

Book Review

Permission to Feel: The Power of Emotional Intelligence to Achieve Well-Being and Success

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Everyday people ask each other, “How are you doing?”, and the typical answers are always great, fine, busy, or tired. These one-word answers often don’t truly encompass our emotional state. Instead, they often reflect our unwillingness to share how we actually feel or our sense that others are not interested in a genuine answer. Inspired by his childhood, Mark Brackett, Director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, has dedicated his career to the study of human emotion and to helping children and adults learn to understand, process, and master their emotions. *Permission to Feel* is a guide to emotional processing, full of personal anecdotes and tangible takeaways. Those who wish to explore the intersection between finances and overall well-being (financial therapists, mental health professionals, and financial professionals alike) can expect to learn strategies for channeling their emotions in personal and professional applications.

Although we all experience feelings and emotions every second of our day, Brackett explains that many of us have still never received permission to feel. Many children, Brackett included, were not given permission to feel from the adults in their lives. Adults often demand children suppress their emotions: “stop crying,” “don’t use that tone with me!” and other requirements that children hide what they are feeling. For Brackett, “permission to feel” is giving yourself and others permission to experience and share emotions. *Permission to Feel* aims to equip people to experience their emotions and process these feelings in productive ways. Emotions, Brackett explains, affect many aspects of our lives. Our motivations, attention, memory, decision making, relationships, health, and creativity can be hindered, directed, or strengthened by our emotions. For example, Brackett asks us to consider each person we interact with during our day and reflect on our feelings when we meet them. How we feel about these people can define and influence our relationships with

them. In conversations with teachers, Brackett found that when teachers reflected on their feelings toward their students, they also realized they treat them differently based on these feelings. Financial and mental health practitioners may find this exercise useful in thinking about their own clients.

While *Permission to Feel* heavily emphasizes education, especially K–12, Brackett’s five steps to emotional intelligence are to recognize, understand, label, express, and regulate emotion. For convenience, Brackett groups this process into the acronym RULER. Mastery over this process makes one an “emotion scientist” in Brackett’s view, having the skills to dissect, analyze, and apply their emotions to effective purpose in universal application.

We must first learn to **Recognize** the emotions we and others feel. Examples of recognizing one’s emotions are things like noticing when we tense up or the signs of being tired, angry, happy, etc. Then, we can learn to understand and comprehend the nuances of these feelings. Following this understanding, we learn to label or describe these feelings using rich emotional language. Recognizing our emotions gives us permission to slow down and examine how we feel so we can then manage those feelings. Emotional intelligence (which Brackett describes as the interplay between our emotions and ability to make decisions, solve problems, reason, and relate to others) has as much to do with our own emotions as others’ emotions. Recognizing others’ emotional states allows us to better attend to their emotional, physical, or even physiological needs. Nonverbal communication makes up much of our interaction with others, but it can be challenging to recognize other people’s emotional states without explicit communication. Our interpretation of how other people are reacting and feeling can be colored by our own emotional state as well. This makes it even more important to be in tune with our feelings to avoid projecting our emotions onto others.

Brackett says **Understanding** emotion is the most challenging skill, as it asks us to consider the reasons behind our and others’ emotions. Instead of compartmentalizing our feelings, this step requires us to look at what is driving our feelings. Is it a specific situation? Something someone said? Understanding includes both the cause of the emotion (i.e. the event or statement that instigated it) and the deeper theme (i.e. insecurity or fear).

Labeling gives us the ability to use vocabulary to describe what we have observed and understood. It goes beyond “fine,” or “good.” These trite responses reflect the cultural norm of hiding how we really feel and our belief that others don’t have a genuine interest in our emotional wellbeing.

If understanding is the most challenging skill, Brackett says **Expression** is the scariest as it requires vulnerability. If we are not vulnerable and express our feelings, we limit others’ abilities to understand, empathize with, or help us.

Once we move forward with expressing our emotions, we must then learn to **Regulate** those feelings. Not all emotional expressions are healthy or productive, such as going shopping to avoid thinking about a stressful situation. Avoidance or attention-shifting strategies can be a helpful regulatory tool, but as we try to control our emotional responses,

we can aim to develop healthier coping strategies. One of these is cognitive reframing strategies in which we seek to find perspective in difficult situations. For example, if a client seems to be in an especially bad mood, we might initially be influenced by this mood. We can reframe by considering possible reasons for the client's attitude and fashion a more empathetic response. Learning to regulate allows us to moderate our emotions and the expression and timing of those feelings.

