



## Healthy Minds Newsletter #7

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*Let's Work Together*



# How do you feel? Part 2

By Tom Vail, LPCMH

*Now that you have taken some time to recognize your feelings, to notice that they exist in the background or the foreground of your experience. Let's take some time to understand what they are, why they exist and how they affect us.*

## *What are emotions?*

We know from brain research that emotions exist deep within our brains. This reveals to us that emotions are very primitive and have been a piece of the human experience for a very long time and that they are vital. Our emotions provide us with critical information necessary for our survival. They do this in two ways. First, our emotions are part of a reward/punishment system designed to guide our behavior and maximize survival. Second our emotions are what we use to form bonds necessary for us to be social. In summary, emotions connect us to others and provide feedback that teach us danger from safety.

## *Why do emotions exist?*

Let's think first about the reward/punishment effect of emotions. Everyone knows that if you put your hand on a hot stove you will experience pain. And we know that it is that pain that teaches us very quickly to pull our hand off of the stove. Some of our emotions serve the same role for us. We experience some of our emotions as pain. Two good examples of this are anxiety and disgust. Anxiety is generated when we encounter an experience that produces uncertainty. It is much safer to live life with certainty. So anxiety acts to steer us away from engaging in activities with unpredictable outcomes. For this reason, the behavior that most often arises from anxiety is avoidance. Disgust arises when we experience something that is extremely unappealing, for example; the smell of rancid meat. The behavioral manifestations of this feeling are gagging and moving away. Again these behaviors in response to the feeling of disgust will prevent us from even being able to eat rancid meat. This is good for our survival.

Emotions also act as a social glue, keeping us connected to each other. To illustrate this let's consider love and loneliness. Love, for almost all of us, is a very rewarding experience and drives us to behave in ways that increase our connection to others. Loneliness for most of us is a painful experience that encourages us to seek out the company of others and socially engage. Additionally, the best way for us to remain in social connection with others is through a shared emotional experience. If you ever doubt how important it is for us to have a shared emotional experience, look at successful advertising and political campaigns. Most successful campaigns rely on a shared emotional connection. On a more personal level, think about how it feels when someone understands you on an emotional level. I think you will know that this very much increases your feelings of connectedness.

## *How do our emotions affect us?*

Based on what I have described the last two weeks, we know that emotions are almost always present, that they do not require our awareness to influence our behavior, that they can have a powerful influence on our behavior and our social connections. But, even though they offer us ways to improve our chances at survival in very primitive situations, they also place many limits on our achievements if we allow them to lead us. In fact if all we do is, “follow our emotions” we will remain stuck and unable to grow. Just think for a second about anxiety; if we were to avoid everything that presented uncertainty, we would never try anything new. Then we would never be able to grow and evolve. So understanding our emotions and how they affect our behaviors and the behaviors of others is very important and one of many tools we need to live a successful and fulfilling life.

Now that you have spent some time recognizing your emotions, spend some time noticing how different emotions affect your behavioral choices. One way to do this, is to stop at different times in your day and notice what you are doing, then recognize what you are feeling and notice if there is a tension between what you are doing and how you are feeling or is it in alignment. I'd like you to become aware of what it is to act in congruence with your emotions and what it is like to make choices at odds with your emotions. As with most things in life, moderation is the key. People who act only on emotional impulses feel out of control, whereas those who ignore their emotions often feel disconnected, lonely and isolated. Check out your balance for yourself and see if it is working for you. Once you get good at it yourself, notice how emotions affect your child and how they impact their behavior.

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# *Fidgets: The fine line between sensory & distraction*

Many kids have sensory needs, and it's important to understand when tools such as fidgets are being utilized as a support, and not a distraction. Below we will dive a little deeper into *what a fidget is, why we use them and how to set some boundaries* to increase their power! There have been *several* research studies indicating the use of a fidget to increase memory recall, engagement, and problem solving. Many studies also indicate the use of fidgets to increase attention and alertness. However, it is often a fine line between sensory & distraction, and we are here to help you understand the difference.

