

CLERGY RESILIENCE SERIES

A CLERGY RESILIENCE PRACTICE

Knowing What You're Feeling

Emotional Intelligence for Clergy Resilience

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Knowing What You're Feeling

Emotional Intelligence for Clergy Resilience

A Clergy Resilience Practice

| Read for an hour. Practice for a month. Then ask what you need next.

About the Clergy Resilience Series

Returning reader? Skip the common introduction and begin this practice.

This introduction appears in every Clergy Resilience Practice. If you have read it in another booklet, you may skip ahead to Knowing What You're Feeling. First-time readers may want to continue here for the theological and practical foundations of the series.

Ministry can be deeply life-giving. It can also wear you down.

The work asks us to enter other people's grief, conflict, fear, hope, illness, joy, disappointment, and change. We preach and teach, lead organizations, respond to crises, manage conflict, accompany people through suffering, celebrate with them, make decisions, and carry responsibilities few people in our congregations ever fully see.

Sometimes we do all of this while trying to make sense of what is happening in our own lives.

Over time, ministry leaves its mark.

You may notice that you are more tired than you used to be. Criticism stays with you longer. You carry other people's problems home. Saying no produces guilt. Conflict occupies your mind long after the meeting ends. Prayer has become something you do professionally rather than something that nourishes you. Perhaps you feel lonely, spiritually dry, cynical, constantly hurried, or simply beaten up.

These experiences do not necessarily mean you are failing at ministry.

They may simply mean that something deserves your attention.

Resilience Is More Than Endurance

Clergy resilience is sometimes understood as the ability to withstand ministry's pressures—to become tougher, develop thicker skin, recover more quickly, and keep going.

But resilience is not simply endurance.

Nor is it another name for self-care.

Resilience is the developing capacity to remain **personally healthy, relationally connected, spiritually grounded, and vocationally faithful** through the ordinary and extraordinary stresses of ministry.

That capacity develops over time.

Emotional awareness helps us recognize what is happening within us. Differentiation helps us distinguish what belongs to us from what belongs to someone else. Boundaries protect what matters. Relationships keep us from practicing ministry alone. Prayer reconnects us with the source of our vocation. Rest and recreation restore capacities that ministry consumes. Attention to sleep, nutrition, movement, and physical health reminds us that our bodies are not separate from our spiritual and emotional lives. Systems awareness helps us remain grounded when congregations become anxious. Reflection and discernment help us recognize when something needs to change.

These are not techniques for making us invulnerable.

They are practices that help us remain available to God, to others, and to ourselves.

Self-Giving, Not Self-Erasure

Christian ministry involves sacrifice.

There will be nights when someone is dying and sleep will have to wait. There will be seasons when the needs of a congregation require more from us than usual. Love costs something. Vocation costs something. Following Christ has never promised a life protected from sacrifice.

The question is not whether ministry will ask something of us.

| It will.

The deeper question is what kind of sacrifice faithfulness requires.

Jesus' life was profoundly self-giving, but it was not indiscriminately available. He withdrew to pray. He rested. He received food and hospitality. He lived in relationship with companions. He left places where people were still looking for him. He sometimes moved toward one need while passing by another. A genuine need did not, by itself, determine what he was called to do.

That matters for pastors.

People may genuinely need us, yet their need may not always be ours to meet. Someone may be disappointed by a boundary we establish without that boundary being unfaithful. Rest may sometimes be more faithful than another meeting. Prayer may take us away from people who want our attention precisely because we need to remember whose ministry this is.

| Christian ministry calls us to self-giving, not self-erasure.

Resilience helps us give ourselves faithfully without losing the self God has given us to offer.

The distinction matters because suffering itself is not evidence of faithfulness. Exhaustion is not proof of devotion. Being indispensable is not the same as being called. Allowing ourselves to be consumed by every legitimate need around us does not necessarily make us more Christlike.

Faithful sacrifice is ordered toward life.

Sometimes it asks a great deal of us, stretching capacities we did not know we possessed. But resilience helps us recover, learn, mature, and return. It preserves and develops our capacity to love, serve, discern, and give again.

So one question runs quietly beneath every resource in this series:

| Is this helping me become more capable of faithful self-giving, or am I simply being consumed?

Start Where You Are

This series is not a training program to complete.

There is no prescribed sequence. There is no expectation that you work through every resource. You may never need some of them.

Begin with what is wearing on you now.

