

SCALING EMOTIONS

Clients of all ages often have difficulty identifying emotions. We generally think of kids as only being able to state 'happy, sad, mad' as their feelings, but adults are often under-developed with identifying emotions as well.

The reason for this underdevelopment is usually trauma. Clients often experience trauma and stop emotionally maturing or they may have never experienced and/or been taught how to express feelings appropriately.

With this directive, clients will not only be encouraged to learn different words for emotions but also what makes the emotion more or less intense, i.e. what makes them more or less angry.

This is a perfect technique to help teach young children emotional vocabulary but can also be used with adolescents and adults to aid in emotional expression.

Before providing the directive, review how we often feel emotion and label it with the most common words, such as sad or mad. While this is somewhat accurate, it does not help us communicate our true feelings and allow ourselves to be heard. As therapists, it is often our job to teach clients different words for emotions, just as teachers instruct students with vocabulary words.



*Pro tip - Use the attached feeling word wheel to help clients identify their feelings before, during, and after the sandtray session.

Directive: Today we're going to do a sandtray about one part of your feelings (therapist: choose whatever emotion that client struggles with most, such as shame, anger, sadness, etc). It's common for people to not know how to express their feelings and how to move up and down the feeling scale. With this directive, you'll be using new emotional vocabulary words and discussing triggers and coping skills.

Instruct the client to choose 4 or 5 miniatures to represent whatever emotion they struggle with, for example - anger. The client chooses several miniatures that represent anger for her. After choosing them and coming back to the sandtray, you then instruct them to place the miniatures in the sandtray from what represents least angry to most angry.

After the client places them in the tray, you then discuss the triggers that make the client just a little angry all the way up to fully explosive. As you do this, listen to the words your client uses to explain his feelings, such as "I feel so frustrated when..." Reflect back on the anger words the client uses and allow them to place the word that connects with that miniature. For example, if a client uses a small snake for small anger, then they may use the word irritated to go with that snake. If they choose the word furious, it will likely belong with a larger snake (or any other miniature they choose).



The goal is to identify and practice using differing emotional words in the sandtray so the client can communicate effectively with others and learn to be truly seen, which as we know, releases GABA in the brain (the breaking neurotransmitter).

With this simple technique, you can achieve 3 goals: 1) Identify triggers 2) Learn emotional vocabulary, and 3) Discuss coping skills to move down the scale, such as “furious” to just “irritated.”

You can use this directive with the same client with different emotions or in group therapy sessions. Save this technique in your sandtray technique toolbox to be used when you are needing a way to teach emotional vocabulary using the whole brain.

