



Counter the Feelings Police

When my friend tells me about her cancer diagnosis, I ask what I can do to help. I know about Susan Silk's ring theory for crises.* You draw a bunch of concentric circles with the person in crisis at the center, people closest to them in the next ring, and less close people in outer rings. The rule is, "Comfort IN, dump OUT." Ask for support from someone less affected by the crisis.

The ring theory does not say, "People in outer rings don't get to have feelings," nor, "These are the feelings and intensity required at each ring." Our emotional responses are messages about what we sense and how it affects us, uniquely tied in with our individual history and personality. Someone in an inner ring might be stoic and calm. Someone in an outer ring might weep uncontrollably.

Trying to keep order. We absorb the idea that there is a right way to feel, and a right length of time to feel that way. There is a push from society to remain productive and not inconvenience anyone else unduly. People close to us might be uncomfortable with strong emotions and want to avoid feeling helpless.

There is also a push from inside to avoid feeling overwhelmed. We develop an internal Feelings Police both as a defense against people policing our feelings from the outside,

* "How not to say the wrong thing" by Susan Silk and Barry Goldman, April 7, 2013. <https://articles.latimes.com/2013/apr/07/opinion/la-oe-0407-silk-ring-theory-20130407>

and because we lack the tools to manage our emotions. The internal Feelings Police is genuinely trying to keep order, which is useful in a true emergency when you need to act first and feel later. Unfortunately, they often forget to stand down when the emergency is over.

Sense your Feelings Police. What do you notice about your inner Feelings Police? Are they a faint whisper, or one voice among many, or are they in charge?

What tools do they use to keep your feelings squashed? They might use shame, for example, “Big boys/girls don’t cry.” They might use dissociation, so you feel calm in a spacy, vague way. They might say others are more important, and you do not deserve to take up space with your feelings. They might say your feelings are wrong, or bad, or too much, or too little, or too conflicted. You can let these critical voices know that you hear them, and they get to feel exactly the way they feel for as long as that’s so.

Sensitivity is fine. Both external and internal Feelings Police love to say, “You’re too sensitive.” As Robyn Posin writes*, we can translate that as, “More sensitive than they are comfortable with,” and reflect it back as a neutral statement. “I hear that I seem too sensitive to you.” No defense of sensitivity is required, because there is nothing wrong with sensitivity. To a friend, or an inner voice, we could add, “Maybe you can share what you are worried about.”

People who are prevented from listening to their feelings are easier to derail, control, and gaslight. Criticism of emotions can be part of a Tone Argument used to silence someone with less power. “You sound angry, so I can ignore you.” Abusers do not want their victims to realize that they are

* “Being Too Much” by Robyn Posin.
<http://forthelittleonesinside.com/being-too-much>

feeling terrible because of the abuse, not because of innate flaws. Emotions can motivate and fuel change.

Anchor in the present. Our emotional responses are a mix of past and present, internal cues and external stimuli. They are a shining ribbon of information about what is true for us. When we can witness our emotions without being swept away by them, they keep us anchored in the present. “Right now, I feel angry. Right now I feel happy. Right now I feel confused and uncertain about what I feel.” Since emotions are physical responses in the body, we can also name physical sensations: clenched jaw, pulled-in shoulders, headache, upset stomach, or on the positive side, open shoulders, head high, free breathing.

Our emotions might not feel the way we expect. For example, grief might be silent and immobile with shock, like the first moment after a fall. It might feel like physical pain, or like a bottomless ocean. It might want to curl up small, or to run around and organize everything. It might come and go unpredictably, or not show up at all, with no regard for “appropriate” schedules. It might snag on ungrieved losses that seemed unimportant at the time.

Happily, I hear that my friend’s cancer is treatable. The Feelings Police pop up about good news, too. How much am I allowed to celebrate? What about people who are not hearing good news right now? I can allow both relief about her reprieve and sadness about her illness to move through me.

Make room for feelings. We can intentionally make room for all our feelings when they feel chaotic and overwhelming. Paradoxically, spending a little time to give them more space tends to make them more manageable, even if nothing else changes.

- Start with the sensation or emotion on the surface. It

might be confusion, a sense of overwhelm, a named emotion, a desire for things to be different, or a physical sensation.

- Offer that first layer a specific spot in the room and see if it is willing to move over there for a while. You might get a sense of its size, texture, color, or other qualities.
- If it is not willing to move away, check if you can get as much distance as a piece of paper between you and it. If it is still unwilling, you could sense if you can give it more space inside you. You can also shift focus to the unwillingness and offer it some room.
- Sense how it feels to have a little more space inside.
- As new emotions and sensations surface, continue to give each a spot in the room and sense a bit about it.
- When nothing more comes, take a few breaths and enjoy the spaciousness of being exactly how you are in this moment.

If you are keeping a friend company when they are having big feelings, you can make room for them in the same way. You do not have to fix or change anything. Let your friend know you hear them, and their feelings make sense, and they get to feel the way they do for as long as that's so. When you can allow your big feelings, it becomes easier to allow someone else to have them too.

Emotions flow and change. Emotions are meant to move. Giving them more space allows them to flow and change, peak and ebb. As we become more comfortable with giving them space, our Feelings Police can quiet down and rest.