stuck in a destructive form of self-doubt or self-hatred in which we are obsessed with (and afraid of) what others think of us.

Working through the self-doubt and self-hatred of shame can lead us to the gift of true humility. Humility is knowing who you are and being comfortable enough in your own skin to show up just as you are in your relationships. This kind of humility allows you to give yourself more freely to others because you’re not holding back out of fear of being rejected. With true humility, we can develop real relationships and live confidently from our true identity. The more we embrace vulnerability, the more we receive the gift of humility.

FEAR

Wisdom is the ability to apply knowledge to specific circumstances. As we face our fears with courage and insight instead of letting them control or distract us, we receive the much-needed gift of wisdom in how to proceed in uncertain situations.

The first step in claiming fear’s gift is taking the time to stop, reflect, and identify the source of the fear. For example, perhaps we are encountering a person, place, or thing posing a real threat to our physical safety. Instantly, our heart is fearful because we believe another person’s choice, or perhaps our own choice, is leading us down a destructive path. We believe our identity and security are threatened. In this moment, the feelings of fear are screaming, “Watch out! Don’t lose yourself!”

To put it simply, fear alerts us to *perceived* threats, but sometimes these threats are more than perceived—they’re very *real*. Our fear energizes us for fight or flight in precarious situations, and it helps us make wiser choices. Much of the time, however, the powerful feeling of fear isn’t based on external realities; it’s been aroused by our internal insecurities,

worries, and memories of past wounds. This fear clouds our judgment. It makes us defensively harden our hearts and anxiously control people and our environment. This reaction doesn’t bring wisdom and strength. Instead, it produces obsessive thinking, which inevitably leads to more fear in our minds and hearts. We need to determine if the threat is real or not. If it’s real, we need to take action to protect ourselves and deal with the threat. If it’s not real, we need to take this opportunity to look inside and address the wounds that haven’t yet been healed.

The moment when we stop to recognize the source of our fear is where the real work of letting go begins—letting go of the old fears that are blocking us from true freedom. We can’t know freedom or think clearly if we are wearing lenses of fear.

SADNESS

Sorrow, too, offers a valuable gift. As we work through grief and sadness, we gradually experience the comfort that helps us find meaning again after a loss.

Sadness is different from depression. Depression is often defined as the refusal to grieve. It occurs when we get stuck in the thoughts surrounding our loss and hold onto the pain, refusing to be comforted. We unconsciously believe, *If I let go of the pain, I will have to grieve the loss . . . and if I grieve the loss, I'm afraid I'll be left with nothing.*

Jesus tells us, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4 NIV). Working through sadness brings us to a more mature place as we recognize that throughout our lives, we encounter many losses to be grieved. Every loss is a kind of death. Life is filled with a thousand "deaths" but in grieving each loss, we experience comfort and new life.



Realizing there are gifts on the other side of painful emotions changes our perspective. How is this insight changing your perspective on your uncomfortable emotions?

What are some ways that recognizing the gifts that come from each of these emotions help you admit and own the difficult emotions you have been avoiding?

Does this new perspective give you hope? Explain your answer.

Can you remember a time when working through a difficult emotion was productive and completely worth it? Describe that experience.

What gift did you receive as a result?

Look back at the chart at the beginning of this chapter and notice that "joy" and "pain" both release the same gift of "healing." Is this surprising to you? Explain why both joy and pain bring healing.

FEELINGS SKILLS

One of the most important lessons we learn in recovery is that our emotions aren't good or bad, right or wrong. We weren't designed to hold our emotions in. When we repress emotions, they don't go away. They're still there, but we aren't allowing them to play their crucial role as windows to our thoughts, our desires, and our choices.

To gain clarity about the role of our emotions, we simply start by acknowledging them as they occur—without judgment or blame. They are part of being alive. Achieving wholeness and health always involves the ability to identify emotions and process them effectively. Being specific about what we feel is essential to knowing how to meet the needs that our feelings are highlighting. Here is a list to help you begin to understand and develop a vocabulary for your emotions.