Perhaps you need stronger boundaries. Perhaps you need to understand why a particular situation makes you so angry. Maybe you need relationships in which no one needs you to be their pastor. Perhaps you need a way to recover after demanding weeks, or help sorting out what belongs to you and what you have been carrying for someone else.

Perhaps ministry has hurt you and you need to tend the wound.

Perhaps you have stopped doing things that give you joy.

Perhaps your body is telling you something you have been too busy to hear.

Perhaps you are beginning to wonder whether something about your vocation needs to change.

Start there.

Each resource in this series focuses on one dimension of clergy resilience. It is designed to be read in about an hour and practiced for approximately a month.

The reading introduces the practice.

| The month is where the learning happens.

You will be invited to notice what happens in ordinary ministry, experiment with a few practices, reflect on what you discover, and decide what is useful enough to carry forward.

There is nothing to complete here.

| You are practicing, not performing.

If you miss several days, begin again. If a practice doesn't fit, adapt it. If you discover that the issue you started with isn't really the issue, follow what you are learning.

The purpose is not to master another program. It is to become more attentive to yourself, your relationships, your vocation, and the presence of God within all of them.

You Were Never Meant to Do This Alone

Personal practices matter, but clergy resilience is not solely an individual responsibility.

Sometimes pastors become depleted because we have developed unhealthy patterns. Sometimes we are depleted because we are serving within unhealthy systems. Often both are true.

No amount of emotional intelligence can make an abusive situation healthy. Better boundaries cannot eliminate every unreasonable expectation. Prayer cannot substitute for sleep. A vacation cannot repair chronic organizational dysfunction. And resilience should never become an excuse for asking clergy to endure circumstances that need to change.

Healthy resilience includes knowing when we need someone else.

At times, faithful resilience may require a trusted colleague, friend, clergy cohort, coach, spiritual director, therapist, physician, mentor, or denominational leader.

Seeking support is not evidence that resilience has failed.

| Relationship is one of the ways resilience develops.

One Practice at a Time

You do not need to become perfectly resilient before you can practice healthy ministry.

Resilience develops as we live.

Notice one thing.

Practice one thing.

Pay attention to what changes.

At month's end, you may decide to continue the practice. You may choose another resource because something else now needs attention. Or you may simply return to your life and ministry carrying one new capacity with you.

That is enough.

| Read for an hour. Practice for a month. Then ask what you need next.

Knowing What You're Feeling

You finish a difficult meeting and walk to your car.

Something happened in that room.

You know you are upset, but you aren't quite sure why. Someone challenged a decision you made. Another person said very little but looked angry. A third tried to smooth everything over. You kept the meeting moving and remained calm.

Now you're driving home replaying the conversation.

You tell yourself you're frustrated.

But are you?

Maybe you're angry.

Maybe you're embarrassed.

Maybe you felt publicly undermined.

Maybe you're afraid the conflict is going to grow.

Maybe you're disappointed because someone you trusted didn't support you.

Maybe you're worried that you handled the situation badly.

Maybe you're carrying the room's anger and haven't yet discovered how much of it belongs to you.

"I'm frustrated" can cover a remarkable amount of territory.

Until we know what we're actually feeling, it is difficult to decide what to do with it.

That is where emotional intelligence begins.

This booklet centers on one practice: Notice → Name → Sort → Choose. Notice what is happening. Name the feeling as precisely as you can. Sort feeling from story and your experience from the emotions around you. Then choose a faithful response. A shorter tool called PAUSE appears later for highly activated moments, but it supports this four-part practice rather than replacing it.

Emotions Are Information

Clergy spend a great deal of time paying attention to other people's emotions.

We walk into hospital rooms and immediately notice anxiety.

We hear grief underneath someone's anger.

We recognize tension in a committee before anyone names it.

We know when a couple sitting across from us is telling us that everything is fine when clearly everything is not fine.

Pastoral ministry trains us to notice emotional information.

The problem is that we can become much better at reading everyone else than at reading ourselves.

We ask:

How is she doing?

Why is he so angry?

What is happening in this congregation?

But we may not ask with the same curiosity:

| What is happening in me?

Emotions offer information about how we are experiencing the world. They tell us that something has caught our attention.

Fear may tell us that we perceive danger.

Anger may signal violation, injustice, frustration, or obstruction.

Sadness may tell us that something important has been lost.

Embarrassment may tell us that we believe something about ourselves has been exposed.

Resentment may alert us that we have repeatedly agreed to something we no longer freely choose.

Jealousy may expose longing, comparison, or insecurity.

