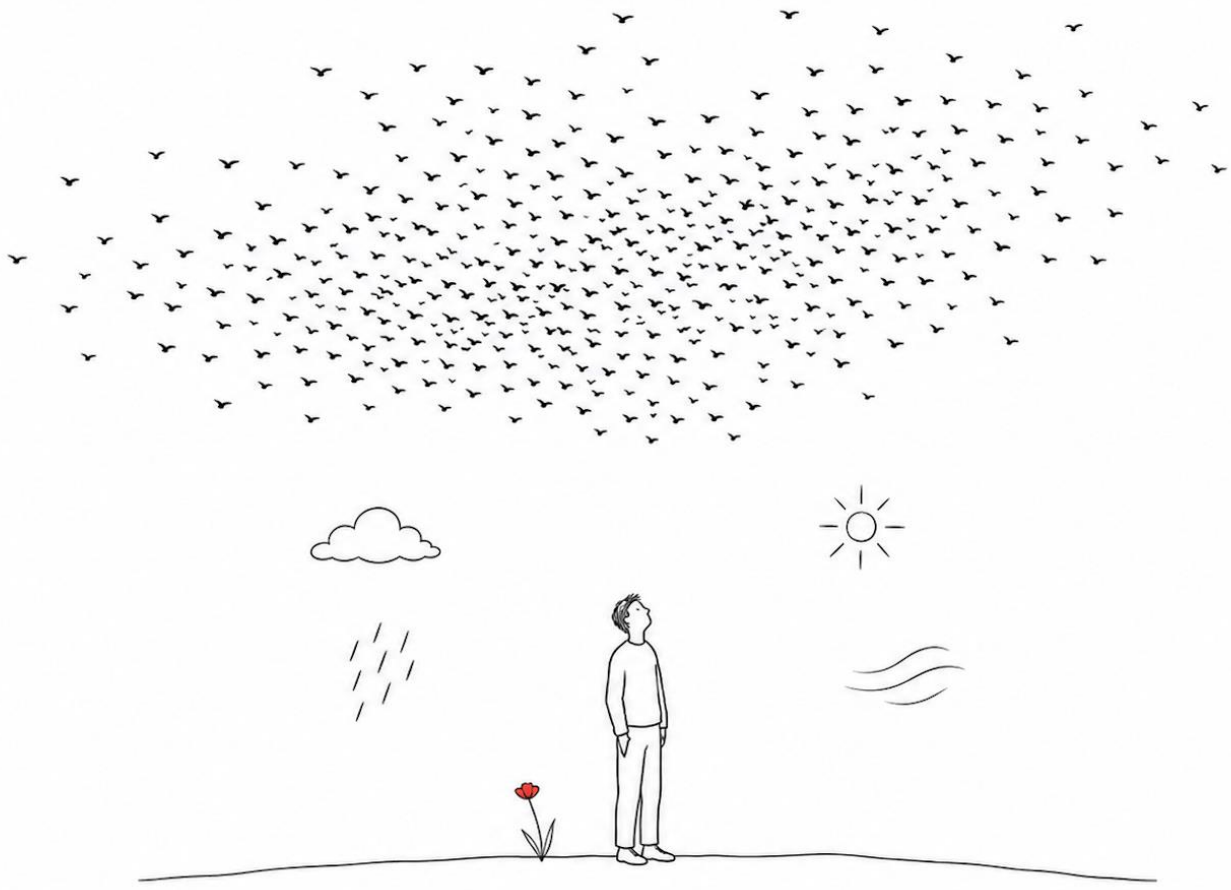
Emotions Decoder

A simple guide to recognising, naming, and understanding your feelings



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Introduction

This is a small book about emotions.

Not every feeling needs deep analysis. Not every feeling needs to be acted on. But most feelings are easier to live with when we can name them.

This book is a simple decoder. It is here to help you pause, find a word that captures what you feel, and choose one small next step.

It is not a replacement for therapy, medical care, or support from people who know you well. It will not make life calm all the time, nor will it stop difficult feelings from showing up.

But it may help you understand them a little sooner.

You can read it straight through, or use it when a feeling is hard to name. Start with the four-step check in Chapter 4, then use the emotion chapters as a guide. When you need help finding a starting word, skip to the Quick Decoder at the end.

The aim is not to get every label right. The aim is to build a clearer, kinder language for your own inner life.

Close enough is good enough. One small step is enough to begin.

About the Author

Steve Ellen is a psychiatrist and writer who draws on decades of clinical experience to make mental health and everyday emotions easier to understand. He writes about psychology, relationships and the mess of being human, with curiosity, humour and a healthy scepticism of easy answers. He co-authored Mental: Everything You Never Knew You Needed to Know About Mental Health.

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Chapter 1: Feelings Are Signals

Most of us were never taught much about emotions. We were taught maths, spelling, and how to look both ways before crossing the road, but many of us were left to work out our feelings by ourselves.

Some families had plenty of emotion words. Other families had only a few acceptable settings: fine, busy, tired, angry, or don't talk about it.

So we grow up with powerful feelings and a small vocabulary. We say "I'm stressed" when something more specific is happening. We say "I'm fine" when we are not fine.

This little book is built around a simple idea:

Emotions are signals.

They are quick messages from the body and mind. They tell us that something may need attention, but they are not always accurate, polite, or convenient.

A feeling is not a judge, a command, or a diagnosis. It is a signal.

A smoke alarm is a useful comparison. Sometimes it warns you about a real fire, and sometimes it goes off because you burnt the toast. Either way, the sensible move is to pause and check.

