7 Ways to Improve Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence (or EI for short) is a controversial but widely-discussed alternative to traditional IQ. EI measures our ability to perceive our own emotions, as well as the emotions of others, and to manage them in a productive and healthy way.

EI is fundamental to our life experience and can influence how successful we are in our relationships and careers. Whatever stage of life you’re at, you can use the seven simple steps below to improve your Emotional Intelligence and develop your self-awareness and empathy.

**Practice Observing How You Feel**

In the process of rushing from one commitment to the next, meeting deadlines, and responding to external demands, many of us lose touch with our emotions. When we do this, we’re far more likely to act unconsciously, and we miss out on the valuable information that our emotions contain.

Whenever we have an emotional reaction to something, we’re receiving information about a particular situation, person or event. The reaction we experience might be due to the current situation, or it could be that the current situation is reminding us of a painful, unprocessed memory.

When we pay attention to how we’re feeling, we learn to trust our emotions, and we become far more adept at managing them. If you’re feeling out of practice, try the following exercise:

Set a timer for various points during the day. When the timer goes off, take a few deep breaths and notice how you’re feeling emotionally. Pay attention to where that emotion is showing up as a physical feeling in your body and what the sensation feels like. The more you can practice this, the more it will become second nature.

**Pay Attention to How You Behave**

As I mentioned above, a key part of improving our EI is learning to manage our emotions, which is something we can only do if we’re consciously aware of them.

While you’re practicing your emotional awareness, pay attention to your behavior too. Notice how you act when you’re experiencing certain emotions, and how that affects your day-to-day life. Does it impact your communication with others, your productivity, or your overall sense of well-being?

Once we become more conscious of how we’re reacting to our emotions, it’s easy to slip into judgement mode and start attaching labels to our behavior. Try to refrain from doing that right now, as you’ll be far more likely to be honest with yourself if you’re not judging yourself at the same time.

**Take Responsibility for Your Feelings and Behavior**

This is probably the most challenging step, and it’s also the most helpful. Your emotions and behavior come from you—they don’t come from anyone else—therefore, you’re the one who’s responsible for them.

If you feel hurt in response to something someone says or does, and you lash out at them, you’re responsible for that. They didn’t “make” you lash out (they’re not controlling you with puppet strings, after all!), your reaction is your responsibility.

Equally, your feelings can provide you with valuable information about your experience of the other person, as well as your own needs and preferences, but your feelings aren’t another person’s responsibility.

Once you start accepting responsibility for how you feel and how you behave, this will have a positive impact on all areas of your life.

**Practice Responding, Rather than Reacting**

There’s a subtle but important difference between responding and reacting.

Reacting is an unconscious process where we experience an emotional trigger, and behave in an unconscious way that expresses or relieves that emotion (for example, feeling irritated and snapping at the person who has just interrupted you).

Responding is a conscious process that involves noticing how you feel, then *deciding* how you want to behave (for example, feeling irritated, explaining to the person how you feel, why this isn’t a good time to be interrupting you, and when would be better).

**Practice Empathizing with Yourself and Others**

Empathy is about understanding why someone feels or behaves in a certain way and being able to communicate that understanding to them.It applies to ourselves and other people, and practicing this ability will improve your EI.

Start by practicing with yourself. When you notice yourself feeling or behaving in a certain way, ask “Why do I think I’m feeling like this/doing this?” At first, your response might be “I don’t know,” but keep paying attention to your feelings and behavior, and you’ll start to notice different answers coming through.

**Create A Positive Environment**

As well as practicing the skills I’ve mentioned so far (self-awareness, self-responsibility, and empathy), make time to notice what is going well and where you feel grateful in your life.

Creating a positive environment not only improves your quality of life, but it can be contagious to people around you too.

**Remember EI is a Lifetime Process**

EI isn’t something you develop once then drop. It’s a lifetime practice, and it is possible to keep improving. Even when you feel like you’ve mastered these steps, remember to keep practicing, and you’ll reap the benefits of EI for the rest of your life.