Relief may tell us that we have been carrying more tension than we realized.

Joy may reveal what gives us life.

None of those emotions automatically tells us what is true.

Fear can perceive danger where there is none.

Anger can misidentify an offender.

Shame can tell us we are defective when we have simply made a mistake.

Anxiety can convince us that catastrophe is imminent when it isn't.

| Emotions are information, not instructions.

We listen to them without automatically obeying them.

That is an important resilience skill.

The Pastor Who Doesn't Get Angry

Many clergy have emotions they have learned not to have.

Perhaps anger wasn't acceptable in your family.

Perhaps sadness was interpreted as weakness.

Perhaps fear seems inconsistent with faith.

Perhaps clergy aren't supposed to feel jealous.

Perhaps disappointment in your congregation feels disloyal.

Perhaps resentment sounds insufficiently pastoral.

So the emotion gets translated.

Anger becomes “concern.”

Fear becomes “discernment.”

Resentment becomes “fatigue.”

Sadness becomes “I’m fine.”

Sometimes our theological language helps us understand our emotions.

Sometimes it helps us hide from them.

Emotional maturity doesn't require us to approve of every feeling. It requires us to become sufficiently honest to recognize what is actually there.

The psalmists understood this remarkably well.

They could be grateful, frightened, furious, joyful, despairing, hopeful, vengeful, lonely, trusting, and confused—sometimes within the same prayer.

The emotion could be brought into the presence of God before it had been resolved.

That suggests a useful spiritual practice:

| We don't have to clean up our emotions before bringing them to God.

We can begin with what is actually there.

From “Fine” to Something More Precise

One of the simplest ways to develop emotional intelligence is to increase emotional vocabulary.

Imagine someone asks you after a difficult week:

“How are you?”

You respond:

“Tired.”

That may be physically accurate.

But perhaps tired isn't the whole story.

You might be:

- disappointed
- discouraged
- lonely
- irritated
- apprehensive
- overwhelmed
- resentful
- bored
- ashamed
- grieving
- relieved
- unappreciated
- helpless
- restless
- hopeful
- satisfied
- content

The more precisely we name an emotion, the more clearly we can understand it.

Consider the difference between:

■ **“I'm angry.”**

and:

■ **“I feel betrayed.”**

Or:

■ **“I'm stressed.”**

and:

“I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint them.”

Or:

“I'm exhausted.”

and:

“I resent how available everyone expects me to be.”

The second statement in each pair gives us something to explore.

Precision creates possibilities.

If a more precise word is hard to find, that is not unusual. Many of us rely on a relatively small emotional vocabulary. **Appendix A: Finding the Word** offers groups of emotion words with brief descriptions.

Don't study the list.

Browse it until a word makes you think:

That's closer.

Try This: Name Three

At some point today, stop for sixty seconds.

Ask:

What am I feeling right now?

Try to name three emotions.

Not thoughts.

Not explanations.

Not what somebody else did.

Emotions.

You might discover:

calm, curious, hopeful.

Or:

irritated, rushed, apprehensive.

Or:

lonely, disappointed, tired.

Don't fix anything.

Just notice.

If three seems excessive, name one.

The skill begins with attention.

Feelings and Stories Are Different

Imagine that a church member walks past you after worship without speaking.

You feel something immediately.

Then the story begins.

She's angry about my sermon.

She never liked me.

Someone has been talking to her.

This is going to become another problem.

The feeling might be anxiety.

The story is everything your mind constructs around that feeling.

Those are not the same thing.

A useful emotional-intelligence practice is learning to separate three things:

What happened?

She walked past without speaking.

What did I feel?

Anxious. Perhaps rejected.

What story did I tell myself?

She's angry with me.

That story may be correct.

It may also turn out that she was trying to catch her grandson before he left the building.

Pastoral ministry generates an enormous amount of ambiguous information. People change seats. Attendance drops. Someone doesn't respond to an email. A session member becomes quiet. A family stops coming. A staff member closes the office door.

When we are tired or anxious, our minds are especially talented at filling in missing information.

Emotional intelligence helps us notice when we have mistaken interpretation for fact.

The Body Often Knows First

Emotions are not purely mental events.

You may notice tension in your shoulders before realizing you are anxious.

Your jaw tightens during a meeting.

Your stomach tightens when a particular person's name appears on your phone.

Your breathing becomes shallow.

You can't fall asleep because a conversation keeps replaying.

You walk into the church building and suddenly feel tired.

You feel an unexpected burst of energy when a meeting is canceled.