FEELINGS WORD LIST

Feelings when your needs are met:

Happy

Glad
Calm
Content
Cheerful
Joyful
Amused
Excited
Eager
Warm
Pleasant
Tranquil
Serene
Peaceful

Loved

Affectionate
Sensitive
Caring
Warm
Touched
Tender
Devoted
Compassionate
Comfort
Attracted
Close
Kind

Hopeful
Confident
Empowered
Open
Strong
Safe
Secure
Expectant
Optimistic
Encouraged

Peaceful

Calm
Content
Quiet
Relieved
Satisfied
Tranquil
Centered
Quiet
Relaxed

Inspired
Eager
Enthusiastic
Amazed
Passionate
Eager
Daring
Optimistic
Powerful
Empowered
Playful
Thrilled

Thankful

Moved
Grateful
Touched
Glad
Joy
Relief
Elated
Delighted
Ecstatic

Feelings when your needs aren't met:

<i>Confused</i>	<i>Sad</i>	<i>Afraid</i>	<i>Lonely</i>
Indecisive	Broken	Apprehensive	Disconnected
Hesitant	Depressed	Threatened	Disinterested
Distrustful	Miserable	Panic	Forgotten
Lost	Powerless	Petrified	Abandoned
Embarrassed	Depressed	Terrified	Bored
Pessimistic	Despair	Worried	Lost
Disillusioned	Discouraged	Scared	Alienated
Perplexed	Dejected	Alarmed	Cold
Inadequate	Wretched	Dread	Detached
Dazed	Gloomy	Horrified	Distant
Ambivalent	Empty	Shocked	Numb
Puzzled		Rattled	Withdrawn
Preoccupied	<i>Hurt</i>	Overwhelmed	Indifferent
	Crushed		Apathetic
<i>Angry</i>	Agony	<i>Anxious</i>	
Enraged	Devastated	Ashamed	<i>Ashamed</i>
Irritated	Heartbroken	Suspicious	Humiliated
Annoyed	Miserable	Nervous	Disgraced
Bitter	Offended	Wary	Mortified
Provoked	Tortured	On edge	Indignity
Insulted	Tormented	Agitated	Rejected
Boiling	Humiliated	Disturbed	Guilty
Indignant	Dejected	Troubled	Isolated
Contempt	Ashamed	Unsettled	Flawed
Disgusted	Appalled	Doubtful	Hopeless
Horrified	Victimized	Timid	Worthless
Hostile	Rejected	Guarded	
Appalled	Deprived	Fragile	
		Vulnerable	
		Insecure	
		Restless	
		Self-conscious	



Think of a recent experience (painful or pleasant) and identify the feelings you had at the time.

Imagine Jesus looking at you with warmth and affection. He invites you, "Tell me how you feel." In response, write a letter to him to express your anger, sorrow, fear, shame, or any other painful emotion. (Take your time and be completely honest with him. Use additional paper if you need to.)

Now review the chart and see if there are more specific emotions that better reflect your experience.

Step 2: Identify the Feeling and Rate the Intensity

The second step involves identifying and rating the emotion. That sounds easy, but for many, it's incredibly difficult. For years, they've discounted their feelings and buried them, or they've been so overwhelmed by one or two dominant emotions that they haven't fully felt others.



Once you have identified the emotion, rate it on a scale of 1-10 (1 being low and 10 being high). (For example: I feel angry. On a scale of 1 to 10, my anger is an 8. It's very intense!)

When our emotions are over a 6, we often make compulsive, panic-driven decisions. No one *likes* to feel uncomfortable emotions, but we need to learn how to tolerate them as we wait until the intensity of our feelings comes down to a manageable level. Then we can think clearly to address related problems and decisions. This learned skill is called "distress tolerance."

