

Intro (Rashi): Hello and welcome to The Alternative Story podcast. The Alternative Story is an organisation that provides emotional wellbeing services to individuals and organisations. We believe that mental health is psychosocial and, in this podcast, we'll be exploring the many aspects that shape your mental health, through an intersectional lens.

Often when we think of emotions, we think of them as either good or bad. But all emotions are valuable information that we're receiving. This information helps us make sense of the world around us.

Hi, my name is Rashi. I'm the director of The Alternative Story and in this episode, I will be exploring what emotions are with Ahla. Ahla has a Master's in Applied Psychology with a specialisation in Clinical Psychology and is the Head of Academy, here at The Alternative Story. So, let's begin looking at what exactly emotions are.

Ahla: Thank you!

Emotions, Feelings, and Moods

Rashi: So I'm just gonna dive right in and ask you: What exactly are emotions? Because there seems to be a lot of words that are synonymous with emotions. For example, there's like 'feelings' and 'mood' and, if you get a little clinical, there's 'affect' as well. So, what exactly are these words and how do they connect with each other?

Ahla: First of all, I just wanted to say that I'm so excited about this topic because this is something I feel is so central to how we navigate the world and how we show up in the world, and so central to the work that I do as well. So this is something that I get really excited about, so I'm eager to have this conversation with you, Rashi.

To talk about emotions—emotions are essentially information. We can look at it as pieces of data that give us cues about what's going on inside us and what's going on in our environment.

Rashi: Okay.

Ahla: So it can give us cues to tell us that something is wrong, or it can give us cues to tell us that something is going right and something is going well. So these are essentially cues to deal with the world and to deal with other people in the world.

To talk about these different words—emotions, feelings, and mood—these are different words that are often used interchangeably in our day-to-day conversations. Emotions are largely to do with raw sensations that you experience, when you're experiencing the feeling.

Rashi: Okay.

Ahla: So it's basically the chemical reaction that happens in your body. Like your neural pathways are activated and the sensations that you feel in your body is what is named as 'emotion'.

Rashi: So emotions are basically physiological.

Ahla: Yeah, the physiological aspect.

Rashi: Okay.

Ahla: So, some examples could be: your face gets really hot when you're angry or when you feel furious, or you feel like your heart is starting to beat really fast when you feel anxious. So those physiological aspects is called, usually, as 'emotion'.

And feelings are usually the cognitive appraisal. When I say 'cognitive appraisal', what I mean is that the meaning that we make out of these bodily sensations.

Rashi: Okay.

Ahla: So, if my heart is beating really fast and if I'm feeling like my palms are being really sweaty then I—there is a cognitive appraisal that takes place where I'm able to turn towards these sensations and say, "Oh, I'm feeling anxious."

So that labelling, that language that we put around certain bodily sensations and those subjective experiences that we have—that is what is called as a 'feeling'.

Rashi: Hmm, so I'm just trying to understand also—The same physiological experience might be there for a couple of different emotions. For example, even when I'm happy, my heartrate really increases but also when I'm anxious. So, the meaning that I assign to these things would determine the feeling.

Ahla: Yeah. Absolutely.

Rashi: Yeah. So we spoke about emotions and we spoke about feelings. Where does 'mood' feature in all of this?

Ahla: So, moods are mostly—It's more like an umbrella term. When you're feeling or experiencing a mood, you can experience different emotions within that mood. So it's a state of being, and it can be a semi-permanent state where it can be longer as well.

So, for example, I could say that I've been in quite a sour mood in the past three months because my physical health has not been the best. So more of a long-term state of being where I could have been feeling sad, I could have been feeling exhausted, I could have been feeling disappointed. There are multiple feelings that I could be feeling within that umbrella.

The common analogy that is used to explain this, the difference between a mood and a feeling, is usually the analogy of the difference between weather and climate.

So weather is something that can keep changing from day-to-day, it's more transient. It can be sunny in the morning and it can be rainy in the evening. It can be sunny today, it can be cloudy tomorrow. So it's much more quicker and changes quickly.

Rashi: And those are feelings.

Ahla: Yeah, those are your feelings. And mood is more like the climate of a place where, you know, tropical weather. So all round the year, it might not be too cold or too hot. It's more long-term in that sense.

The Importance of Emotional Literacy

Rashi: Makes sense, okay. So we've got all these languages, right? In terms of these words that describe these different kinds of things. What more do we need to know about emotions, in terms of—to deal with them?

Is it important to just talk about emotions? Is it important to talk more about feelings? Where do we focus—Where do we put our focus on for a good conversation around this?

Ahla: I mean, it's good to know, technically, what is the difference between an emotion or a feeling. But in our day-to-day lives, often these words are used quite interchangeably which is completely fine. I can say 'emotions' when I mean 'feelings' and vice versa. I don't think we're the emotion police here, but it's good to know what I mean when I say these things.

But I think that's a very good question to answer also, that like—Why do we need to talk about emotions? Especially in a culture where it's seen as uncomfortable, awkward to talk about emotions and people are just like "I've been living my entire life without having to talk about emotions or even without having to feel my emotions. Why should I talk about this?"

Rashi: Absolutely.

Ahla: I get so excited to talk about this because there's so much research that kind of shows why it's so important, it's so central. Much more important than talking about our thoughts and our cognitions, it's much more important to talk about emotions. Because it's basically a lens through which we're interpreting all of the information that we receive on a day-to-day basis.