What is happening here? Is there real danger? Has something changed? Has a boundary been crossed? Do I need rest, food, company, repair, courage, or a better plan?

That small pause is where emotional skill begins.

The simple move

You do not need to become a feelings expert. Most of the time, the helpful move is simple: notice what is happening, name it as best you can, ask what it might point to, and choose one small, decent next step.

Noticing matters because emotions often arrive in the body before they reach words. Naming matters because vague feelings are harder to work with. Understanding matters because the same feeling can require different responses. The next step matters because feelings become useful when they lead to proportionate action.

This book is not about being calm all the time. Calm is useful, but it is not the whole point. Some situations should move us to tears, laughter, repair, protest, love, or change.

The aim is not to flatten your emotional life. It is to understand it well enough that it does not run the whole show.

The goal is not perfection. It is a better relationship with your inner weather. A good emotional vocabulary will not stop the weather, but it can help you read the sky.

As you move through this book, do not worry too much about finding the perfect label. Emotions blend, shift, and arrive in clusters. Close enough is good enough if the word helps you understand yourself and choose a better next step.

The next time you notice a feeling, try saying: **Something is happening in me.**

Then ask: **What might this feeling be trying to tell me?**

That question creates a little space between the spark and the action. In that space, you have more room to choose.

And that is where this primer begins.

Chapter 2: What Is an Emotion?

An emotion is not just a thought, a mood, or a dramatic word for “having a lot on”.

An emotion is a fast body-and-mind shift. Something happens, outside you or inside you, and your system responds. Your body changes, your attention moves, and an urge appears.

That shift can be subtle. Sometimes it’s a flicker of irritation, or the urge to walk away, explain, apologise, hide, laugh, cry, or fix something. At other times it may show up as a physical sensation, such as tightness in the chest, sudden warmth, or a stomach drop (of course, not all physical symptoms are emotions; some need medical attention).

It may not arrive with a neat label. Most feelings do not enter the room and announce themselves. They arrive as sensations, attention, and urges. Then the mind tries to explain them.

An emotion starts as a signal. The story comes next. Sometimes the story is useful. Sometimes it is unfair or incomplete. That is why it helps to know the three basic parts of an emotion.

1. Something changes in the body

Emotions are physical. You might notice heat, heaviness, tightness, restlessness, a change in breath, a change in energy, or a sense that your body wants to move, hide, freeze, or reach out.

These changes are not proof that the feeling is right. They are signs that something in you has shifted.

Think of the body as the first messenger. A better first question than “What is wrong with me?” is: What am I noticing in my body?

2. Your attention moves

Emotions change the spotlight. They make some parts of the situation feel bigger, sharper, closer, or more urgent.

This is why emotions can feel convincing. If the spotlight is on danger, the world looks dangerous. If the spotlight is on rejection, the room looks cold. If the spotlight is on unfairness, small details can become evidence.

The spotlight is useful, but it is narrow. A good second question is: What is this feeling making me notice?

That question gives you a little distance. It lets you respect the signal without assuming it has shown you the whole picture.

3. An urge appears

Every emotion comes with an urge to action. You may want to move toward, move away, speak up, hide, repair, check, control, rest, connect, try again, or give up.

The urge is not the same as the right action. The urge to send the angry email is not proof that doing so is wise. The urge to cancel because you feel anxious is not proof that staying home is the best choice.

An emotion gives you energy and direction. Your job is to choose how to use it.

A useful question is: What does this feeling want me to do?

Then add: Would that actually help?

The urge is information. It is not the boss.

Emotions, feelings, moods, and stress

People often use these words as if they mean the same thing, but it helps to separate them.

An emotion is usually sharp and specific. Something happens, and you begin to notice it. It's an automatic, bodily response.

The words feeling and emotion are used interchangeably, but strictly speaking, a feeling is your conscious, subjective experience of a response. For the rest of this book, I'll use the words loosely, as most people do.

A mood is more like emotional weather. It lasts longer and may not have a single clear trigger. A mood is more like the background weather, whereas an emotion is usually a more specific response – how you feel in the moment.

Moods can be harder to decode because they are often made from many small things: sleep, food, pain, hormones, conflict, alcohol, loneliness, or too much time online.

Stress is what happens when the demands on you feel bigger than your capacity. Stress can include many emotions. Saying "I'm stressed" may be true, but it may not be specific enough to guide your next step.

If you say, "I'm stressed," try asking: What flavour of 'stressed' is this? The better the label, the better the response.

A simple practice

For the next few days, when a feeling shows up, try this quick check: body, spotlight, urge.

Body: What am I noticing in my body?

Spotlight: What is this feeling making me notice?

Urge: What does this feeling want me to do?

Then ask: What would be one small, wise next step? Not the perfect step. Just one small step that is less likely to make things worse.

That is how emotions become useful. They begin as signals. You become psychologically skilled when you pause long enough to read the emotion.

Chapter 3: Why Naming Feelings Is Hard

Naming a feeling sounds simple: pause, look inside, and say what is there. But feelings rarely arrive with labels. The word often comes later.

Naming feelings can be hard because feelings are fast, mixed, social, and sometimes hard to translate. The good news is that naming is a skill, and you can train and improve your recognition.

You do not need the perfect word. You need a useful word.

Feelings move fast and blend

Emotions often appear before language catches up. By the time you name them, you may already be acting from them.

Feelings also blend. You can feel relieved and sad, proud and nervous, angry and hurt, or hopeful and frightened. This does not mean you are confused. It usually means the situation has more than one meaning.

Sometimes the best first sentence is: I am feeling a few things at once.