Your body is providing information.

That doesn't mean every physical sensation has a psychological cause. Bodies require medical attention, and unexplained or persistent symptoms deserve appropriate professional care.

But one part of emotional intelligence is learning to notice the physical dimension of emotional experience.

Ask occasionally:

| Where am I carrying this?

You may be surprised by the answer.

Who Owns This Feeling?

This question points toward differentiation, explored more fully elsewhere in the Clergy Resilience Series. For now, the aim is simply to notice that pastors work in emotional systems: we enter an anxious room and become anxious, sit with grief and carry some of it away, or feel responsible for making another person's anger disappear.

Human beings affect one another emotionally; that is part of relationship. But compassion does not require emotional duplication. A pastor can remain present to another person's fear, anger, or grief without becoming governed by it.

Ask: What am I feeling—and how much of this belongs to me? You do not have to answer it perfectly. The question creates enough space to care without assuming that everything you feel is yours to carry.

The Space Between Feeling and Response

Emotional intelligence does not eliminate strong emotion. A resilient pastor still gets angry, hurt, frightened, embarrassed, or defensive. The difference is not the absence of emotion but what happens next.

There is a small but important space between feeling something and doing something. Notice → Name → Sort → Choose helps us inhabit that space. Feeling identifies the moment; discernment chooses the response.

A Secondary Tool for Activated Moments: PAUSE

When emotion runs high and a response feels urgent, PAUSE can support the primary practice:

Pause — Do not respond immediately unless the situation genuinely requires it.

Attend — Notice what is happening in your body and what emotions are present.

Understand — Ask what triggered you and what story you are telling yourself.

Sort — Distinguish what is yours, what may belong to someone else, and what you do not yet know.

Engage — Choose what response, if any, serves life, relationship, vocation, and faithfulness.

Sometimes you will have twenty minutes; sometimes twenty seconds. PAUSE is not a second framework to master. It briefly creates enough room to return to Notice → Name → Sort → Choose when you are activated.

Emotional Intelligence and Prayer

Prayer is one place where emotional intelligence and theological resilience meet.

Instead of beginning prayer with what you think you should feel, try beginning with what is actually there.

God, I'm angry.

I'm afraid.

I'm jealous.

I'm so tired of these people today.

I feel like a failure.

I'm relieved that she resigned, and I feel guilty for being relieved.

I don't want to go to that meeting.

I loved what happened today.

I felt useful.

I am grateful.

The goal isn't to sanctify every emotional impulse.

The goal is to bring the truth of our experience into relationship with God.

Then another question becomes possible:

| What might God be inviting me to notice here?

Not:

What is God telling me through this emotion?

That assumes too much.

Simply:

What deserves my attention?

Sometimes anger reveals an injustice.

Sometimes anger reveals wounded pride.

Sometimes it contains both.

Prayer gives us a place to hold the question without demanding an immediate answer.

When a Feeling Keeps Returning

Some emotions pass quickly.

Others keep returning.

Pay attention to recurring emotions.

If you repeatedly feel resentful after session meetings, something may deserve attention.

If Sunday afternoon consistently brings sadness, notice it.

If one staff relationship repeatedly produces anxiety, don't simply dismiss it.

If you experience relief every time a particular church activity is canceled, become curious.

If you regularly feel dread on Saturday night, listen.

If joy appears every time you teach but rarely when you administer, notice that too.

Patterns often reveal more than isolated experiences.

One emotional moment may be about a bad day.

A recurring emotional pattern may be telling us something about a relationship, boundary, expectation, role, system, or vocation.

The purpose isn't to diagnose yourself.

It is to become curious.

When Emotional Awareness Is Not Enough

Sometimes emotional awareness reveals something that requires more than a resilience exercise.

Persistent despair, overwhelming anxiety, traumatic reactions, inability to function, substance misuse, thoughts of self-harm, or emotional distress that disrupts daily life deserve appropriate professional attention.

Likewise, if what you are experiencing involves abuse, harassment, threats, or an unsafe congregational environment, the issue is not simply whether you can regulate your emotions more effectively.

Resilience includes recognizing when something exceeds what should be carried alone.

The response may need to include a therapist, physician, coach, denominational leader, trusted colleague, or other appropriate professional.

Emotional intelligence helps us recognize what is happening.

It does not require us to handle everything ourselves.

Your Four-Week Practice

For the next month, you are not trying to master emotional intelligence.

You are developing one habit:

Notice what you are feeling before deciding what to do with it.

