

The Feeling Balloon Exercise

When working with young clients, I typically introduce this exercise early on in the clinical relationship. It's a good tool to assess for inner life and coping strategies.

You can go so many places with this one—feel free to adapt, expand, and use it for more than one session.

Materials: A balloon, 8x11 paper, and a sharp pointed pen (optional).

Ages: 8-young adult

1. Ask client to define feelings without using the words feeling, feel, felt, in the definition (for example, “an emotion that lives inside you”). Stress how difficult it is to describe feelings and tie in the reluctance of our society to recognize, discuss, deal with, and treat feelings. Especially for males.

2. Take turns identifying various positive and negative feelings or emotional states and write them into your balloon. Whether done in 1:1 or group sessions, I always do this exercise along with the client(s) and we include one another's feelings in our balloon. If client get stuck identifying feelings, you may need to prompt. For example, “Let's say that you walk into a birthday party and everyone points and laughs at you, how would you feel?” (“Right—embarrassed”). Also, encourage clients to look for opposites of feelings already given.

For example: Successful, Sad, Angry, Ugly, Confident, Dumb, Attractive, Mean, Smart, Popular, Lazy, Proud, Bored, Down, Pretty, Lame, Abused, Happy, Disgusted, Bullied, Confused, Dirty, Loved, Funny, Silly, Unpopular, Hopeful, Depressed, Nerdy, Understood, Ordinary, Disappointed, High, Sick, Grateful, Low, Misunderstood, Forgetful, Special, Vengeful, Forgotten, Dismissed, Thirsty, Energetic, Accepted, Hated, Tired, Hungry, Controlled, Starving, Excited, Driven

3. When balloon is filled up, ask client why they think we drew a balloon, and not a car, a building, or a train, etc. You're looking for parallels between humans and balloons regarding negative emotions. “What happens when we take in too many negative feelings? What happens when there's too much air inside a balloon?” (“Right — it explodes.”).

4. Explain the concept of “popping” in the emotional realm. Ask client what behaviors humans engage in when they “pop.” For example, they have trouble at school, they yell at children, steal, drive too fast, use substances, get suspended, get into fights, join gangs, stay in bed all day, etc.

5. Ask client to list the most bothersome feeling they have experienced during the past two weeks.

6. Have client circle the feeling inside the balloon. Illustrate how “filled up” we get when upset by blowing air into the balloon as client describes uncomfortable feelings. Young clients (especially when done in a group setting) get a kick out of this, and laugh and squirm when they think the

balloon is going to pop!

7. Draw 10 lines (or more) around the balloon, and explain that if you took a tiny needle and gently made a hole in the balloon, a little bit of air would be released. Tie this lesson into the human realm, and how we need to find healthy ways to handle our emotions so we can let go of our negative energy. This is how we avoid an explosion.

8. Engage them in listing healthy ways to deal with uncomfortable emotions and write coping skills on the lines around the balloon. Stress that healthy strategies are things we do that do not hurt ourselves, others, or property. For example, take a shower, talk to someone, go for a walk, play sports, write in a journal, listen to music, hit a pillow, count to ten, take a nap, etc.

9. Review the strategies and remind client that there are many options for dealing with stress. If clients get stuck, you can help them identify coping skills. I like to provide psycho-education around the physical benefits of activity (endorphin release, strong heart, focus, etc.).

“It’s pretty hard to think how mad you are at your mom, when you’re concentrating on pitching the ball.”

“Crying is a great stress reliever. Many people do not feel comfortable crying in front of others—but you can cry by yourself in private. When we cry, our tears release a chemical that makes us feel calmer.”

10. Make sure to incorporate the physical manifestations of uncomfortable emotions such as rapid heartbeat, an increase in body temperature, headache, stomachache, fatigue, etc. Remind of the importance to notice body changes to help with emotional regulation.

Bonus tip: (depending on your client’s stressors — may not be suitable for trauma counseling) I sometimes take a sharp pointed pen and pop the balloon at a point in the session when it’s least expected...In all my years doing the “Feeling Balloon” I’ve never experienced a client who doesn’t have a humorous reaction when this happens.