Our emotional vocabulary is often too small

Many of us rely on broad words: stressed, fine, tired, upset, annoyed, over it.

These words are not wrong. They are just broad. A broad word can start the process, but it should not always finish it.

When you catch yourself using a vague word, try asking:

What kind of stressed?

What kind of tired?

What kind of upset?

A vague label gives you vague choices. A clearer label gives you clearer choices.

Some people find naming especially hard

Some people have real difficulty identifying and describing emotions. The word often used for this is alexithymia – a term built from Greek roots meaning ‘no words for feelings.’

This does not mean they have no feelings. It means feelings may be harder to recognise, separate, or put into words.

This can happen for many reasons. Some people have always been this way. Some learned early that feelings were unsafe or unwelcome. Some become numb after stress, trauma, grief, depression, burnout, or long periods of just getting through.

The point is not to turn this into another thing to judge yourself for. If naming feelings is hard, start smaller: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; strong or mild; moving toward or moving away.

Families and cultures teach feeling words

We do not learn emotional language in a vacuum. Families, cultures, workplaces, schools, friendship groups, and whole communities teach us which feelings are acceptable, which are embarrassing, and which should be hidden.

Some groups favour toughness. Some favour cheerfulness. Some favour calm, usefulness, duty, restraint, respect, or not making a fuss. These habits often helped people survive and belong.

But it is worth asking: Is this really the feeling, or is this the feeling I was taught to name?

Learn the language

If you want to talk to yourself, you need a language for what is happening inside you. That is what emotion words give you.

Anger, sadness, fear, joy, disgust, shame, guilt, envy, jealousy, grief, loneliness, relief, hope, pride, regret, resentment, awe, embarrassment, gratitude.

Each word opens a slightly different door. Each word asks a different question. Each word points toward a different kind of next step.

You do not need to memorise a textbook or get every label right. Keep expanding your vocabulary, one useful word at a time.

The better you can name what you feel, the more freedom you have in what you do next.

Chapter 4: The Four-Step Emotion Check

When a feeling shows up, you do not need to solve your whole life. You need to read the signal well enough to choose the next small thing.

The four-step check is simple: *Notice. Name. Need. Next step.*

It is not a test. It is a pause.

1. Notice

Start with what is happening now. What do you notice in your body? Use the body, spotlight and urge prompts from Chapter 2 to help you notice.

You might notice a tight chest, a hot face, a heavy mood, a restless body, a sharp voice, sudden silence, or an urge to leave, fix, hide, argue, check, or explain. Note the sensations.

You might also notice what set it off: a message, a memory, a tone, a deadline, a look, a change, or a silence.

The first useful sentence is: Something is happening in me.

That is enough to begin.

2. Name

Next, find the closest useful word. Angry. Sad. Anxious. Ashamed. Lonely. Grateful. Hurt. Relieved. Frustrated.

The word does not have to be perfect. It only has to be close enough to help.

If you cannot find the word, start broader: Is this pleasant or unpleasant? Is it mild or strong? Does it make me want to move toward, move away, shut down, or speak up?

Sometimes the first label changes. “Stressed” might become anxious. “Tired” might become sad. “Hurt” might become angry.

That is fine. Naming is a doorway, not a verdict.

3. Need

Once you have a rough name, ask what the feeling may be asking for.

Anger may need a boundary. Sadness may need care. Fear may need safety. Anxiety may need a plan. Guilt may need repair. Loneliness may need connection. Frustration may need a different path. If unsure, check the Quick Decoder at the end.

You do not have to obey the feeling. You are asking what need might underlie it.

A useful question is: What might this feeling be pointing to?

Sometimes the answer is ordinary: food, sleep, rest, movement, quiet, help, a clearer plan, or a conversation. Ordinary needs still count.

The time question

If the need is hard to find, ask what **time frame** the feeling is pointing to. Is this about the past, the present, or the future?

- Feelings about the past often need repair, learning, grief, gratitude, or letting go.
- Feelings about the present often need safety, rest, attention, connection, a boundary, or action.
- Feelings about the future often need planning, preparation, courage, or one small step forward.

This question helps you choose the right kind of response.

4. Next step

The final step is one small, proportionate action. Not the perfect action. Not the dramatic action. Not the action that fixes everything.

Just the next useful thing.

That might be waiting before you reply, drinking water, writing the clean version of the request, apologising, asking for help, setting a boundary, making a plan, going outside, or resting.

A good question is: What is one small thing I can do that will not make this worse?

A next step does not have to remove the feeling. It only has to move you in a better direction.

An everyday example

Imagine a close friend has stayed for the weekend. After they leave, the house feels unusually quiet. You wander around, checking your phone, unable to settle into anything.

Notice. There is a heaviness in your chest. You keep looking towards the empty chair where your friend was sitting, and you feel like retreating to the sofa for the afternoon.

Name. Perhaps this is sadness, with a little loneliness mixed in. You enjoyed having them here, and you miss their company.

Need. You may need some connection and a little time to adjust to the quiet. Nothing has gone wrong between you. A good visit has ended, and that matters.

Next step. You send a simple message: “It was lovely having you here. I’m missing our kitchen chats already.”

You may still feel sad after sending it. The point was to recognise what you were feeling and respond with a small act of connection. That step is useful even if the feeling does not disappear.

The short version

When the feeling arises, ask:

> *What is happening in me? (Notice)*
> *What is the closest name for it?*
> *What might it need?*
> *What is one small next step?*

That is the check: Notice. Name. Need. Next step.