Each week adds one small movement.

There is no score.

There is no perfect record.

If you forget for three days, resume on the fourth.

You are practicing, not performing.

Week One: NOTICE

This week, your only job is to notice.

Two or three times during the day, stop briefly and ask:

| What am I feeling right now?

Don't analyze it.

Don't fix it.

Don't explain why.

Name whatever you can.

If possible, name more than one emotion.

You might use ordinary transitions as reminders:

- arriving at church
- before lunch
- leaving the office
- getting into the car after a meeting
- before going to bed

At the End of the Day

Ask:

| What feeling showed up most often today?

That's enough.

At the End of Week One

Reflect briefly:

What emotions were easiest to recognize?

Which were hardest?

Were there emotions you tended to call something else?

What did your body tell you?

Did anything surprise you?

Week Two: NAME

This week, continue noticing, but work toward greater precision.

Move beyond:

good

bad

fine

stressed

tired

upset

Ask:

What is a more precise word for this?

Keep **Appendix A: Finding the Word** nearby this week.

When you repeatedly reach for familiar words such as fine, stressed, frustrated, tired, or angry, browse the appendix.

You aren't looking for the correct answer.

Look for a word that brings you closer to what you are actually experiencing.

You might discover that what you have been calling anger is actually betrayal.

What you have been calling stress may be apprehension.

What you have been calling exhaustion may contain resentment.

What you have been calling discouragement may actually be grief.

And what you have been calling “fine” may turn out to be contentment—which is worth noticing too.

Precision matters because different emotions invite different questions.

A Daily Question

Once each day, ask:

| What is the most accurate word I can find for what I am feeling?

Then ask:

| What happened immediately before I noticed it?

Don't assume causation.

Just notice the connection.

At the End of Week Two

What emotional words have you used most frequently?

What situations repeatedly evoke them?

Are there emotions you resist naming?

Are you beginning to recognize feelings sooner?

Has a more precise word changed how you understand anything?

Week Three: SORT

Now we add the question:

| What belongs to me?

When a strong emotion appears, notice it and name it.

Then ask:

What happened?

What am I feeling?

What story am I telling myself?

What part of this is mine?

What might belong to someone else?

What don't I know yet?

The answers may not be clear.

That's fine.

The practice is to keep asking.

Try It After One Difficult Interaction

Choose one conversation, meeting, email, or pastoral encounter this week that stays with you.

Write four short sentences:

What happened:

Just the observable facts.

I felt:

Name the emotions.

The story I began telling myself was:

What did you assume or interpret?

What I actually know is:

Separate knowledge from interpretation.

Then stop.

You don't have to solve the situation.

At the End of Week Three

Did separating feelings from stories change anything?

Did you discover that you were carrying someone else's anxiety, anger, grief, or expectations?

Did you discover something that genuinely does belong to you?

Is there anything you need to take responsibility for?

Anything you need to give back?

Anything you simply need to leave unresolved for now?

Week Four: CHOOSE

This week, practice the space between feeling and response.

Continue to notice, name, and sort.

Then ask:

What response do I choose?

If you are emotionally activated, use PAUSE to make room for that choice. Then return to the primary question: What response serves life, relationship, vocation, and faithfulness?

Sometimes the answer will be:

Speak.

Sometimes:

Wait.

Sometimes:

Ask a question.

Sometimes:

Apologize.

Sometimes:

Establish a boundary.

Sometimes:

Talk with someone I trust.

Sometimes:

Pray.

Sometimes:

Let it go.

Emotional intelligence doesn't tell you which response is correct.

It gives you greater freedom to choose instead of merely reacting.

At the End of Week Four

Look back over the month.

What do you notice sooner now?

What emotion have you learned to name more accurately?

What recurring pattern have you discovered?

Are you better able to distinguish feeling from interpretation?

Have you noticed emotions that belong partly to the system around you?

Has creating even a small space before responding changed any conversations?

What would you like to keep practicing?

A Practice to Carry Forward

You don't need to keep doing all the exercises.

If this month has been useful, carry one simple practice with you:

Notice. Name. Sort. Choose.

Notice

Something is happening in me.

Name

What am I actually feeling?

Sort

What is mine? What is someone else's? What don't I know?

Choose

What response serves life and faithfulness?

With practice, the questions become less mechanical.

You simply become more emotionally attentive.

That is the goal.

Not perfect emotional control.

Not perpetual calm.

Not detachment.

Attentiveness.

What Might You Need Next?

