



EMOTION Valuing the natural range of emotions and seeking to understand other perspectives

INTRODUCTION

Emotions are the internal, physical reactions we have to our daily experiences. Every moment of our day, and every interaction we have with others, inspires emotions. We are capable of feeling dozens of emotions ranging from happy, sad, and mad, to pride, contentment, and jealousy. While we aim to feel as many positive emotions as possible, sometimes negative or unwanted emotions are an expected and unavoidable part of life.

There are cultural and situational differences that affect how we show our emotions.

In some social contexts, we may be free to express how we feel, while in others, it is more appropriate to hide or minimize our emotions.

These cultural and situational rules for what emotion we can show and how we show it can be difficult to understand.

Everyone experiences emotions differently, which can sometimes make it difficult to interpret and understand. For example, something that makes you feel happy may make someone else feel sad, or the way that you respond to a situation, may differ from how others might react.

Because of these differences, it is common to see emotions in others that we did not expect. When the emotional response is what we expected, we interpret that situation as “right”. When we see an unexpected emotional response, we interpret it to be “wrong” and we may react with surprise, frustration, or even feel offended. When that happens, we may become judgmental and incorrectly assume the other’s behavior is inappropriate, and we may avoid interacting with that person in the future.

Autistic individuals often have a different understanding of emotion and express emotion in different ways. While many autistics are incredibly aware of, and sensitive to, the emotions of others, there are often differences in how they interpret and respond to these. This may include being under-responsive (that is, a milder or neutral expression of emotion) or over-responsive (such as a heightened or intense expression of emotion).

For example, an autistic individual may feel intensely angry while appearing calm on the outside, or laughing and appearing happy during a time when those around them are sad. In either case, it is not uncommon for there to be a disconnect between the emotions that people expect to see and the emotions being shown by the autistic individual. Many autistics have reported that they see unexpected emotional responses from non-autistics,

The differences between people positively contribute to all aspects of society. However, the differences in emotional expression between autistics and non-autistics can sometimes interfere with building strong social connections. It is critical that we continue to view the diversity of emotional expression between as a difference that is a natural part of being human. Accepting, and valuing, these differences will support practices that are more inclusive and lay a foundation for building strong rapport with others.



RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

Be Curious. When you see an unexpected emotional response, seek to understand why the individual feels that way.

Avoid assuming that you understand what someone else is feeling or why they are feeling that way.

Seek to understand why they are feeling that way. If you can understand what caused the unexpected emotion, you will be better able to find a solution to address the issue. Similarly, if someone does not understand your emotions, when you are calm and able to talk about it, share why you reacted the way that you did so that the other person will understand how to support you when needed.

Confirm and Clarify. Make sure you have it right. Ask the individual to confirm your perception of what they are feeling. Offer clarifying phrases or statements for discussion; give opportunities for individuals to explain or clarify their emotional response.

Don't Judge. Everyone thinks, feels, and responds differently.

Do not make assumptions or judge people for their initial reactions to a situation.

Being curious allows you to understand how and why a person feels the way they do; this will enable you to empathize and appreciate the differences and complexities between people.

Give Time. As our emotions grow in their intensity, we are less and less able to think clearly and have greater difficulty remembering our coping skills. If someone is experiencing intense emotions, you can:

Ask "How can I help?"

Ask if they would like you to stay and help or if they would like space. Either way, give people time to process their emotion and to calm down.

By giving people extra time to process, to feel, and to think, you are much more likely to help them find their inner calm.

Overall, we want to create an environment where expressions of emotion, both expected and unexpected, are accepted. We want people to feel safe and to trust that others will not judge them poorly for being who they are. When we take a perspective based on understanding and valuing diversity, we help everyone feel included.

Speak Calmly. Consider lowering your tone and speaking clearly when asking about the situation.

Be mindful of your volume, and focus on keeping your communication brief (short sentences).

When we are around someone who is experiencing intense emotions, our own emotions will also become more intense. Maintaining a calm composure will help to de-escalate many situations.

Give Space. When people are experiencing more intense emotions, they often benefit from having extra space around them.

It is important to gently encourage, discuss and promote social interaction with autistic students or employees. Talk to them about their preferences and support the design and structure of social situations that meet everyone's needs.

This will help everyone to feel more comfortable within social situations over time. For example, discussing and supporting mandatory versus optional social events and opportunities, or allowing people to connect in pairs or in groups if they wish.

Collaborate. Discuss with the individual how to best support their emotional needs.

Develop a plan for how you will support emotional events.

Determine whether it is best for the person to remain in the moment or to have some quiet time away from the situation to calm.

Not everyone is able to clearly and calmly articulate their emotions. Sometimes all that is necessary, is a plan for next time.

Together, you should agree on how everyone will respond, where they will respond, and what additional support tools may be necessary (For example, tissue, a dark room, glass of water, a note pad to journal or document needs, and so on).