It is helpful to realize that the intensity of any and every emotion we experience can only last up to 20 minutes. After that (and often long before that), the intense emotion begins to subside.

THE 5 STEPS OF DISTRESS TOLERANCE

Emotional health requires self-awareness and the ability to manage emotions. Here are five steps to help you with distress tolerance.⁹ To begin, identify a recent situation you would like to process using the following annotated steps:

Step 1: Identify the Source of the Emotion

Some of us have neglected our emotions so much and for so long that we have difficulty identifying the event that prompted our feeling. The first step, then, is to become skilled in making this connection.



Think of a recent time when you had uncomfortable or unpleasant emotions. Trace an emotion to a specific event, conversation, or circumstance. (For example: I'm upset about the argument I had with my spouse this morning.)

Step 3: Increase Self-awareness through Observation

When emotions overwhelm us, we can slow down and become more self-aware. In Step 3, you notice how you are responding to the emotion. You become more aware of what's going on in your mind (like racing thoughts) and in your body (like physical tension).



Think of the event and the feeling you described in Steps 1 and 2. Now, notice and observe how the emotion affected you physically and mentally. No need to write anything down during Step 3. Just notice and observe:

- » Notice your physical movements.

- » Notice and look for any tense areas in your body.

- » Observe your thoughts.

- » Observe your behaviors or actions.

» Your behaviors or actions (ex. I'm biting my nails.)

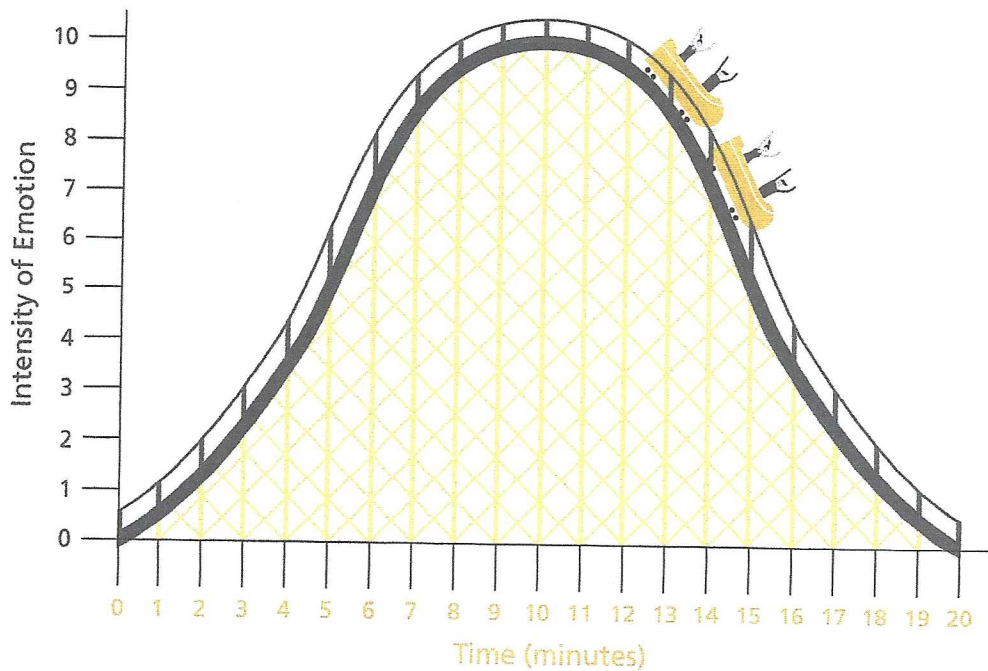
» Your actual responses (actions) to the event (ex. I went to the kitchen and binged. Then I purged.)

» Your feelings before, during, and after (ex. I felt numb during the fight. Hours later, I was so angry and so uncomfortable I couldn't stand it, so I binged and purged. I felt relief after I binged and purged, but then I felt super guilty and mad at myself.)