Use it lightly. Use it often. Let it give you a little more room to choose.

Chapter 5: The Feel-Good Signals

Not every emotion is an alarm. Some feelings tell you that something is good, helpful, connecting, meaningful, or worth repeating.

These are the feel-good signals.

They do not mean life is perfect. They do not erase pain, stress, grief, anger, or fear. They simply point to something that gives you energy, steadies you, connects you, or helps you keep going.

They are easy to overlook. Many people notice unpleasant feelings quickly and pleasant feelings only in passing. A problem grabs attention. A good moment often slips by unless we pause long enough to let it register.

Feel-good emotions are not decorations. They are information.

They tell you what matters, what works, who helps, what gives you life, and where you might want to place more attention.

Joy

Joy says: This is good. Let it land.

Joy can be bright and obvious, or quiet and small. It might arrive as laughter, ease, warmth, play, satisfaction, or a sudden sense that the day has opened.

The useful move is to notice it before rushing past. What is good here? Can I stay with it for a few seconds? Can I share it, repeat it, or make a little more room for it?

Joy does not need to be chased. It needs to be noticed.

Love and connection

Love says: This matters. Protect it.

Love is not only romance. It is care, warmth, loyalty, tenderness, friendship, family, community, and the ordinary habit of showing up.

It often lives in small actions: listening, checking in, telling the truth kindly, repairing quickly, making time, remembering what matters to someone else.

The useful move is to turn toward it. But don’t forget love can also need a boundary or some distance.

Who or what matters here? What small act of care is being asked of me? Where could I repair, soften, or show up?

Love is not proven by drama. It is built by attention and care.

Gratitude

Gratitude says: I was helped. Name it.

Gratitude notices what made life easier, kinder, safer, or more possible. It might be another person, a place, a chance, a skill, a body that carried you, or a small mercy in a hard week.

Gratitude is not the same as pretending everything is fine. You can be grateful and tired. Grateful and sad. Grateful and angry about something that still needs to change.

The useful move is to make the thanks specific. What helped me? Who helped me?

How can I name it, return it, or pass it on?

Gratitude works best when it is honest, not forced.

Pride

Pride says: That mattered, and I rose to it.

Healthy pride is the feeling of recognising effort, courage, progress, or a choice that matched your values.

It does not have to be loud. It might simply be a private moment of, “I did that.”

The useful move is to mark the effort and learn from it. What did I do that I respect? What helped me do it? What would I like to keep doing?

Pride becomes unhealthy when it needs to put others down. Healthy pride does the opposite. It lets you stand a little taller without making anyone else smaller.

Hope

Hope says: A path might exist.

Hope is not blind positivity. It is not pretending the facts are better than they are. Real hope looks at the situation and still asks, “What is one possible way forward?”

It may be quiet. It may be tired. It may be very small.

The useful move is to connect hope to action. What do I want to move toward? What is one path, even a narrow one? What is the next step I can actually take?

Hope becomes stronger when it has a plan.

Awe and admiration

Awe says: This is bigger than me.

Admiration says: That is worth learning from.

Both feelings can widen you. Awe may come from beauty, nature, courage, art, birth, death, skill, or something that makes your usual worries feel smaller for a moment. Admiration points toward excellence, kindness, courage, or craft.

The useful move is to let the feeling teach you. What did this show me? What did it make me respect? Is there one small thing I can copy, practise, protect, or appreciate?

Awe helps you widen your view. Admiration helps you aim up.

Using feel-good feelings well

Feel-good emotions are not there to be grabbed, performed, or turned into pressure. You do not have to be joyful all the time. You do not have to be grateful for everything. You do not have to feel hopeful on command.

These feelings work best when they are allowed to be real. Notice them. Let them land. Share them when sharing feels right. Repeat the conditions that made them possible.

A simple question can help: What is this pleasant feeling showing me?

It may be showing you a person to value, a habit to maintain, a place that restores you, a skill to practise, a boundary that improved your life, or a small moment worth remembering.

Pleasant feelings do not fix everything. But they do help you see what is worth keeping.

A simple practice

When a feel-good signal appears, ask: What is good here? What helped make it possible? Can I savour it, share it, or repeat it? That is enough.

You do not need to squeeze meaning out of every pleasant moment. You only need to stop long enough to notice when life is giving you something back.

Chapter 6: The Loss Signals

Some emotions follow a particular kind of change. A person is gone. A season has ended. A hope has shifted. A version of life no longer fits. Even good changes can carry loss within them.

These are the loss signals. They are not here to punish you. They help you register what mattered, adjust to what is different, and carry something forward.

Loss signals often slow us down. That can feel inconvenient, especially in a world that prefers people to move on quickly. But slowing down is sometimes the point.

You are not meant to rush every ending.

Sadness

Sadness says: Something mattered, and it has changed.

Sadness can be heavy, quiet, tearful, tired, or flat. Sadness often points to loss, disappointment, or something missing. Its cause is not always clear. It often asks you to stop pretending nothing happened.

The useful move is to name what has changed. What am I sad about? What did this mean to me? What kind of care do I need now?

Sadness does not mean you are weak. It means your system is making room for reality, particularly a new reality.

Grief

Grief says: Life will be different.

Grief is broader than sadness. It is the wider process of living after a major loss, or of preparing for change in anticipation of a loss. It can include sadness, anger, guilt, relief, numbness, love, confusion, and even laughter.

This is why grief can feel strange. It does not move in a straight line. It comes in waves.

The useful move is to let the loss be real, without trying to solve it all at once. What has gone or is changing? What remains? How can I sit with this? Who can sit with me in this?

