

Improving Emotional Intelligence (EQ)

When it comes to happiness and success in life, emotional intelligence matters just as much as intellectual ability. Learn how you can boost your EQ.



What is emotional intelligence or EQ?

Emotional intelligence (otherwise known as emotional quotient or EQ) is the ability to understand, use, and manage your own emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges and defuse conflict. Emotional intelligence helps you build stronger relationships, succeed at school and work, and achieve your career and personal goals. It can also help you to connect with your feelings, turn intention into action, and make informed decisions about what matters most to you.

Emotional intelligence is commonly defined by four attributes:

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **Social awareness** - You have empathy. 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 who 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 ability or your intelligence quotient (IQ) isn't enough on its own to achieve success in life. Yes, your IQ can help you get into college, but it's your 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 build off one another.

Emotional intelligence affects:

Your performance at school or work. High 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 rate emotional intelligence as important as technical ability and employ EQ testing before hiring.

Your physical health. If you're unable to manage your emotions, you are probably not managing your stress either. This can lead to serious health problems. Uncontrolled stress raises blood pressure, suppresses the immune system, increases the risk of heart attacks and strokes, contributes to infertility, and speeds up the aging process. The first step to improving emotional intelligence is to learn how to manage 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, get comfortable with, or manage your emotions, you'll also struggle to form strong

relationships. This in turn can leave you feeling lonely and isolated and further exacerbate any mental health problems.

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.

Your social intelligence. Being in tune with your emotions serves a social purpose, connecting you to other people and the world around you. Social intelligence enables you to recognize friend from foe, measure another person's interest in you, reduce stress, balance your nervous system through social communication, and feel loved and happy.

Building emotional intelligence: 4 key skills to increasing your EQ

The skills that make up emotional intelligence can be learned at any time. However, it's important to remember that there is a difference between simply learning about EQ 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.

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

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

Building emotional intelligence, key skill 1: Self-management

In order for you to engage your EQ, you must 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 stress has overwhelmed you. Was it easy to think clearly or make a rational decision? Probably not. When you become overly stressed, your ability to both think clearly and accurately assess emotions—your own and other people’s—becomes compromised.

Emotions are important pieces of information that tell you about yourself 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 upsetting information without letting it override your thoughts and self-control. You’ll 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 2: Self-awareness

Managing stress is just the first step to building emotional intelligence. The science of [attachment](#) indicates that your current emotional experience is likely a reflection of your early life experience. Your ability to manage core feelings such as anger, sadness, fear, and joy often depends on the quality and consistency of your early life emotional experiences. If your primary caretaker as an infant understood and valued your emotions, it’s likely your emotions have become valuable assets in adult life. But, if your emotional experiences as an infant were confusing, threatening or painful, it’s likely you’ve tried to distance yourself from your emotions.

But 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.

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, and 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, you may have “turned down” or “turned off” your emotions. In order to build EQ—and become emotionally healthy—you must reconnect to your core emotions, accept them, and become comfortable with them. You can achieve this through the practice of mindfulness.

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, your 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

It's important that you learn how to manage stress first, so you'll feel more comfortable reconnecting to strong or unpleasant emotions and changing how you experience and respond to your feelings. You can develop your emotional awareness by practicing the mindfulness meditation in HelpGuide's free [Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](#).

Key skill 3: Social awareness

Social awareness enables you to recognize and interpret the mainly nonverbal cues others are constantly using to communicate with you. These cues let you know how others are really feeling, how their emotional state is changing from moment to moment, and what's truly important to them. When groups of people send out similar nonverbal cues, you're able to read and understand the power dynamics and shared emotional experiences of the group. In short, you're empathetic and socially comfortable.

Mindfulness is an ally of emotional and social awareness

To build social awareness, you need to recognize the importance of mindfulness in the social process. After all, you can't pick up on subtle nonverbal cues when you're in your own head,

thinking about other things, or simply zoning out on your phone. Social awareness requires your presence in the moment. While many of us pride ourselves on an ability to multitask, this means that you'll miss the subtle emotional shifts taking place in other people that help you fully understand them.

You are actually more likely to further your social goals by setting other thoughts aside and focusing on the interaction itself.

Following the flow of another person's emotional responses is a give-and-take process that requires you to also pay attention to the changes in your own emotional experience.

Paying attention to others doesn't diminish your own self-awareness. By investing the time and effort to really pay attention to others, you'll actually gain insight into your own emotional state as well as your values and beliefs. For example, if you feel discomfort hearing others express certain views, you'll have learned something important about yourself.

Key skill 4: Relationship management

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. It's impossible to avoid sending [nonverbal messages](#) to others about what you think and feel. The many muscles in the face, especially those around the eyes, nose, mouth and forehead, help you to wordlessly convey your own emotions as well as read other peoples' emotional intent. The emotional part of your brain is always on—and even if you ignore its messages—others won't. Recognizing the nonverbal messages that you send to others can play a huge part in improving your relationships.

Use humor and play to relieve stress. Humor, laughter and play are natural antidotes to 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.

Learn to see conflict as an opportunity to grow closer to others. Conflict and disagreements are inevitable in human 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.



Get more help

[The Language of Emotional Intelligence](#) - A review of Dr. Jeanne Segal's book, which offers specific methods to improve your emotional intelligence skills. (PsychCentral)

[10 Ways to Enhance Your Emotional Intelligence](#) - Tips to improve your EQ. (Psychology Today)

[Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace](#) (PDF) - How to build and practice EQ to improve your success at work. (USF)

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