» Your perceptions following the event about yourself, the other person or people involved, and God

Step 5: Choose Healthy Alternatives

Emotions have a natural cycle: often a rapid rise and a gradual fall. The steep hill of roller coaster illustrates the predictable rise and fall of emotions. Like the scale you used in Step 2 of the distress tolerance exercise, the intensity of any emotion starts at 1 and can rise to a maximum of 10. As you ride the emotion up the hill of intensity, your discomfort increases.



Too often, we feel so uncomfortable with the heightened feelings that we try to escape or numb the emotion. We may do this through repression, substances, eating disordered behavior, or self-harm, but there are far better ways to handle overwhelming feelings. We can replace avoidant, self-destructive behaviors with self-soothing ones. We can use a variety of methods to ride out the level of intensity. These include, but are not limited to, breathing deeply, listening to music, taking a walk, talking to a friend, walking the dog or petting a cat, reading a book, taking a hot shower, watching a favorite movie, or journaling. These (and many others) enable us to be fully aware of our emotion while doing something productive, allowing the emotion to naturally fall to a more manageable level.

The self-soothing process equips people to use their emotion to identify distorted thinking, consider reasonable options, and make a good decision. It helps them move from flawed reasoning, dominated by intense emotions, to a *wise mind*. Dr. Marsha M. Linehan, explains, "Wise mind is that part of each person that can know and experience truth. It is where the person knows something to be true or valid. It is almost always quiet. It has a certain peace. It is where the person knows something in a centered way." Wise mind is the condition in which people are able to observe reality, think clearly, and respond to people and situations with confidence. With a clear and reasonable mind, people can make better decisions and have confidence to take action.



What behaviors do you engage in to avoid feeling your emotions and riding them out?

How does cutting off the natural rise and fall of an emotion through this behavior keep you stuck in unhealthy patterns?

At what level of intensity and/or minute of time do you usually cut off the natural pattern and try to escape the feeling?

Does this really help you manage the feeling? Why or why not?

What are several things you do that make you feel relaxed and calm?

Which one is the most pleasurable and effective?

How can you invite God into this process?

How might others help you in this process?

The most important and final point is this: *Don't make decisions when your emotional intensity is above a 6!* Use these five steps and ride out the emotion. (Remember, the intensity of an emotion does not last longer than 20 minutes.) In the past, we felt so threatened by the feelings that we ran away, stuffed them, fought back, used destructive behaviors to cope, or catastrophized, "I'm going to die!" But with our new understanding and these new skills, we can tolerate these emotions and actually use them to take steps forward in our healing and growth. When the emotion has subsided to a more manageable level, you will have the clarity to make wise decisions.

A NEW NORMAL

Let me give an example of how these four steps operated for Ali, a young woman in her mid-20s. After she had been in treatment for several months, she was doing much better. She returned home and went back at work. In fact, she was doing so well she decided to go off her meds. Before long, however, her symptoms returned stronger than ever. She called to tell me she felt suicidal. She said, "I'm so sad and so angry; I don't know if I can go on. I think I need to go back on my medication."

I asked, "What are you feeling right now as you are telling me about this?"

"Anxious," she said. "Actually, panic."

"What else?" I asked.

"I feel like a failure."

"What feeling does that sound like?"

"Shame," she said.

"Ali, rate the intensity of your anxiety and shame on a scale of 1 to 10."

She thought for a couple of seconds and then told me, "Seven."

"Ali, I know it feels like a seven right now, but it's probably not really a seven. You're not really in any danger, and we know that you are not a failure. Can we talk more about what this is about?"

"Yeah," she answered, "It's about the meds. I really think I need them, but I don't want to go back on them. I have worked so hard in my recovery, and going back on them makes me feel like a failure." Her voice rose. "Margaret, I don't know what to do!"

"It sounds like your anxiety just went up to an eight. Tell me more of what you're thinking."

