

The Power of Naming a Feeling

HOW PUTTING EMOTIONS INTO WORDS HELPS THE BRAIN SETTLE

When you name what you're feeling, you give your brain clearer information. Research on "affect labelling" suggests this simple act can reduce emotional intensity and help you respond more calmly, thoughtfully and in line with your values.

FROM FEELING TO WORDS



What Happens in the Brain Two systems working together

01 AN EMOTION ACTIVATES The Brain's Alarm

When something feels threatening, the **amygdala** — a small, almond-shaped structure deep in the temporal lobe — flags its emotional significance and helps trigger the stress response.

02 WORDS ENGAGE REGULATION The Brain's Brake

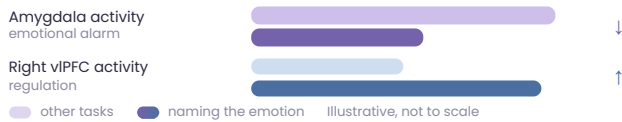
Naming the feeling engages the **right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex (vLPFC)**, involved in inhibition and emotion regulation — linked to a quieter amygdala response.

What the Research Found Affect labelling as implicit emotion regulation

LIEBERMAN ET AL. (2007)

Putting Feelings into Words

In a brain scanner, people viewed emotional faces. Choosing a word for the emotion (e.g. "angry") was compared with tasks such as choosing a gender-matched name.



1 It helps during exposure

Spider-fearful people who described their feelings during exposure showed lower arousal a week later.

2 It works without trying to feel better

Labelling can reduce distress even when people don't expect it to help.

3 Specific words help

Describing emotions precisely is linked with more flexible coping.

A Broader Perspective & What It Means for You Making sense of our inner experience

DR DANIEL SIEGEL

"Name it to tame it"

Siegel's interpersonal neurobiology suggests that naming inner experience helps integrate emotional and reflective processes, supporting self-awareness and balance.



Feelings may feel less intense and overwhelming



You understand your experience more clearly



It creates a pause between feeling and reacting



You can choose a response that fits your values

Try It for Yourself Next time you notice a strong emotion

01 PAUSE

Take one slow breath.

02 NAME IT

"I feel..." — angry, sad, anxious, hurt.

03 BE SPECIFIC

Try "frustrated" rather than just "bad".

04 NOTICE

Any shift in intensity? Small shifts matter.

05 CHOOSE

What do you need next — support, rest, space?

ANXIOUS

uneasy · tense · on edge · dreading

SAD

disappointed · lonely · grieving · low

ANGRY

frustrated · irritated · resentful · let down

ASHAMED

embarrassed · exposed · guilty · small

OVERLOADED

overwhelmed · drained · scattered · numb

Right now, I feel _____

What I need is _____

SOURCES

Lieberman, M. D., et al. (2007). Putting feelings into words: Affect labeling disrupts amygdala activity. *Psychological Science*, 18(5), 421–428.

Torre, J. B., & Lieberman, M. D. (2018). Affect labeling as implicit emotion regulation. *Emotion Review*, 10(2), 116–124.

Kircanski, K., Lieberman, M. D., & Craske, M. G. (2012). Feelings into words: Language and exposure therapy. *Psychol. Sci.*, 23(10), 1086–1091.

Kashdan, T. B., Barrett, L. F., & McKnight, P. E. (2015). Unpacking emotion differentiation. *Curr. Dir. Psychol. Sci.*, 24(1), 10–16.

Siegel, D. J. (2012). *The Developing Mind* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
Siegel, D. J., & Bryson, T. P. (2011). *The Whole-Brain Child*. Delacorte Press.