Sometimes emotional awareness, by itself, solves very little.

That's okay.

Often, its purpose is to reveal where the work actually is.

If this month helped you realize:

“I keep carrying everybody else's problems.”

Your next practice may be **What Is Yours to Carry? — Differentiation and Pastoral Resilience.**

“I know what I'm feeling, but I still can't say no.”

Consider **Caring Without Losing Yourself — Healthy Boundaries.**

“The congregation's anxiety keeps becoming my anxiety.”

Consider **When the Church Is Anxious — Staying Grounded in an Anxious System.**

“I know I'm reacting too quickly when I'm activated.”

Consider **Creating Space to Respond — Self-Regulation.**

“I realize I don't have anyone with whom I can talk honestly about this.”

Consider **You Cannot Do Ministry Alone — Life-Giving Relationships.**

“What I'm actually feeling is hurt. I feel beaten up.”

Consider **When You Feel Beaten Up — Healing from the Hurts of Ministry.**

“I'm beginning to realize that I am simply depleted.”

Consider **Learning to Recover — Rest and Clergy Resilience.**

Or return to **Is Ministry Wearing You Down?** and notice which sentence catches your attention now.

You may discover that it is different from the sentence that brought you here.

That is not failure.

That is discernment.

A Closing Reflection

Emotions are part of the life God has given us.

They are not infallible guides. They are not moral verdicts. They do not determine what we must do.

But neither are they obstacles to faithful ministry that need to be suppressed so we can get on with serving everyone else.

They are part of how we experience ourselves, other people, the world, and sometimes God's movement within our lives.

Learning to notice them makes us more available to truth.

Learning to name them gives us greater freedom.

Learning to sort them helps us carry what is ours without claiming responsibility for everything around us.

Learning to choose our response creates space for discernment.

And that space matters.

Because Christian ministry calls us to give ourselves.

Resilience helps us know what we are giving, why we are giving it, and whether that giving is participating in life.

Notice what is happening.

Name it honestly.

Bring it before God.

Then choose what faithfulness asks of you.

One practice at a time.

Appendix A: Finding the Word

A Vocabulary for What You May Be Feeling

You don't need to learn these words.

This isn't a vocabulary test.

When you have difficulty naming what you feel, browse the groups below. Notice whether a word seems closer to your experience than the word you first chose.

The descriptions are not clinical definitions. The list includes emotions as well as closely related experiences, body states, and interpretations that people commonly use when trying to understand what is happening within them. They are invitations to greater precision, not diagnoses.

You may experience several emotions at once. Some may even seem contradictory: relieved and sad, angry and frightened, grateful and exhausted.

That is normal.

You may also decide that none of these words quite fits.

That's fine too.

The goal is not to find the “correct” label.

The goal is to move closer to what is actually happening within you.

Anger, Violation, and Resistance

Angry — I perceive something as wrong, threatening, obstructive, unfair, or unjust.

Annoyed — Something is bothering me, though not necessarily deeply.

Irritated — Something keeps rubbing against me or demanding attention I do not want to give.

Frustrated — Something I want, need, or am trying to accomplish is being blocked.

Resentful — I feel I am repeatedly giving, doing, accepting, or tolerating something I no longer freely choose.

Indignant — I perceive an offense against fairness, dignity, justice, or what I believe is right.

Offended — Something has violated my expectations, beliefs, dignity, or sense of appropriate behavior.

Defensive — I feel that my actions, competence, motives, or identity are being attacked, and I want to protect myself.

Outraged — I experience an intense response to something I perceive as seriously wrong or unjust.

Impatient — I want something to move, change, or conclude more quickly than it is.

Fed up — My tolerance for a recurring situation is depleted.

You might ask:

What feels threatened or violated?

What am I trying to protect?

What expectation is being frustrated?

Have I agreed to something I no longer freely choose?

Is there a boundary, injustice, disappointment, or wound underneath this anger?

Fear, Anxiety, and Uncertainty

Afraid — I perceive danger or the possibility of harm.

Anxious — I feel uneasy about something uncertain, unresolved, or potentially threatening.

Apprehensive — I anticipate that something difficult or unpleasant may happen.

Uneasy — Something does not feel settled or safe, even if I cannot yet identify why.

Worried — My attention keeps returning to something that might go wrong.

Threatened — I perceive something important—security, relationship, position, reputation, identity, or well-being—as being at risk.

Insecure — I am uncertain about my adequacy, belonging, standing, or safety.