## *What IS a fidget?*

Fidgets are objects that provide sensory input in the least distracting way. Sensory input can be used to replace sensory seeking behaviors such as out of seat behavior or any form of self stimulatory behavior that requires appropriate input to replace.

## *What is NOT a fidget?*

Toys that create noise that distract those using them, or those around them from working. Toys that prevent work. Typically, if it can not be contained within one's personal space, it is not a fidget. Ideally fidgets are held in a single hand.

## *What can be used as a fidget?*

It's important to remember that a fidget does not **need** to be an elaborate item, or popular toy.

## *Where can we use fidgets?*

The idea of fidgets is for them to be small enough to hold in a single hand, so it can be used anywhere that sensory input is needed, or helpful! We can use fidgets while working at a desk, standing up, waiting in line, etc.

## *How can we teach the appropriate use of fidgets?*

Just as we teach any other skill! It should be altered for each individual child. Remember, tools always need to be taught how to use, we should never assume a child understands rules and boundaries that were never clearly and explicitly taught. There are materials out there such as [social stories](#), and fidget contracts. However, materials are not absolutely necessary. *Show your child how to use the fidget, show them how to NOT use the fidget, and verbal prompt them if needed during the early stages of usage!*

## Setting boundaries around Sensory

Setting boundaries around sensory allows sensory to remain separate from play, or become a distraction. Limiting usage to specific locations, assignments, times of day, etc. are a great way to make sure your child is getting the sensory input needed, while also not overdoing it! It is also important to create clear and concise rules around the use of fidgets, and [this](#) is a great example of that!

*Still need help? Occupational therapists, and behavior analysts can assist with whether or not a sensory tool is serving the function intended :)*

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## Life Skills

While your kids are home, it's the perfect opportunity to teach them life skills, such as basic household chores or daily living skills. We often teach life skills through task analyses, which involves breaking down the skill into several steps, and teaching each step individually. We have provided two task analysis below for getting dressed and making coffee.

Getting Dressed	Making Coffee
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pick up pants and hold them with thumb and forefinger on each side</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Get the coffee maker, a "1 cup" measuring cup, ground coffee, and a coffee filter</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Put one leg in one hole, and then the other leg through the other hole</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Take the basket and the coffee pot off of the coffee maker</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pull pants up</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fill the coffee pot with water up to the designated number of cups you would like on the coffee pot</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lay shirt out with the back facing up</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pour all the water into the top of the coffee</li></ul>

	maker
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Put arms through the shirt and in each arm hole</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Place 1 coffee filter in the basket of the coffee maker</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lift arms up and pull head through the hole</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Measure and pour designated amount of coffee into the coffee filter</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pull shirt down</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Put the coffee pot on the burner and press start</li> </ul>



**Bring it all together:** Now that we are all home, it's the perfect chance to practice life skills with your child, such as **getting dressed**. If you have a child who **fidgets** a lot or needs to be holding a fidget, this may seem like a difficult task to teach. Just remember, there are appropriate times to use a fidget, and during task completion it can be a distraction. Try holding the fidget and offering it after your child completes the task. Also, make sure you are in tune with your child's **emotions**, as having a fidget could be a great coping mechanism for them when presented with a challenge.



## *Social Skills: Understanding Personal Space*

Personal space differs for everyone, but generally speaking, it is the close area around one's body. Some people prefer a larger personal space, some people don't mind standing closely to talk to someone. Regardless, respecting others' personal space is a social skill that can help individuals foster relationships in their social, personal and professional lives. When teaching

personal space to your children, remember that personal space differs depending upon a few factors:

1. How well do you know this person? Are you very close? It is a family member or spouse? Personal space tends to be smaller when dealing with someone you know very well.
2. Is this person a friend at school? A teammate? A coworker? Personal space is typically arm's length when you are conversing with people you know.
3. Have you never met this person before? Is this person a stranger? Typically, when you are unsure about someone or slightly uncomfortable, personal space tends to be larger than normal.

