

But How Do You Really Feel?

STAYING ATTUNED TO YOUR EMOTIONS CAN HELP BOOST RESILIENCE, LOWER ANXIETY, AND POINT YOU TOWARD ACTIVITIES THAT BRING JOY. MAKE A SELF CHECK-IN YOUR NEW HEALTHY HABIT.

By Dinsa Sachan

YOU SNEAK A PEEK at your Fitbit stats every 10 seconds. You look for suspicious moles after every shower. But when was the last time you checked in with your emotions? Last month? Last year? Five years ago?

Big life events, like layoffs, divorces, and deaths, can inspire you to evaluate your headspace because you know you should “feel the feelings” before moving on. But habitually getting in touch with your emotions—rather than burying them or willing them to change—can help you assess your mental state and improve overall well-being. There’s no better time to start than the present: Keep reading to learn the whys and hows of the self check-in.

What Your Emotions Can Do for You

Regularly pausing to acknowledge the full spectrum of your feelings has a host of science-backed payoffs. People who accept their unpleasant thoughts and moods without judgment may be less affected by everyday problems than those who evade them, a 2018 study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found. Ignoring your feelings can provide quick relief—but if you don’t acknowledge them, they can eventually snowball into bigger mental health problems (like depression). It’s equally important to recognize the good stuff. In a study of older adults, those who took the time to appreciate life’s little joys were more resilient and less depressed than those who didn’t savor them, as reported in a 2017 issue of the *Journal of Applied Gerontology*.

How to Tune In to Your Feelings

Think of emotional check-ins as daily “micro-introspections.” Start by doing a body scan from head to toe, advises Heather Ford, a licensed professional counselor and the director of social services at Destiny Springs Behavioral Health Hospital in Surprise, Arizona. Is your heart rate slow? Are your shoulders relaxed? Is there a lightness in your chest? “Recognize how your body is feeling,” Ford says. You’ll notice patterns in your body’s response to emotions. For example, anxiety might give you sweaty palms or, less obviously, make you play with your hair or tap your foot. “If you can learn your first signs or symptoms of anxiety, you can insert some kind of intervention—like deep breathing—that helps bring you back down,” Ford says.

You also want to direct your attention to your mind: What are you thinking or feeling in the moment? Feeling “low” or even “miserable” might be your starting point, but drill down to the exact emotion. Are you actually feeling guilt? Sadness? Jealousy? The more specific you can be, the better. In a recent study, teens who were able to describe emotions using precise language were less likely to develop increased depressive symptoms than those who used vague terms (like “upset” or “bad”) to describe their mental state.

If this sounds daunting, start slowly, suggests Jennifer Harsh Caspari, PhD, assistant professor

and director of behavioral medicine for internal medicine at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. “When a thought or feeling comes up, take a step back and consider saying something along the lines of ‘Isn’t that interesting?’” she suggests. “Do that for a few days, rather than starting off by labeling your emotions—which can be a really hard first step.” So the next time you get off the phone with Mom (or your sister or boss), Caspari says, assess your thoughts: “This is what I’m thinking, even if I don’t exactly know what I’m feeling.”

Once you can identify your feelings from day to day, you’ll start to see the benefits. It helps prevent emotional upheavals if a crisis strikes, explains Simon Rego, PsyD, chief psychologist at the Montefiore Medical Center in New York City. After a day of frustrations, you’ll be less likely to absolutely lose it on the poor unsuspecting stock person at the drugstore. “Once you become aware of what you’re feeling, it helps create a bit of space to diminish its intensity,” he says. “Now you are observing it rather than being overwhelmed by it.” Not convinced? Here’s proof: People with a phobia of public speaking who voiced their fears before making a speech were more relaxed after presenting than those who didn’t acknowledge their anxiety, a study at UCLA found.

Putting Self-Reflection Into Practice

Check-ins are like physical exercise: To get the most benefit from them, you have to do them regularly. “These skills work best if we learn them when our emotions aren’t so intense. Then we can apply them at times that are more challenging,” Rego says. In other words, practice. Period. Rego suggests checking in with yourself once a day to start. “The beginning of the day or around the time you begin your bedtime routine is ideal,” he says. Fitting a check-in into your schedule should be painless, says Jason Moser, PhD, associate professor of psychology at Michigan State University. Just 5 to 10 minutes is enough time to get a quick roundup of your thoughts and emotions.

Also, tailor the check-in to the moment. If you’re doing it at night, think about how your day went, Ford says: “What were some positive moments? Maybe there were things you wish had gone differently; check in on how you felt about them.” If you’re a morning person who wants to pair your check-in with your cup of coffee or meditation practice, ask yourself, “How am I feeling as I approach the day? What’s coming up? How do I feel about it?” says Maryanna D. Klatt, PhD, a professor in the department of family medicine at the Ohio State University College of Medicine. Once you’ve mastered the basics, you can start checking in during other daily activities, Rego says—for example, while taking your evening stroll or sitting behind the wheel in traffic (though we can bet what your emotions will be at that moment!). To make this habit really stick, Klatt suggests using a physical action as your prompt. Whenever you touch your boss’s office doorknob before joining her for an important meeting, ask yourself, “Am I clear or muddled?” If it helps you unpack your current mood, try taking notes in a journal or on your phone’s note-taking app. “Writing has the added benefit of giving you some perspective because you can see your thoughts on paper or the screen,” Moser says.

The Power of Knowing Yourself Better

Check-ins can help you decide if you need to do something about your emotions or just accept them. For instance, experiencing fleeting sadness or nostalgia isn’t always a cause for alarm; in some cases, your emotional response may make complete sense. If you’ve lost a loved one, Rego says, it’s normal to feel sad, bereft, and a bit depressed for a while. Similarly, he says, you

might feel more anxious and on guard after witnessing a traumatic event, such as a car accident or a wildfire. By simply acknowledging your feelings, you can put some much-needed distance between yourself and the event.

Identifying your emotions will also help you see a connection between cause and effect—and allow you to direct your life toward happiness, Klatt explains. “If something is impacting you in a positive way, maybe you want to increase the experience,” she says. For example, if hanging out with a friend cheers you up, then that’s a signal you need to spend more time with them. Now that you know what makes you feel great, you can seek it out as needed.