Helpless — Something matters to me, but I cannot see how to influence what happens.

Vulnerable — I recognize that I can be hurt, rejected, exposed, or affected by what happens.

Dread — I strongly anticipate an experience I do not want to face.

Panicked — I experience an intense sense of immediate threat or loss of control.

You might ask:

What am I afraid might happen?

What feels at risk?

How likely is the outcome I am imagining?

What can I influence?

What cannot I control?

Do I need reassurance, preparation, support, information, a boundary, or simply time?

Sadness, Loss, and Disappointment

Sad — I experience sorrow, loss, or diminished well-being.

Disappointed — Something I hoped for or expected did not happen.

Discouraged — Difficulty or disappointment has reduced my hope, confidence, or energy.

Grieving — I am responding to the loss of someone or something that mattered deeply.

Lonely — I want meaningful connection and do not experience enough of it.

Rejected — I experience another person's choice or response as a rejection of me, of our relationship, or of what I offered.

Abandoned — Someone I depended on or expected to remain has left or become unavailable.

Heartbroken — A significant loss or relational wound has caused profound sadness.

Empty — Something that once provided meaning, energy, connection, or purpose now seems absent.

Defeated — I feel that something I worked for, hoped for, or struggled against has overcome me.

Homesick — I long for a place, people, time, or sense of belonging associated with home.

Melancholy — I experience a quiet, lingering sadness that may not have a single identifiable cause.

You might ask:

What have I lost?

What did I hope would happen?

What mattered about it?

Am I allowing myself to grieve, or am I trying to move immediately to fixing?

Who can accompany me in this?

Shame, Guilt, and Exposure

These experiences are easily confused, but the distinctions matter.

Guilty — I believe I have done, failed to do, or participated in something inconsistent with my values or responsibilities.

Ashamed — I experience myself as defective, unacceptable, or unworthy.

Embarrassed — Something about me has been exposed or noticed in a way that makes me uncomfortable.

Humiliated — I experience my dignity as having been diminished, often publicly or through another person's actions.

Regretful — I wish I had acted differently or that an event had unfolded differently.

Inadequate — I believe I do not possess what is needed for the task, expectation, or situation before me.

Exposed — Something I wanted private, protected, or unnoticed now feels visible.

Self-conscious — I am unusually aware of how others may be perceiving or evaluating me.

Remorseful — I recognize that my actions have caused harm and feel sorrow about what I have done.

You might ask:

Did I do something wrong, or have I concluded that something is wrong with me?

Is repair needed?

Do I need to apologize?

Whose judgment am I carrying?

Am I judging myself more harshly than I would judge another person?

Was my dignity actually violated?

Hurt and Relational Wounding

Hurt — Something another person did, said, withheld, or failed to do caused emotional pain.

Wounded — A hurt has reached deeply and continues to affect me.

Unappreciated — I believe something I have given or contributed has not been recognized or valued.

Dismissed — I experience my thoughts, feelings, contribution, or presence as having been treated as unimportant.

Misunderstood — I believe another person has formed an inaccurate understanding of me, my motives, or what I meant.

Used — I experience another person or system as valuing what I provide more than valuing me.

Excluded — I experience myself as being left outside a relationship, group, conversation, or decision where I expected or wanted belonging.

Disrespected — I experience another person's behavior as failing to honor my dignity, role, boundaries, or legitimate contribution.

Betrayed — Someone I trusted has violated that trust or an expectation central to our relationship.

Beaten up — Criticism, conflict, disappointment, hostility, or repeated emotional injury has accumulated and left me feeling bruised, guarded, or depleted.

You might ask:

What actually hurt?

Was this a single event or an accumulation?

What did I expect from this relationship?

Does anything need repair?

Do I need accountability, distance, grief, support, forgiveness, or a stronger boundary?

Fatigue, Depletion, and Overload

Some of these experiences are not emotions in a narrow psychological sense. They are included because they are often the first words we use when trying to describe what is happening.

Tired — My physical or mental energy is reduced.

Exhausted — My available energy feels significantly depleted.

Drained — An experience or relationship seems to have taken emotional or physical energy from me.

Depleted — The resources I normally draw upon feel diminished or unavailable.

Overwhelmed — More is coming at me than I currently feel able to manage.

Burned out — Prolonged demands have left me exhausted and increasingly detached, cynical, or less effective; this pattern may deserve support beyond a vocabulary exercise.

Numb — I notice little emotional response where I would ordinarily expect to feel something.