If your child struggles with understanding personal space, here are a few tips you could try!

1. **Model Appropriate Distance** - You guessed it! Model, model, model! You are your child's biggest teacher, especially right now that we are all home. When speaking to others, stand at an appropriate distance.
2. **Practice Personal Space** - If you know your child is having difficulties respecting personal space, there is nothing wrong with practicing! Have your child stick their arms out straight in front of them, stand in front of them where their arms stop. Then, switch! You hold out your arms and have them stand in front of you. "Seeing" personal space can help to understand!
3. **Talk About it** - Having a conversation about personal space can help too! Ask your child how they feel when someone is too close, or too far away. Discuss why it's important to keep a distance (respecting space, making people feel comfortable).



# Mindful Moment

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The Safari exercise is a great way to help kids learn mindfulness. This activity turns an average, everyday walk into an exciting new adventure.

Tell your kids that you will be going on a safari: their goal is to notice as many birds, bugs, creepy-crawlies, and any other animals as they can. Anything that walks, crawls, swims, or flies is of interest, and they'll need to focus all of their senses to find them, especially the little ones (Karen Young, 2017).

A similar exercise for teens is the mindfulness walk. This exercise provokes the same response in children that a mindful walk elicits in teens: a state of [awareness](#) and grounding in the present. This can also lead to opportunities for conversations with your teen and opportunities for you to listen.

# Weekly Tips

- 1. Make a to-do list.** Making lists when I feel my mind racing is very helpful. It's important to remember that not everything needs to be done in one day. Make a list, clear your mind, complete what you can, and forgive yourself if you do not get it all done!  
-Lauryn Elder M.Ed., BCBA
- 2. Sit outside!** Never underestimate the power of a little fresh air and sunshine! When it's nice outside, take a little break and enjoy the weather! With the stay-at-home order still in place, it's easy to get a little antsy! Break up the routine and enjoy the outdoors any way you can! -Alexis Foulk, M.S., BCBA
- 3. Check in with your kids.** It's easy to get caught up in the business of quarantine life, but don't forget to check in with the family every day. Try doing at least one daily check in to ask how everyone is feeling. Knowing how everyone in the house feels can help the day go much better sometimes. -Alexandria Larson M.S., BCBA
- 4. Don't forget the importance of self-care.** As we enter the 8<sup>th</sup> week of school closure and time together at home, it may be a time when many of us are losing momentum on some of our self-care behaviors. This is a great week to recommit yourself to the three behaviors that ward off depression. 1. Exercise 2. Get sunshine for at least 30 minutes every day. 3. Maintain social connections by reaching out to those you love and who love you! -Tom Vail., LPCMH





## Just for Fun

**Virtual Tours:** Click on the links below to go on a virtual adventure! Check back each week for different locations!

1. [Polar Bears and the Tundra](#) - a virtual field trip about these fascinating animals in their natural habitat!
2. [Son Doong Cave](#) - explore the World's Largest Cave and the surrounding area with the 3D virtual tour!

**Keeping Kids Engaged at Home:** [87 Things to Do at Home to Avoid Cabin Fever](#)

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**Brandywine School District  
Behavioral Support Team  
Wilmington, DE**

Email Lauryn Elder for teacher questions: [Lauryn.Elder@bsd.k12.de.us](mailto:Lauryn.Elder@bsd.k12.de.us)

Email Alexis Foulk for additional resources: [Alexis.Foulk@bsd.k12.de.us](mailto:Alexis.Foulk@bsd.k12.de.us)

Email Alexandria Larson for parent questions: [Alexandria.Larson@bsd.k12.de.us](mailto:Alexandria.Larson@bsd.k12.de.us)

Email Jen Stein for mental health tips: [Jennifer.Stein@bsd.k12.de.us](mailto:Jennifer.Stein@bsd.k12.de.us)