Grief often needs time, company, ritual, memory, and ordinary care. Food. Sleep. A walk. A phone call. A small task. A place to cry without being managed.

You do not have to “get over” what mattered. You learn how to carry it differently.

Guilt

Guilt says: I may need to repair something.

Guilt usually looks backward. It appears when you think you have hurt someone, broken a promise, missed a responsibility, or acted against your values.

The useful move is to keep it specific. First, check what was actually your responsibility. Feeling guilty does not always mean you did something wrong. Then, what did I do, or not do? Who was affected? Is there a repair I can make?

Guilt becomes unhelpful when it turns into self-punishment, over-apologising, or trying to make the other person comfort you. Used well, guilt helps you own up to what is yours, repair what you can, and change one thing for next time.

The point is not to suffer forever. The point is to clean up what can be cleaned up, then to live differently.

Regret

Regret says: I wish I had chosen differently.

Regret looks back at a choice, an action, or an inaction. It can be painful, but it can also be useful when it leads to learning.

The useful move is to turn replay into a rule. What do I wish I had done? Is there a repair I can make? What will I do differently next time?

Regret becomes heavy when it loops without action. You cannot go back and choose again, but you may be able to apologise, repair, learn, change a habit, or make a better rule for the future.

Regret is not a sentence to serve. It is tuition.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia says: That was good. Carry something forward.

Nostalgia is the warm ache of looking back. It may come with a song, a place, a photo, a smell, or a memory of who you were with certain people.

It is sweet because something mattered. It is sad because time has moved.

The useful move is to ask what the memory is giving you. What did I love about that time? What value, habit, person, place, or feeling do I want to carry forward? What is the present-day version?

Nostalgia becomes unhelpful when it turns the past into a place you try to live. Used well, it becomes a bridge. It reminds you of what fed you, so you can bring some of that into now.

Bittersweetness

Bittersweetness says: This is good, and it is ending or changing.

Some moments contain both joy and loss. A farewell. A last day. A child growing up. A project finishing. A new beginning that asks you to leave something behind.

Bittersweetness is not confusion. It is accuracy.

The useful move is to name both sides. What is sweet here? What is sad here? What small act would honour both?

You might say thank you. Take a photo. Write a note. Mark the ending. Begin the next thing gently.

Bittersweetness helps you cross thresholds without pretending they are simple.

Using loss signals well

Loss signals need room, but they also need movement. Getting the balance right can be challenging. The middle path is gentle honesty plus one small step.

Name what changed. Let it matter. Ask for company if you need it. Do one ordinary thing that keeps life moving. A shower. A meal. A message. A form. A walk. A small ritual. A quiet hour.

Ordinary things count more than they seem to.

When to be careful

Loss signals are normal. But get support if sadness, grief, regret, or numbness starts to shrink your life for weeks, or if you feel hopeless, unsafe, unable to function, or as if you do not want to be here.

You do not need to wait until things become unbearable. Support is part of adapting. See Chapter 11 for more on seeking support.

A simple practice

When a loss signal appears, ask: What has changed? What mattered here? What do I need to honour, repair, learn, or carry forward?

What is one small step that helps life keep moving?

Loss signals do not ask you to forget.

They ask you to tell the truth about what mattered, and then take the next small step into the life that is here now.

Chapter 7: The Threat Signals

Some emotions arise when your system detects a threat. The threat might be physical. It might be social. It might concern the future, your safety, your reputation, your belonging, or your ability to cope.

These are the threat signals. They are not pleasant, but they are not useless. They are trying to protect you. The skill is to listen without letting the alarm run your whole life.

Fear

Fear says: Careful. There may be danger now.

Fear is the immediate alarm. It asks you to check safety, move away from real danger, or protect yourself.

The useful move is to look at the facts. Is there danger here now? Do I need to leave, step back, ask for help, or act quickly?

If the danger is real, move. If you are safe enough, let your body stand down a little.

Fear is not weakness. It is a safety system.

Disgust

Disgust says: Keep that away.

Disgust is the body's strong "no." It may appear around bad smells, spoiled food, mess, illness, bodily fluids, or behaviour that feels wrong.

The useful move is to check the risk. Is this actually unsafe, or just unpleasant? Do I need to clean, step back, set a rule, or let it pass?

Disgust is useful when it protects you from real contamination or harm. It becomes harmful when it turns people into things to reject.

Use disgust to set clean boundaries, not to strip anyone of dignity.

Anxiety

Anxiety says: Something might go wrong.

Anxiety often looks forward. It scans for risk, uncertainty, possible mistakes, rejection, illness, failure, or loss.

A little anxiety can help you prepare. Too much can trap you in checking, avoiding, overthinking, or asking for reassurance that never quite lasts.

The useful move is to turn the “what if” into a plan. What am I worried might happen? What is one reasonable step I can take? What can I stop checking for now? Can I practice leaving some uncertainty unresolved?

Anxiety usually settles more after action than after endless thinking.

Shame

Shame says: I might not be good enough here.

Shame is a threat-to-belonging signal. It can arrive when you feel exposed, judged, rejected, criticised, or not up to standard.

It often wants you to hide. Sometimes shame is pointing to something specific that needs repair. Sometimes it is old pain, impossible standards, or someone else’s cruelty speaking too loudly.

The useful move is to narrow it. What exactly happened? Do I need to repair something, or am I attacking my whole self? Who is safe enough to tell the truth to?

Shame grows in secrecy. It usually softens when it is named carefully with someone who will not use it against you.

Embarrassment

Embarrassment says: I had a social slip.

