



## Improving Emotional Intelligence (EQ)

Key Skills for Managing Your Emotions and Improving Your Relationships



Many of us find it increasingly difficult to connect in the modern world, both with ourselves and others. An important factor in our ability to successfully connect is emotional intelligence. When it comes to happiness and success in our relationships, career and personal goals, emotional intelligence (EQ) matters just as much as the more well known, intellectual ability (IQ). We need emotional intelligence to turn intention into action, in order to make informed decisions about the things that matter most to us, and to connect to others in productive and nurturing ways.

### What is emotional intelligence?

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Emotional intelligence (EQ) is the ability to identify, use, understand, and manage your own emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges and defuse conflict. This ability also allows us to recognize and understand what others are experiencing emotionally. This recognition and understanding is, for the most part, a nonverbal process that informs thinking and influences how well you connect with others.

Emotional intelligence differs from how we think of intellectual ability, in that emotional intelligence is a learned—not acquired. This learning can take place at any time in life so the social and emotional skill set, known as emotional intelligence, is something we can all have.

It is important to remember that there is a difference, however, between learning about emotional intelligence and applying that knowledge to your life. Just because you know you *should* do something doesn't mean you will—especially when you become overwhelmed by stress, which can override your best intentions. In order to permanently change behavior in ways that stand up under pressure, you need to learn how to overcome stress in the moment, and in your relationships in order to remain emotionally aware.

### Emotional intelligence is commonly defined by four attributes:

1. **Self-awareness** – You recognize your own emotions and how they affect your thoughts and behavior. You know your strengths and weaknesses, and have self-confidence.
2. **Self-management** – You're able to control impulsive feelings and behaviors, manage your emotions in healthy ways, take initiative, follow through on commitments, and adapt to changing circumstances.
3. **Social awareness** – You can understand the emotions, needs, and concerns of other people, pick up on emotional cues, feel comfortable socially, and recognize the power dynamics in a group or organization.
4. **Relationship management** – You know how to develop and maintain good relationships, communicate clearly, inspire and influence others, work well in a team, and manage conflict.

### Why is emotional intelligence so important?

As we know, it's not the smartest people that are the most successful or the most fulfilled in life. You probably know people who are academically brilliant and yet are socially inept and unsuccessful at work or in their personal relationships. Intellectual intelligence (IQ) isn't enough on its own to be successful in life. Yes, your IQ can help you get into college, but it's your emotional intelligence (EQ) that will help you manage the stress and emotions when facing your final exams. IQ and EQ exist in tandem and are most effective when they both are elevated and building off one another.

## Emotional intelligence affects:

**Your performance at school or work.** Emotional intelligence can help you navigate the social complexities of the workplace, lead and motivate others, and excel in your career. In fact, when it comes to gauging important job candidates, many companies now view emotional intelligence as being as important as technical ability and use EQ testing before hiring.

**Your physical health.** If you're unable to manage your emotions, you probably are not managing your stress either. This can lead to serious health problems. Uncontrolled stress can raise blood pressure, suppress the immune system, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, contribute to infertility, and speed up the aging process. The first step to improving emotional intelligence is to learn how to relieve stress.

**Your mental health.** Uncontrolled emotions and stress can also impact your mental health, making you vulnerable to anxiety and depression. If you are unable to understand, be comfortable with, and manage your emotions, you'll be at risk of being unable to form strong relationships which can leave you feeling lonely and isolated.

**Your relationships.** By understanding your emotions and how to control them, you're better able to express how you feel and understand how others are feeling. This allows you to communicate more effectively and forge stronger relationships, both at work and in your personal life.

## What is social intelligence and why does it matter?

Social intelligence is closely related to emotional intelligence. Our emotions evolved to serve a social purpose that enables us, as humans, to survive. The ability to recognize friend from foe, to reduce stress, and return our nervous system to a state of balanced equilibrium and to feel loved and happy is essential. These essential abilities all depend on successful emotional communication that is nonverbal and connects you to other people and their emotions.

### Social emotional communication can instantly convey:

- ▶ The friendliness or unfriendliness of another person
- ▶ Another person's interest in us
- ▶ Another person's caring for or about us

Personal and social attributes play off one another. The world is a social place and we are social beings.

## Building emotional intelligence: 4 key skills to increasing your EQ

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The key skills for building your EQ and improving your ability to manage emotions and connect with others are:

1. Self-awareness
2. Self-management
3. Social awareness
4. Relationship management

### Building emotional intelligence key skill 1: Self-awareness

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The science of [attachment](/articles/parenting-family/what-is-secure-attachment-and-bonding.htm) (/articles/parenting-family/what-is-secure-attachment-and-bonding.htm) teaches that present day emotional experience is a reflection of early life emotional experience. Your ability to experience core feelings like anger, sadness, fear, and joy most likely depends on the quality and consistency of your early life emotional experiences. If your emotions were understood and valued, your emotions became valuable assets later in life. But, if your emotional experiences were confusing, threatening or painful, you most likely did your best to distance yourself from them.

Being able to connect to your emotions—having a moment-to-moment connection with your changing emotional experience—is the key to understanding how emotion influences your thoughts and actions.

**What kind of a relationship do you have with your emotions?**

**Do you experience feelings that flow**, encountering one emotion after another as your experiences change from moment to moment?

**Are your emotions accompanied by physical sensations that you experience** in places like your stomach, throat, or chest?

**Do you experience individual feelings and emotions**, such as anger, sadness, fear, joy, each of which is evident in subtle facial expressions?

