



The Emotional Toolbox

Adapted from *Feel: The Power of Listening to Your Heart* by Matthew Elliott

I want to provide a simple set of tools to help you understand and interpret what your emotions are saying about you and others. The Emotional Toolbox consists of four simple words: *Focus*, *Know*, *Value*, and *Believe*. It's a simple tool kit and when you learn to use it, it will help you live life better.

Focus

First, we need to understand why we are feeling what we are feeling. That takes *focus*.

God really cares about why we feel what we feel. At the end of the book of Jonah, He really questions Jonah about his anger at God's mercy for the people of Nineveh and even goes so far as to give him an object lesson using Jonah's own emotion over the death of a plant that had shaded him and contrasts that with God's own emotion for a city of people that he really cared about. Let's listen in...

God comes to Jonah with a simple question: "Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?"

"Yes," says Jonah, "even angry enough to die."

God replies, "You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?"ⁱ

Do you see the point? God is taking Jonah to an understanding of why he is angry. He is questioning the thinking that is creating the anger, digging out the root. Eventually, God has to walk Jonah through the whole thing, but God's initial response is not to denounce Jonah's anger, but to examine it.

He literally prompts Jonah to ask and answer the question of why he is angry.

The first aspect of the *Focus* tool is why. What is behind this thing I'm feeling?



The second aspect of the *Focus* tool has to do with the MP3 downloads we play in our heads about the way we see the world, who we are, what we have to offer, and what we believe about other people.

Our emotional response to anything is a collage of our personalities, upbringing, self-image, worldviews, experiences, and beliefs. What we concentrate on, what we dwell on, what we run over and over again in our heads is what we get emotional about. So we need to stop and think about what we are always telling ourselves. If it does not line up with what is true, we must cancel the download. Then we need to reboot our thought patterns with godly values and beliefs. Only then can our emotions reflect a godly perspective.

We must choose to fill our minds with the right things. As Paul teaches us in the book of Philippians, “fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.”ⁱⁱⁱ The *Focus* tool asks, *Why I am feeling what I’m feeling?* and *What is preoccupying my mind and heart?* Sometimes, those answers require a change in our thinking and focus. This is the first step to understanding our emotional lives.

Know

The plain facts often determine how we feel. The *Know* tool is our assessment of the world around us, a determination of what we believe is *actual* and not just *imagined*.

Sometimes, our emotions are based on wrong knowledge. We often make the mistake of saying our emotions are wrong, when much of the time they’re perfectly right—just based on the wrong information. The *Know* tool helps us check to see if our information is right.

If I tell you there’s a five-hundred-pound grizzly bear fifteen feet away from you, you would be terrified, your heart would beat like crazy, and fear would overwhelm you.

Now let me add one little piece of information: zoo.

Knowing more of the context, your feelings now change. Were your feelings wrong before? No, but they needed additional information. In fact, if you weren’t at the zoo, your feelings of terror might have saved your life.



I think it's interesting that, in the Bible, God doesn't tell us how to feel without telling us what truth to believe. He gives us the context in which to feel our emotions. He never just tells us about the bear without telling us where it is.

When there is a command to be joyful, have hope, or love one another, there is also a corresponding truth. Jesus taught that putting his truth at the center of our lives is what will bring lasting freedom and joy to our souls. "Jesus said to the people who believed in him, 'You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'"ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus Christ brings to each of us a new set of information about the world around us. Without him, we have reason to fear and worry. With him, our emotions have a whole new context.

Value

We get the most emotional about the things that mean the most to us.

Our emotions are a reflection of our priorities, what's really important to us.

If I bend a paper clip on your desk, I doubt you would care very much. If I hit your car and totally mangle your back fender, you will really feel upset. The paper clip is not valuable to you, where your car is on a number of different levels – needed transport, replacement cost, and perhaps an extension of your personality. The emotion you feel in each situation indicates how much you value the item.

The apostle Paul had a radical change in his values when he met Jesus face-to-face. He had been on a mission to be the best religious Jew he could be. He had put everything into it. He was a persecutor of Christians, a perfect adherent to Jewish law, a Pharisee of Pharisees, religious leader extraordinaire—bar none.