Embarrassment is usually smaller and shorter than shame. It is the hot-face feeling after a mistake, an awkward moment, a wrong word, a clumsy move, or a public wobble.

The useful move is a small repair, not a full self-trial. Name it lightly. Fix what needs fixing. Move on. A short “sorry, I meant…” is often enough.

Embarrassment grows when you keep replaying it as proof that something is wrong with you. Most people forget small awkward moments faster than you think.

Using threat signals well

Threat signals need respect. They also need to be checked. If you dismiss them completely, you may ignore real danger. If you obey them completely, your world can get smaller and smaller.

The middle path is: Notice the alarm. Check the facts. Act if needed. Stand down if safe.

Take the smallest brave step when avoidance is shrinking your life. Not every fear needs a full retreat. Not every worry needs another hour of thought. Not every shame feeling tells the truth.

But every threat signal deserves a pause.

When to be careful

Get support if any threat signal is shrinking your life, damaging relationships, stopping you from doing ordinary things, or keeping your body on alert for weeks.

Get urgent help if you feel unsafe, at risk of hurting yourself or someone else, or unable to come down from panic or distress. You do not have to handle threat signals alone.

Chapter 11 has more on seeking help.

A simple practice

When a threat signal appears, ask: Is there real danger now? Is this about something that might happen later? Is this about belonging, judgment, or feeling exposed?

What is one small action that protects me without shrinking my life?

Threat signals are there to protect you. Used well, they help you move toward safety, preparation, honesty, and courage, one small step at a time.

Chapter 8: Anger and Frustration

Anger and frustration often feel similar. Both can bring heat, tension, impatience, and the urge to act quickly. Both can make your voice sharper and your body less patient.

But they are not the same signal. Anger says: A line has been crossed. Frustration says: This path is blocked. Knowing the difference helps you choose the right response.

Anger

Anger usually arises when something feels unfair, disrespectful, unsafe, or unacceptable. It may signal a boundary, a value, a promise, a role, or a need that has been ignored.

The useful move is to slow the heat down enough to find the line. What feels crossed here? What matters to me? What needs to be said clearly?

Anger can help you protect what matters. It can help you say no, speak up, call out unfairness, or ask for better terms. But anger becomes messy when it turns into punishment, blame, contempt, revenge, or a performance of being right.

The aim is not to remove anger. The aim is to make it clear and proportionate. A useful sentence is: When this happened, I felt angry. I need this to change.

Keep it specific. Keep it about the issue in front of you. The greatest hits of the past can wait.

Frustration

Frustration appears when something is not working.

The goal may matter, but the current path is blocked. The task is vague, the tool is clumsy, the plan is too big, the timing is wrong, or you do not have the help you need.

The useful move is to name the block. What exactly is stuck? Is the next step too big? Do I need clarity, a different tool, more time, help, or a new approach?

Frustration can help you change tack. It can push you to shrink the task, ask a better question, fix the setup, or stop doing the same thing the hard way.

But frustration becomes messy when it turns into rage-clicking, snapping, quitting too soon, or grinding away without adjusting.

A useful sentence is: I am stuck at this point. I need a different next step.

Sometimes the best move is not more effort. It is a better path.

How to tell the difference

Ask: Was a line crossed, or is a path blocked?

If a line was crossed, you may be dealing with anger. If a path is blocked, you may be dealing with frustration.

Sometimes both are present. A blocked path can become anger if the block feels unfair or repeated. Anger can become frustration if the same boundary conversation goes nowhere.

You do not have to separate them perfectly. You only need to get close enough to choose a useful move.

Anger often needs a boundary. Frustration often needs a tweak.

Using anger and frustration well

Both feelings ask you to pause before acting. Not because the feeling is wrong, but because the first impulse is often too hot.

Before you speak, send, quit, slam, accuse, or explain too much, ask: What is the cleanest version of this?

For anger, the clean version is usually a boundary or request. For frustration, the clean version is usually a smaller step or a change in method.

Before acting on anger, check whether tiredness, hunger, pain, or overload is adding heat.

Try not to see frustration as proof of failure. A blocked path may be out of your control, or just need a different approach.

When to be careful

Get support if anger or frustration leads to frightening people, breaking things, getting physical, losing control, damaging relationships, or feeling unable to stop once you start.

Also be careful if you are angry most of the time, or if every small block feels unbearable. That may mean your system has been carrying too much for too long.

Heat is useful in short bursts. It is costly when it becomes your normal setting.

A simple practice

When you feel heat, ask: Is this anger or frustration? What line was crossed, or what path is blocked?

What do I need: a boundary, a request, a smaller step, or help? What can I do that is clear, firm, and not cruel?

Anger protects what matters. Frustration helps you change what is not working.

Chapter 9: Mixed Feelings Are Normal

Some moments carry more than one feeling. You can be grateful and tired. Sad and relieved. Proud and nervous. Angry and hurt. Hopeful and frightened.

This does not mean you are confused, fake, ungrateful, or unstable. It usually means the situation has more than one truth in it.

A good change can still involve loss. A hard decision can still bring relief. A person you love can still frustrate you. A goodbye can be right and still hurt.

Mixed feelings are not a problem to solve. They are often a more accurate reflection of real life. The mistake is trying to force one clean label onto a complicated moment.

Instead of asking, “Which feeling is the real one?” try asking: What are the main feelings here? And: What does each one need?

One part of you may need rest. Another may need courage. One part may need to grieve. Another may be ready to move forward.

You do not have to act on every feeling at once. You only need to notice what is there and choose the next small step. Sometimes one feeling needs attention first.