**Can you experience intense feelings** that are strong enough to capture both your attention and that of others?

**Do you pay attention to your emotions?** Do they factor into your decision making?

If any of these experiences are unfamiliar, your emotions may be turned down or turned off. In order to be emotionally healthy and emotionally intelligent, you must reconnect to your core emotions, accept them, and become comfortable with them.

### **Mindfulness practice builds self-awareness as it reduces stress**

Mindfulness is the practice of purposely focusing your attention on the present moment—and without judgment. The cultivation of mindfulness has roots in Buddhism, but most religions include some type of similar prayer or meditation technique. Mindfulness helps shift your preoccupation with thought toward an appreciation of the moment, physical and emotional sensations, and brings a larger perspective on life. Mindfulness calms and focuses you, making you more self-aware in the process.

#### Developing emotional awareness

If you haven't learned how to manage stress, it's important to do so first. When you can manage stress, you'll feel more comfortable reconnecting to strong or unpleasant emotions and changing the way you experience and respond to your feelings. You can develop your emotional awareness by learning the mindfulness meditation in Helpguide's free [Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](/emotional-intelligence-toolkit/index.htm) (/emotional-intelligence-toolkit/index.htm) that helps you to get in touch with difficult emotions and manage uncomfortable feelings.

## **Key skill 2: Self-management**

Being emotionally aware is just the first step to emotional management. In order for you to engage your emotional intelligence, you must also be able use your emotions to make constructive decisions about your behavior. When you become overly stressed, you can lose control of your emotions and the ability to act thoughtfully and appropriately.

Think about a time when you have been overwhelmed by stress. Was it easy to think clearly or make a rational decision? Probably not. This is because while your brain can manage feeling and thinking at the same time, when we become overly stressed, our ability to both think clearly and accurately assess emotions—our own and other people's—becomes compromised.

Emotions are important pieces of information that tell us about ourselves and others but in the face of stress that takes us out of our comfort zone, we can become overwhelmed and lose control of ourselves. With the ability to manage stress, and stay emotionally present you can learn to receive disturbing pieces of information without letting this information

override your thoughts and self control. You will be able to make choices that allow you to control impulsive feelings and behaviors, manage your emotions in healthy ways, take initiative, follow through on commitments, and adapt to changing circumstances.

### Key skill 3: Social awareness

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Social awareness is the skill needed to pick up on the largely nonverbal cues others constantly send. These cues speak to the emotions others are experiencing and give you a more precise idea of their experience what is truly important to them. When groups of people send out similar nonverbal cues, you are able to read and understand shared joint experiences. In order to do these things, you will have to know how to suspend your thoughts in order to experience nonverbal cues that change from one moment to the next. Ironically, not thinking about goals and objectives when with other people is what you need to further those objectives.

#### **Mindfulness is an ally of emotional and social awareness**

Social awareness is a moment-to-moment experience that can't take place while we are thinking about something else. When we are in our heads, planning the future or analyzing the past we cannot be present in the moment. This makes it especially difficult to pick up on subtle nonverbal cues. The myth of multitasking must be ignored. Although we can switch subjects very quickly, when we do so, we miss the subtle emotional shift—taking place in other people—that help us to understand them.

- ▶ We are actually more likely to further our social goals and objectives by setting our thoughts, intentions, and goals aside in social situations and instead, focusing on the interaction itself. Moment-to-moment social awareness is an empowering personal process.
- ▶ Following the flow of another person's emotional responses is a give-and-take process that requires us to also pay attention to the flow of our own emotional experience.
- ▶ A common fear is that by paying attention to others we diminish self-awareness but the opposite is really true. We gain self-awareness by taking the time and putting in the effort to pay attention to others.

Paying attention to what you experience emotionally as you listen to others also illuminates your own beliefs and values. It's easy to mouth popular ideas and values that may not really be a good fit for you. But, when you feel discomfort hearing others express these views, you have learned something important about yourself.

## Key skill 4: Relationship management

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Working well with others is a process that begins with emotional awareness and your ability to recognize and understand what other people are experiencing. Once emotional awareness is in play, you can effectively develop additional social/emotional skills that will make your relationships more effective, fruitful and fulfilling.

### Become aware of how effectively you use nonverbal communication



(</articles/relationships-communication/nonverbal-communication.htm>)

It's impossible to avoid sending nonverbal messages to others about what we think and feel. The many muscles in the face surrounding the eyes, nose, mouth and forehead—none of which are weight-bearing like other muscle—help us to wordlessly convey our own emotions as well as read other peoples' emotional intent.

The emotional part of our brain is always on—and even if we ignore its messages—others won't. Recognizing the kinds of nonverbal messages that we send to others can be a huge part improving our relationships. See [Nonverbal Communication](/articles/relationships-communication/nonverbal-communication.htm) (</articles/relationships-communication/nonverbal-communication.htm>).

### Use humor and play to relieve stress

Humor, laughter and play are natural antidotes stress. They lessen your burdens and help you keep things in perspective. Laughter brings your nervous system into balance, reducing stress, calming you down, sharpening your mind and making you more empathic. See [Laughter is the Best Medicine](/articles/mental-health/laughter-is-the-best-medicine.htm) (</articles/mental-health/laughter-is-the-best-medicine.htm>).

### Learn to see conflict as an opportunity to grow closer to others

Conflict and disagreements are inevitable in relationships. Two people can't possibly have the same needs, opinions, and expectations at all times. However, that needn't be a bad thing. Resolving conflict in healthy, constructive ways can strengthen trust between

people. When conflict isn't perceived as threatening or punishing, it fosters freedom, creativity, and safety in relationships. See [Conflict Resolution Skills \(/articles/relationships-communication/conflict-resolution-skills.htm\)](/articles/relationships-communication/conflict-resolution-skills.htm).

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