After his encounter with Jesus, his life got turned upside down. In an instant his priorities changed, and what now mattered to Paul was getting to know Jesus. Paul puts it this way: "Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ."^{iv} To attain ultimate happiness and significance in this life, we must be willing to lay down the value of being perfect, the value of gaining recognition, the value of our stuff, and just long with all our hearts to get to know Jesus.

That is *infinite* value.



The *Value* tool is about asking ourselves what our emotions are telling us about what's really important to us. Where does this or that fall on our priority scales? Ultimately, we need to align our values with what God says is valuable. That's what will transform us.

Believe

Our emotions reflect how we understand the world to work. These *beliefs* are our assumptions about life.

I work from an office in my home, something I really enjoy. Because of this, Laura and I only need one car. If I have an appointment at the same time that Laura has to take the kids to soccer practice, I can borrow a car, or there is an Enterprise car rental place just a few blocks from our house. Most of the time, it works well for us to have only one car, and it keeps us on budget.

But hypothetically, let's say that Laura knew I had an appointment and needed the car by 2:00 p.m. But it's now 2:30, and she's not home or answering her cell. I'm feeling a little bothered. Is she so neglectful of me that she forgot I needed to leave to meet this person at 2:00? I make phone calls postponing my meeting by a half hour, and then another half hour. My anger builds. By 3:30, I am really mad. Laura has totally disregarded my appointment.

But then I get a phone call saying there has been an accident. My wife and kids are in the emergency room. They have cuts, bruises, and one of the boys has a potentially serious injury.

What happens to my emotion? Immediately, my anger is gone, and now I'm worried sick about the well-being of my wife and children.

What was the difference? At first, my emotion was based on the belief that my wife had neglected my schedule. For two hours, I believed she really didn't value me or my needs as she should have.

But then the facts came in and changed everything.

Again, my emotions weren't wrong—they reflected something I believed about Laura. It might be said that my belief regarding her should have been different, that I should have maintained faith that she would never stand me up that way. I should have believed what I know to be true of her.



So many times in life, we are hurt or angry because what we believe about God, other people, or our circumstances does not line up with the way we understand the world to work. Then a new understanding comes that changes everything.

The *Believe* tool is about examining our emotions to determine what we truly believe about how the world works, how people in our lives act, and how God moves in our lives.

Using the Tools in Everyday Life

God wants us to be emotionally mature with emotionally full lives. Becoming emotionally mature is not, as many teach, about becoming emotionally controlled. It is about becoming emotionally adept, emotionally wise, and emotionally skilled. It is about having lives that are chock-full of wonder and feeling—and then having the ability and practiced skill to live well and wisely in a richly emotional world.

The cost of getting to this good place is working through a process of development and training. It is a long road, a journey that takes a lifetime. There are no magic pills or five-step plans to grow you to emotional maturity. It is about allowing yourself to feel and learning to understand what your feelings are and what they mean.

To get the best out of life, we must be on a journey toward the sanctification of our emotions. Is your love greater this year than it was last year for that person in your life who is hard to understand or just rubs you the wrong way? Are you less prone to let your child have it for no good reason? Are you less likely than before to feel jealousy over a colleague's promotion, even though you thought it was rightfully yours? Is your joy in worship at your church increasing as the years go by?

Has our spiritual growth made a difference in how we *feel*? If not, we must ask ourselves if we are really growing at all.

We can learn to have mature and appropriate emotional responses that glorify God and bless the people around us. We can handle setbacks and tragedies with grace, dignity, and joy. That is the power of God active in us. When others see how we respond to what the world throws at us, they will know that what we have in Christ is truly worth having beyond all else. When they see us giving glory to a good God even in our tears, they will be amazed and say to themselves, "Whatever they have, I've got to get that."



Find more on the **Emotional Toolbox** in Matthew's book *Feel*.

Download the **Truth Box** from faithfulfeelings.com resources page and put the **Emotional Toolbox** to work in your life.

ⁱ Quotes in this section are from Jonah 3:8–4:11

ⁱⁱ Philippians 4:8

ⁱⁱⁱ John 8:31-32

^{iv} Philippians 3:8

All scripture quoted from the *New Living Translation*

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How do you feel? For the past 20 years, Matthew Elliott has pondered this question and explored what the Bible means when it says to love God and hate evil. Today, Dr. Elliott is a leading authority on the biblical view of emotions and the vital role they play in our lives. He is the author of *Feel: The Power of Listening to Your Heart*. For more information, visit www.MatthewElliott.org