If fear is very loud, start with safety. If guilt is clear and you have caused harm, start with repair. If sadness is heavy, start with care. If anger is hot, start with a pause before setting the boundary.

Mixed feelings become easier when you stop treating them as a contradiction. They can sit beside each other.

You can say: I am happy this happened, but I am sad about what it changes. I know this is the right decision, yet I still feel guilty. I love this person, but I need a boundary. I am scared, but I can take one small step.

The word “and” is useful. It lets two truths share the same room.

A simple practice

When you feel pulled in different directions, write three lines:

I feel ___.

I also feel ___.

The next small step is ___.

That is enough. Mixed feelings do not mean you are getting it wrong. They mean you are human, and the moment has layers.

Chapter 10: Four Everyday Practices

Emotional skill is not built by understanding feelings once. It is built by small repeats.

You do not need a complicated system. You need a few tools you can use when life is noisy, awkward, tiring, or tense.

Here are four simple practices to get you started. There are many more. Start small and build.

1. The Four-Step Emotion Check

Use this when a feeling first appears, or when you notice you are about to react.

Use the four-step check from Chapter 4: When the feeling arises, ask:

> *What is happening in me? (Notice)*
> *What is the closest name for it?*
> *What might it need?*
> *What is one small next step?*

Keep it simple. You are not trying to solve everything. You are creating a small gap between the feeling and the action.

Sometimes the next step is practical: drink water, take a walk, write a list, ask for help, or wait before replying. Sometimes it is relational: apologise, make a request, set a boundary, or check in with someone. Sometimes it is simply to pause and let the feeling pass without making it worse.

The four-step check helps slow the moment down just enough for choice to return.

2. The clean sentence

Feelings often become messy when we speak from the heat of the moment.

The clean sentence helps you say the truth without turning it into blame, performance, or a long defence.

- For yourself: *I am feeling ___. It may need ___. One small step is ___.*
- For a partner or friend: *When ____happened, I felt ___. I need / would like ___.*
- For family: I am feeling ___. *How are you feeling? Let's pause to work out what is needed next.*
- For work: *When ___ happened, the impact was ___. What I need / request is ___.*

The clean sentence is not magic. It will not make every conversation easy. But it gives the feeling a clear shape, making it easier for another person to understand what you're asking.

Try to keep it specific. “When the plan changed at the last minute, I felt frustrated. Could you let me know as soon as a change is likely?” is easier to work with than “You never think about me.”

Specific is kind. It gives the conversation somewhere to go.

3. The 10-minute tidy

Use this when a feeling keeps looping, or when the moment is over but still sitting in your body. It’s also a great way to end a day that has been overwhelming.

Write five short lines:

1. What happened?
2. What did I feel?
3. What did I need?
4. What did I do?
5. What would I try next time?

This is not a diary entry. It is a tidy-up. You are seeking a pattern, a lesson, or a small repair.

Maybe overload was adding to your anger. Maybe the real need was sleep, not a debate. Maybe the next step is an apology. Maybe it is a clearer boundary. Maybe it is a smaller task.

The point is not to judge yourself. The point is to learn from the moment while it is still fresh.

4. A useful listening question

When someone else brings you a feeling, try asking: Would you like me to listen, offer practical help, or help you think through options?

This question saves a lot of trouble. Sometimes people want advice. Sometimes they want a hug. Sometimes they want practical help. Sometimes they just want someone to sit beside them for a minute without fixing anything.

If you are not sure, ask.

Keep it small

These practices work best when they stay light. A feeling does not always need a deep conversation. It may need a breath, a sentence, a repair, a rest, or one ordinary next step.

The aim is not to become perfectly regulated. The aim is to become a little easier to live inside.

Use the check. Use the sentence. Use the tidy. Ask the useful question. Then keep going.

Chapter 11: When Feelings Get Too Big

Feelings are meant to move. They rise, give information, ask for something, and usually shift again. Even strong feelings can be normal. But sometimes a feeling stops being a passing signal and starts running the whole system.

That is when it needs more support. This does not mean you have failed. It means the feeling is too big to carry with ordinary self-management alone.

Too strong

A feeling may be too strong if it floods your body, takes over your thinking, or makes it hard to speak, sleep, work, drive, parent, study, or stay safe.

Strong feelings are not wrong. But when the intensity keeps undermining your ability to choose, it is time to slow things down and seek help.

Too long

A feeling may be too long if it persists for days or weeks with little easing.

Sadness, fear, anger, shame, numbness, or anxiety can all feel heavy when they do not shift, even after rest, support, time, or practical steps. If the feeling is becoming your normal weather, take notice.

Too rigid

A feeling may be too rigid if it becomes your only gear: Everything turns to anger. Everything turns to worry. Everything turns to shame. Everything turns to “what’s the point?”

Rigid feelings narrow the world. They make different situations feel the same, even when they require different responses.

Too harmful

A feeling may be harmful if it leads to frightening people, breaking things, getting physical, hurting yourself, using substances to cope, driving dangerously, spending recklessly, or making threats.

The issue is not whether the feeling is understandable. It is whether it is becoming unsafe. Safety comes first.

Too shrinking

A feeling may be too shrinking if your life keeps getting smaller around it: You stop going out, avoid people, give up ordinary tasks, cancel everything, and cannot do things that used to be manageable.

Avoidance can feel like relief at first. Over time, it can lead to a smaller and smaller life.

Too stuck

A feeling may be too stuck if the same loop keeps repeating itself: Same trigger. Same reaction. Same fallout. Same apology. Same regret. Same promise that next time will be different.