Ali thought for a few seconds and then said, "I keep imagining what will happen if I don't go back on the meds. I fear that my symptoms will get worse, and I will start having thoughts of killing myself like I used to! But I also hate the thought of going back on them. It seems like a trap either way."

"Now, notice how you are responding to these thoughts and how your body feels."

After a pause, she explained, "I'm . . . I'm clenching my fists. My shoulders are sore, and I keep pacing. I can't sit still."

I explained, "Ali, going back on your meds is a very important decision. It's not a good idea to make it while you're so anxious. What can you do for the next 20 minutes or so that will help you to feel more calm and relaxed?"

Ali already knew what made her feel better, so she instantly said, "I'm going to go outside to take a walk."

"Great," I told her. "Call me when you get back, and we'll talk through a decision when you are more relaxed."

About 30 minutes later, Ali called. She was in a very different frame of mind. She still felt anxious, but she said the intensity was only at a level of three, so she could reason much better to figure out the best decision. As we talked, she realized she was trying to make a very important medical decision without talking to her doctor. She realized she was anxious because she didn't have enough information to make a sound decision. She decided to give him a call. Her choice to set up an appointment with her psychiatrist to talk about her current symptoms and obtain information and advice from a medical professional was exactly what she needed to do. It enabled her to feel good about her choice instead of panicking about trying to make a decision with little information.

"But what about the shame?" she asked. "How do I work through that? Does going back on my meds make me a failure?"

In response to this very important question, Ali took some time to think, pray, and listen in the days before her appointment with her psychiatrist. This helped her gain a sense of peace that God was with her in the decision-making, and he was guiding her process. As she talked with God and others, she realized that her thought of being a failure was the furthest thing from the truth.

When she talked to her physician, she was thorough and reassuring. She recommended Ali go back on her meds, and then they would reevaluate every few months.

With this new information, Ali decided to go back on her meds. She hoped she and her doctor could wean her off them after six months, but that decision would have to wait. For now, she was sure she was making a very good choice.

Whenever your emotional intensity has risen above a five, and you use the 5 steps to calm down and make a good decision, it's wise to stop and reflect on the event a few days later. Talk to your counselor, your sponsor, or a trusted friend who understands the process of emotional regulation and can help you analyze what happened. You might discuss:

- » How well did I identify the emotion? Were there other emotions that complicated the moment, but I wasn't aware of them at the time?
- » How did I rate the intensity?
- » What was the cause? What was the trigger? What was going on in my mind and body at that time?
- » What distorted thoughts or lies did these intense emotions create? How did these thoughts affect me?
- » What were the self-soothing behaviors I used to lower the intensity of the feelings?
- » What resolution did I find when I could think more clearly?
- » What did I do well? What could I have done a little better?
- » What happens when I use unhealthy behaviors (substances, eating disorder behavior, self-harm, etc.) to subvert the process?
- » How will I handle a similar situation in the future?



Who can help you process these questions?

Do you think the discussion will produce shame or confidence?

Explain your answer.

God is never surprised at the intensity of our emotions. Jesus felt what we feel. He was so afraid in the Garden of Gethsemane that the capillaries in his face burst (Luke 22:44). He understands our full range of feelings, and he doesn't condemn us for being emotional. Anger is the right response to injustice and trampled boundaries, sorrow is the right response to loss, and fear is the right response to threats. God welcomes our honesty about our feelings, so we can take all of them to our Father who listens to every word.

As we practice the five-step process of distress tolerance, it gradually becomes second nature. Over time, we learn to anticipate our emotional reactions to the recurring triggers, so we're not surprised when the intensity of our feelings spikes. We wade into the five steps, intentionally regulate our emotions, and find ways to make good decisions in response to difficult situations. And over time, as we practice these skills, we find a new normal. Painful emotions don't threaten us like they did before. We realize they are the raw materials we can use to craft a life of wisdom, joy, and authenticity.