Brackett recognizes that even when individuals are empowered to take control of their own emotions, the environment and the emotional intelligence of the larger community around a person are central to the success of his model. RULER will fail in places where the people in power penalize the expression of feelings and encourage repression. Brackett explores what environmental failure and success look like at home, school, and the workplace. The financial therapist-client dynamic may fall slightly outside the models discussed by Brackett, but the implication is clear: it's important for professionals to model emotional intelligence for clients and to offer clear indications that feelings can safely be processed within professional interactions. This process may be normal in the therapy environment, but it may need strategic cultivation in the financial practitioner environment to gain client trust for emotional expression.

One of the greatest strengths of this book is its action-plan layout. Hypothetical and real-life examples allow the reader to visualize the everyday applicability of RULER. Emotional regulation, for example, can include physiological responses such as mindful breathing or simply sitting on the other end of the table from an argumentative relative during holidays. Other forms of emotional regulation include attention diversion strategies, such as watching T.V. or even checking Instagram when waiting in a long line at the store. While individuals should not overly rely on attention diversion strategies for emotional regulation, they can still be useful in certain circumstances.

This book was written primarily for personal, parent, and educator use, but it has many applications to financial therapists as well as mental health or financial practitioners. Discussing finances can bring up many emotions, and mental health and financial professionals will glean utility as they seek to understand their clients' behaviors and feelings. Professionals will also learn ways to avoid erroneous conclusions that result from attempting to interpret the emotions of others from nonverbal cues. RULER can provide a framework to use in discussions with clients about money or other emotional topics. *Permission to Feel* also provides an opportunity for introspection. Since our emotions influence our relationships, professionals should be aware of how people make them feel, as it may cause them to treat clients with varying degrees of respect and provide them with different levels of attention in their treatment or planning. RULER could also be valuable in maintaining professionalism in difficult situations with clients.

Financial practitioners, mental health professionals, and financial therapists often walk with clients through the most significant events of their lives, and the emotions surrounding these events are often intense and complex. *Permission to Feel* can aid professionals in guiding their clients through the steps of recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating what they are feeling during these momentous events.

This may lead to better decision-making, such as not selling at a loss when the market is down or creating a plan to pay off debt that is causing anxiety and distress. Improved decision-making may also lead to increased well-being.

While the significant strength of this book is in the straightforward, practical application it offers, future editions should more deeply explore how the RULER steps might be complicated by power dynamics. Readers immersed in diversity, equity, and inclusion work may experience a disconnect or distrust as a result of interwoven bias. Brackett, at times, acknowledges the bias problems inherent in standardized testing, but, at other times, he touts his measures of emotional intelligence as akin to IQ tests, which he claims are well-validated. For readers familiar with scholarship on IQ tests, these claims will garner some suspicion as IQ tests are notorious for cultural biases that recognize dominant cultures as more intelligent. While Brackett acknowledges that the “express” part of his RULER framework is inherently full of risk, he spends little energy on the heightened risk that emotional expression carries when directed upward in systems of power. Overall, Brackett’s goal is a more emotionally aware society. If those in power exercise both the self-evaluation and the steps of emotional empathy prescribed by Brackett, everyone may benefit.

Brackett acknowledges criticism and resistance that others have brought to his tools and workshops in the past, a step towards inviting resistant readers to see that he recognizes and understands their points of resistance. However, Brackett can come across as judgmental of individuals without emotional skills, especially those working with children. Some readers may find this tone of criticism contradicts Brackett’s overall message and may close themselves off from the message because his understanding does not extend to recognizing the emotional needs of all parties in a given situation. This paired with the suggestion that further expense on his tools and resources is necessary may put off a number of readers.

Despite areas for growth in future editions, *Permission to Feel* is accessible to everyone. From our birth to our death, we live in a state of emotional flow. Financial therapists, financial professionals, and mental health professionals have a unique opportunity to validate and legitimize the emotions of their clients to help clients move forward through financial strains and decisions to more satisfying outcomes. Many people were not taught these skills and may find their emotions around finances restrict their ability to effectively discuss finances with a family member, trusted friend, or professional. Brackett offers practical tools to help professionals and clients alike move to more productive conversations.