A stuck loop usually requires more than willpower. It needs a new plan, more support, and sometimes professional help.

A simple check

Has this feeling stopped moving and taken over?
Is it shrinking my life?
Is anyone unsafe?
Do I need support beyond myself?

If the answer is yes, reach out. Feelings are human, too. But you are not meant to carry the heaviest ones alone.

When to get more help

Get more help when a feeling is too strong, too long, too rigid, too harmful, too shrinking, or too stuck. That help might be a trusted friend, partner, family member, GP, counsellor, psychologist, support line, workplace support service, or emergency service.

You do not have to wait until everything becomes unbearable. Getting help early often prevents a hard season from becoming a crisis.

If there is immediate danger, or you might hurt yourself or someone else, treat it as urgent. Contact emergency services or go to the nearest emergency department.

Help

If you are outside Australia, use your local emergency number or a recognised crisis support line in your country. If there is immediate danger, contact emergency services now.

In Australia:
Emergency: 000
Lifeline: 13 11 14, or text 0477 13 11 14 (www.lifeline.org.au)
Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636, or online chat (www.beyondblue.org.au)

Chapter 12: Closing Note - Keep It Simple

This book has one simple message: Feelings are signals, not commands.

They are not always accurate. They are not always convenient. They are not always easy to name. But they are usually pointing to something worth noticing.

You do not need to analyse every feeling in depth. You do not need to find the perfect word. You do not need to stay calm all the time.

You only need enough space to notice what is happening, name it as best you can, ask what it may need, and choose one small next step.

That is the decoder.

The whole thing in four questions

When a feeling shows up, ask:

> *What is happening in me?*
> *What is the closest useful name for this?*
> *What might it need?*
> *What is one small next step?*

That is enough to begin.

Close enough counts

Emotional language does not need to be perfect to be useful. Maybe the first word is "stressed." Later, it becomes anxious, overloaded, lonely, ashamed, or frustrated. Maybe the first word is "angry." Later, you notice hurt underneath.

Maybe there is no clear word yet. You only know the feeling is unpleasant, strong, or hard to sit with.

That still counts. A rough name is better than no name, if it helps you pause and choose.

Small steps count

Most emotional moments do not require a dramatic response. They need one small, honest move. A breath. A pause. A glass of water. A clearer sentence. A repair. A boundary. A rest. A message. A plan. A decision to wait.

Small steps are not weak. They are how change usually happens.

People help

Some feelings settle when they are named. Others need another person.

A safe conversation can make a feeling less frightening. A clear request can prevent resentment from building. A sincere apology can ease guilt. A calm presence can help grief, fear, or shame soften enough to move forward.

You are not meant to manage every feeling privately.

Sometimes the next small step is telling the truth to someone who can hold it kindly.

Keep learning the language

Emotion words are tools. The more words you have, the more clearly you can talk to yourself and to others. Anger is different from frustration. Guilt is different from shame. Fear is different from anxiety. Sadness is different from grief. Joy is different from relief.

The differences matter because each feeling asks for something slightly different.

Learn the words slowly. Use them lightly. Let them help you understand your inner life without turning it into a project you might fail.

The final reminder

When in doubt, come back to the basics: Notice. Name. Need. Next step.

And if a feeling becomes too strong, too long, too rigid, too harmful, too shrinking, or too stuck, get support.

That is not failure. That is wisdom.

Feelings are part of being human. They can be messy, layered, and inconvenient, yet they can also guide you towards care, courage, repair, rest, connection, and change.

Keep it simple. Read the signal. Take the next small step.

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The Quick Decoder

Use this as a first-pass map. Pick the closest useful word, then choose one small next step.

Emotion	What it may be saying	One small step
Anger	Something feels unfair or a line has been crossed.	Say what happened and what needs to change.
Anxiety	Something might go wrong.	Make one small if/then plan.
Awe	This is bigger than me.	Pause, take it in, and let it widen your view.
Bittersweetness	This is good, and it is ending or changing.	Name both sides and mark the moment.
Disgust	Keep that away.	Check whether it is unsafe or just unpleasant.
Embarrassment	I feel awkward or exposed.	Make a small repair if needed and move on.
Envy	They have something I want.	Name the want and take one small step toward it.
Fear	There may be danger now.	Check the risk and move to safety if needed.
Frustration	This path is blocked.	Try one change or ask for help.
Gratitude	I was helped.	Thank someone specifically.
Grief	Life is different now.	Contact one safe person or mark the loss simply.
Guilt	I may need to repair something.	Check your responsibility; repair what is yours.
Hope	A path might exist.	Take one small step toward it.
Jealousy	Something I value may be at risk.	Ask for a calm conversation, not a test.
Joy	This is good.	Pause for a few seconds and let it land.
Loneliness	I need more meaningful connection.	Send one small message or go where people are.
Love	This matters. Stay close.	Turn toward the person or thing that matters.
Nostalgia	That was good.	Name what you want to carry forward.
Pride	I did something that mattered.	Name the effort and what helped it happen.
Regret	I wish I had chosen differently.	Write one thing you would do differently next time.
Relief	The pressure has lifted.	Breathe out, reset, and note what helped.
Resentment	I am still carrying an unfairness.	Turn the complaint into a specific request.
Sadness	Something mattered and has changed.	Name what changed and do one gentle thing.
Shame	I feel exposed or not good enough.	Tell one safe truth or separate the act from the self.

This table is a starting point. Once you have a word, ask: What is this feeling pointing to? What is one small thing I can do that will not make this worse?