Detached — I experience emotional distance from people, work, or situations that ordinarily matter to me.

Bored — I experience insufficient interest, stimulation, meaning, or engagement.

You might ask:

Do I need sleep—or is something else hiding underneath “tired”?

What is consuming energy?

What restores energy?

Is this temporary fatigue or a recurring pattern?

What does my body need?

What might need to stop?

Joy, Energy, and Vitality

Emotional intelligence isn't only about identifying distress.

Positive emotions also tell us something important.

Joyful — I experience deep pleasure, gladness, or delight.

Delighted — Something has brought an immediate sense of pleasure or enjoyment.

Content — I experience enoughness and do not presently need circumstances to be different.

Satisfied — Something has met an important expectation, need, hope, or value.

Energized — An experience has increased my vitality or sense of capacity.

Excited — I anticipate or experience something with heightened positive energy.

Playful — I feel free to experiment, laugh, enjoy, or engage without needing to produce an outcome.

Curious — I want to understand, discover, or explore.

Inspired — Something has awakened imagination, possibility, meaning, or motivation.

Hopeful — I can imagine meaningful possibility ahead.

Proud — I feel appropriate satisfaction in something I have done or become, or in something someone I care about has done or become.

Grateful — I recognize something as a gift and feel appreciation for it.

You might ask:

What is giving me life?

When do I feel most energized?

What does this tell me about what matters to me?

Is there enough room for this in my life?

What might God be inviting me to receive rather than accomplish?

Connection, Love, and Belonging

Loved — I feel genuinely cared for and valued.

Accepted — I experience belonging without needing to earn it through performance.

Known — I experience another person as seeing and understanding something real about me.

Supported — I experience others as willing to stand with me, help me, or share a burden.

Connected — I experience meaningful connection rather than isolation.

Affectionate — I experience warmth, tenderness, or fondness toward someone.

Compassionate — I am moved by another person's experience, and I desire their well-being.

Trusting — I experience enough safety to rely upon another person or become appropriately vulnerable.

Safe — I experience enough security, in this moment, that I do not need to remain highly guarded or defensive.

Included — I experience myself as welcomed into relationship, community, conversation, or shared purpose.

Belonging — I experience myself as part of something without needing continually to justify my place within it.

You might ask:

Where can I be known rather than merely needed?

Who allows me to be a person rather than a role?

Where do I feel safe enough to be honest?

Whose presence restores me?

Who might need to know me better?

Peace, Relief, and Release

Calm — Emotional and physical activation has settled.

Relieved — A threat, responsibility, uncertainty, or burden has diminished or passed.

Settled — Something that felt unresolved now feels sufficiently integrated or clear.

Rested — My body and mind have regained energy and capacity.

Secure — I experience sufficient stability and safety.

Grounded — I feel present, centered, and able to remain myself within what is happening.

Free — A burden, expectation, fear, or constraint no longer has the same hold on me.

At ease — I am able to be present without significant tension or vigilance.

Peaceful — I experience an underlying wholeness or quiet that does not require everything around me to be resolved.

You might ask:

What has changed?

What burden have I stopped carrying?

What conditions help me become grounded?

Where do I experience peace that is deeper than simply having no problems?

Desire, Longing, and Comparison

Longing — I deeply desire something absent, distant, lost, or not yet realized.

Eager — I want to move toward something with positive anticipation.

Restless — I have difficulty settling and sense a desire for movement, change, or something different.

Dissatisfied — Something important is not meeting a need, value, expectation, or desire.

Envious — Something another person has awakens my awareness of something I wish I had.

Jealous — I fear losing a valued relationship, position, recognition, or possession to someone else.

Yearning — I experience a deep, persistent desire for something meaningful.

You might ask:

What do I want?

What do I see in someone else's life that reveals something missing from mine?

Is this desire inviting action, acceptance, grief, patience, or discernment?

What longing have I been afraid to acknowledge?

When You Still Can't Find the Word

Sometimes the most honest answer to:

| What am I feeling?

is:

| I don't know yet.

That is a legitimate answer.

Stay curious.

Notice your body.

Notice what you want to do.

Notice what thoughts keep returning.

Notice what you avoid.

Notice what gives you relief.

Notice what happens when you pray.

Perhaps the word will come later.

Emotional intelligence isn't demonstrated by always knowing exactly what you feel.

Sometimes it is shown by a willingness to remain with the question long enough for greater clarity to emerge.

Notice. Name. Sort. Choose.

And when you cannot yet name it:

Notice—and stay curious.