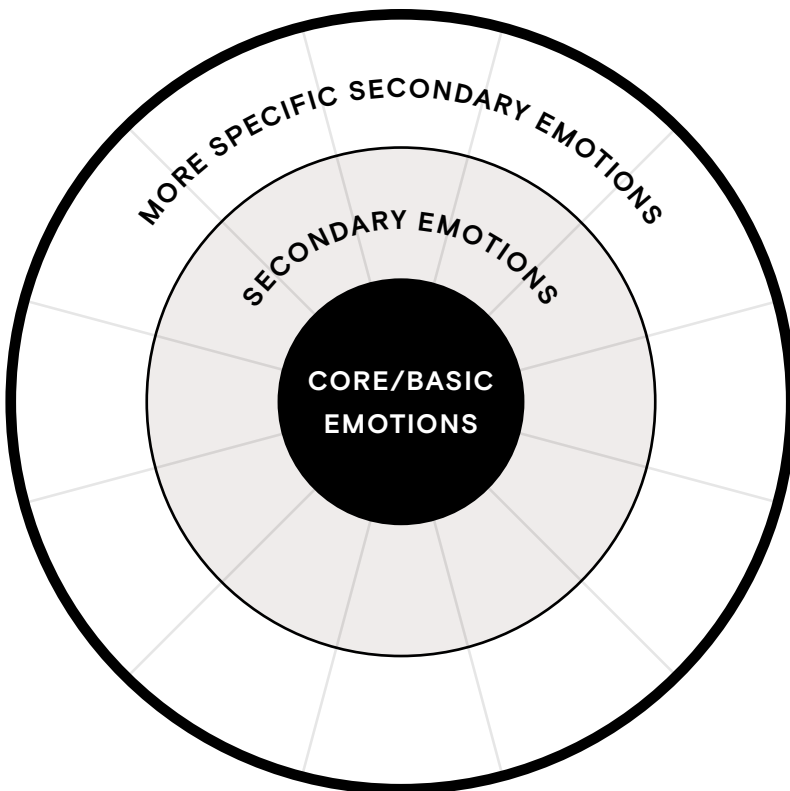


## What is a Feelings Wheel?

You might be thinking, “What in the world is a Feelings Wheel, and what makes it practical for my everyday life?”

A Feelings Wheel is a tool used to help recognize and communicate feelings. Although it may seem a bit extra, a Feelings Wheel is a way to work smarter, not harder with teenagers when identifying and managing emotions. To get a better picture, a Feelings Wheel is a circle that at the center has “core” or basic emotions (emotions that are more easily identified or expressed) and “secondary” or more complex emotions on the outer edge:



### So, what's the point?

The more specific your student can be in labeling their emotions, the more understanding you will have for them and they will have for themselves. My go-to feeling when I was a teen was “frustrated.” It was my answer when I was hurt, anxious, insecure, disappointed, or powerless. But really, it was my answer to explain my negativity without having to be vulnerable. Aren't those other secondary emotions more honest and accurate though? A Feelings Wheel allows us to open up instead of hiding behind what is the easy or standard answer. **Increased relief comes with increased specificity in identifying our emotions and empathizing with them.**

Not only is it helpful for others to understand what is going on inside of us, it is helpful for us to know what is going on inside of ourselves. When we identify our feelings specifically, we are able to learn how to respond and take care of those emotions more accurately.

# How a Feelings Wheel Works

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The more specific your student can be in labeling their emotions, the more understanding you will have for them and they will have for themselves.

## To use the Feelings Wheel:

- 1 Start in the center circle and choose the core emotion you think you are feeling.
- 2 Move outward to the middle circle where it breaks down that feeling even more.
- 3 Finally, identify and select the more specific emotions that you connect with on the outer edges of the circle.



## Core Emotions vs. Secondary Emotions

**Core emotions** can be seen as the eight-pack of crayons and secondary emotions are the 64-pack. The eight-pack gets you by with the necessities, while the 64-pack can be a blend of multiple emotions that provide a more specific label (for example, yellow vs. macaroni). Core emotions are happiness, sadness, disgust, fear, surprise, and anger. **Secondary emotions** encompass any other emotion.

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With a Feelings Wheel, the core emotions are at the center of the circle—which is the easiest place to start. After choosing the most accurate core emotion, you can use your finger to identify the more specific emotions that you connect with on the outer edges of the circle. These more specific emotions are what you can explain to others so that they have a deeper understanding of what you are experiencing. That's way better than the "frustrated" answer, right?

# Using the Feelings Wheel with Your Kid

## Practice often.

Add the Feelings Wheel to conversations about the highs and lows of each person's day with the whole family at dinner or in the car. This allows greater insight into what your teenager's day has been like as well as normalizes talking about real emotions instead of using just the easy or go-to answer. When you participate in using a Feelings Wheel, you are modeling appropriate ways to process and communicate emotions as well as giving them an opportunity to share without feeling targeted or in the spotlight.

## Use it before the breakdown.

Your teenager might go through seasons when they are more sensitive or on edge. This might be a good opportunity to have a one-on-one conversation and help bring light to the shift. Use the Feelings Wheel to help them identify the emotions they are feeling in that moment. Typically, when we hold our emotions in, they eventually explode. Being able to talk prior to an explosion can be preventative by allowing them to take care of their emotions before they are forced to. Emotions demand to be felt. You can choose when to take care of them, or they will choose for you.

## Use it during a shutdown.

Your teenager might not be the "blow up" type, but that doesn't mean all is well inside. If your student seems more quiet or isolated, it can be helpful for you to pursue them and check-in. Referencing the Feelings Wheel can help them see what they may be experiencing and is a beginning to understanding it better. Sometimes they might not even realize what is going on inside of them until they are given the words, especially since there may be situations in which some feelings and expressions of those feelings seem similar to one another.

## Empathize.

We all respond to situations differently, and our emotional response is no exception. By being specific in how we use our emotions, we can pinpoint a common shared experience that will allow us to understand what each other may be feeling. Empathizing with where they are allows them to feel accepted even if you do not agree. (That is a conversation for another time!)

This resource was written by Kayla Lin, MED, LAPC, NCC.



## Remember

This may seem like a completely different shift from your family's norm and may be a little awkward at first. But can you imagine what it would be like for your family to have the freedom to communicate to each other how you are actually doing? This could be a brand new avenue for each person in the family to not only be able to understand each other, but to know how to take care of each other as well. This could continue to make your home the safe haven everyone runs to, the best part being that everyone becomes involved in making it happen.

A RESOURCE  
TO USE WITH  
Teenagers

# The Feelings Wheel

CREATED FOR  
Leaders and  
Parents



# Helping Your Kid Manage Their Emotions

by Kayla Lin  
MED, LAPC, NCC

**A**s a counselor for teenagers, you'd probably never guess what my most memorable and favorite sessions look like. I truly love all of my clients and believe it is an honor and privilege to work with each one of them, but there are a few sessions that stick out to me the most. They all start the same way: The parent walks into the office alone **because they couldn't get their student to get out of the car.**

Surprised? I'll tell you why.

I love being able to meet students where they are when they least expect it. I go to the car, talk through the window if the car is locked, or, if I am lucky enough, sit in the car with them and say, "I get it. I wouldn't want to be here either." These are my most memorable sessions because I get to see how impactful it can be to simply empathize with where my clients are in that moment. So far, I have been able to get them all out of the car and into the office within the first hour.

I definitely didn't always have this type of response. I was actually a horrible babysitter growing up, because if I didn't agree with how the kids were feeling, then my responses weren't super helpful. I love how human nature's first response to intense negative emotions are oh-so-helpful phrases like, "Calm down," "Get over it," or "It's not that big of a deal." These responses are easy to say. They feel logical even. But they rarely have any benefits.

## It's Not Logical

The problem is that the logical response is not what any of our brains need in the midst of an emotional low, especially in high school. In these phases, adolescent brains are actually functioning normally, but the way they function looks far different from an adult brain. The brain actually takes about 25 years to fully develop. Now, I don't mean to scare you. We both know that a 12-year-old brain and a 25-year-old brain are not the same, but this just is an example of how brain development and emotional management are learned processes and not singular events. During those growing years, the emotional part of our brain, called the amygdala, is ULTRA sensitive. In other words, it's super reactive. Seen this before in your kid? Because of this, teenagers will interpret and experience events more intensely. To add to the fun, the part of our brains responsible for logical reasoning, called the prefrontal cortex, is still working on those neural connections to the amygdala in order to be efficient and effective. The prefrontal cortex works at a slower pace. **So, what do we do in the meantime? How do we parent kids through this development?**

Continue Reading



# How to Help

## Expect Intensity

In intense situations, the brain's response will automatically want to fight, flight, or freeze. Maybe you have seen this in your own family, but just in case you haven't, let me break these down.

- In the **fight** mindset, people run toward conflict in an attempt to win.
- In the **flight** mindset, people run away from conflict to avoid it altogether.
- Lastly, with the **freeze** mindset, people become stagnant and can appear to be listening to the other person but not sharing their own opinions.

Depending on your kid's personality and environment, these responses will come out with force. Whether it is a kid completely shut down, angry, or isolated, this will come out with passion because of where their brain is functioning from in the moment.

You can demonstrate this safety by showing empathy. Accept and validate where your kid is with understanding (even when you don't agree). We can't help what we don't know, so we need to respond in a way that allows them to be glad they opened up. In the future, they will know you are safe—which will make those late-night conversations go much smoother as you open up a space for future and deeper issues.

**In order for the brain to "calm down," it needs to feel safe.** When there is felt safety, the amygdala will begin to ease up.

## Do Not Fix

Why? They won't hear it yet. "In one ear and out the other" is a real thing when it comes to managing emotions. When we have a logical response to intense emotions, it's like communicating in different languages. When the brain is responded to and cared for emotionally (the current language it is speaking), then the brain will feel safe to slow down and think rationally. Until that happens, it might as well be back in French class.

## Work Smarter, Not Harder

Everyone wants to be comforted differently, and some ways work better than others. Find out what is most meaningful to your teen by identifying their top two love languages and starting there. This also shows them that you are intentionally thinking of their needs in a thoughtful way, which will become helpful in gaining trust and giving advice at a later time.

Parents, your heart and instinct to help is necessary! Giving your student advice and helping them fix their problems is how you know to love best. However, the previous steps are essential in beginning to understand your teen—even into why the "fix" may not be as easy as it seems. Regardless, helping your teenager manage their emotions will help you know better how to give advice that is helpful, while gaining their trust so they actually hear your advice.

## A Little Encouragement

This is A LOT!  
Now, when using these techniques, one of the most important things to do is apply them to yourself. You need to give yourself empathy and understanding before you try to give those things to someone else. Why? Because we are all human. And none of this comes naturally. Give yourself grace just like you work to give to your teen.

You are doing a great job, and your willingness to continue to want to grow and learn new skills to relate to your teenager is proof of that.