So we have this perception of human beings that we're essentially cognitive, rational beings who sometimes experience emotions but it's actually the other way around. That we're actually emotional beings—

[Sounds of dog barking]

Ahla: Zoe agrees. She's agreeing.

Rashi: [laughs] Yes.

Ahla: So we're actually emotional beings who experience thoughts and cognitions. So it's important to talk about emotions because it is an important motivation factor in everything that we do. So the word 'emotion' literally means 'to move'. It's something that moves us towards things and away from things or experiences or people.

Like, for example, if I wake up in the morning and if I'm feeling quite good about myself, maybe I choose—Okay I wanna wear this certain shirt which is really colourful and it matches the way I'm feeling today. Or if I wake up feeling really grumpy or feeling a bit low then I might feel like "Okay, I want extra strong coffee in the morning so I'm gonna make my coffee extra strong today."

So even these little decisions that we make everyday is very much dependent on our emotions and how we feel, and much less dependent on what our thinking process is.

So there was this—There was this study that was conducted where—and I think this was conducted by the Yale Research Center for Social Emotional Learning. So what they did was they took a bunch of teachers and divided them into two groups.

Asked one group of teachers to think about and write about a good day in their lives and the emotions associated with the good day. So evoking those emotions. And the other group was asked to talk about a bad day or a difficult day, kind of evoking those emotions.

And soon after, they were asked to grade their students, they were asked to grade a bunch of papers.

The results showed that the group of teachers who were asked to think about a bad day actually scored the students much lesser than the group of teachers who were thinking about a good day—their class scored way better on this. So this also means that emotions have a really important role to play in the way that we make decisions, in the way that we judge the world.

The interesting part was that—So after the study, the teachers were asked, "Do you think that it made a difference?" That you just thought about a bad day or you thought about a good day, do you think it made a difference to your grading and most of the teachers said that "No, my grading was not impacted by my mood, the emotions that I was feeling?" Which means that the teachers were unaware of the emotions and the impact that it was having on the decisions that they were making during that activity.

But in a different study, where they asked this question before the teachers graded the paper—How are you feeling right now? What are the emotions that came up for you right now?—there were lesser differences in the grading for that group of teachers. Which meant that emotions can impact your judgment, it can make you biased, only if you're unaware of it. If you're aware of it, then there is less chance that it can impact your decision-making or it makes you judgemental or biased towards something.

Rashi: So, yeah. One thing that it shows for sure is that every excuse that I give my father about why I scored less was genuine. My teacher probably was in a bad mood when she was grading me—

Ahla: [laughs] Possibly.

Rashi: So, hi dad.

Ahla: Let's go with that explanation.

Rashi: But also I think this makes a case, very importantly, about—I don't know, what do you call it— emotional literacy? Emotional education?

Ahla: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. About why we need to be well-versed in the language of emotions, why we need to be aware of what emotions look like for us. Because it's playing a larger role than most of us realise.

Rashi: And I think that—this example that you gave about teachers, right?—I feel like it's a very significant example but in the large scheme of things, your grades matter very little.

Ahla: I mean like, I can't stress more the importance of emotional literacy in leadership. Like it's so important—

Rashi: People getting fired. You know, you're deciding so many things on a daily basis whether it's deciding how much hike a person gets—And I'm talking about these really small examples, right? Which seem small at the moment but, for people, those could be life-changing.

Ahla: Yeah.

RULER: Cultivating Emotional Literacy

Rashi: So what can we do for emotional literacy? What are the things that we could possibly do and understand emotional literacy?

Ahla: Yeah. So there is this tool that is used by the same group, the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. This is a tool called RULER, which is an acronym, and it's a tool used for social emotional learning. So they've been training teachers and leaders and parents and managers to be able to use this tool to get in touch with their own emotions, and also help other people as well.

So we can talk about RULER and what RULER is.

Rashi: Since it's an acronym, what's the acronym? What does it stand for?

Ahla: So it's R-U-L-E-R, where it stands for Recognising, Understanding, Labelling, Expressing, and Regulating.

R—Recognising

Rashi: So the first step—Let's just look at the first step, right? And say, recognising. How do I recognise what are the emotions that I'm having?

Ahla: The first step, recognising, is basically asking the questions: How do my feelings feel? Or how do my feelings look like? So it's coming from that place of curiosity. So if something has happened and you feel something inside your body—I would say that bodily sensations are a great place to start.

So feeling like "Okay, something just shifted in my body when this person said this thing, or this incident happened. I just felt something shift in my body." Either I felt like my muscles were tightening up or I felt a bit nauseous or I felt like my stomach was tightening up or I felt like my breathing was becoming really short.

So something just happened, something shifted but I don't know what yet. So here we're kind of turning towards those bodily sensations in ourselves. Another way of looking at it is also: What are my thoughts right now? What is going on? What am I thinking right now? It's also one way to kind of be inquisitive about what am I feeling.

In other people—If you want to look at how do I recognise an emotional shift in other people, you could look at facial expression, body language, tone of voice. It can help with yourself also like I know that I'm gonna cry when my voice starts breaking up a little bit—

Rashi: Oh, of course.

Ahla: —I know that I'm getting choked up, I start feeling a lump in my throat, I know that "Okay, I'm feeling really sad. I'm feeling really anxious." So there are these bodily sensations that you can turn towards that'll help you understand what's going on, to have a starting point. So paying attention to these emotional cues.

Another thing that can also be helpful is your own personal history of—Like you'll know that—Okay, when I personally tend to start feeling frustrated or anger, my face starts getting flushed or I start feeling really hot in the face. But your experience of anger could be different. Maybe you feel like something's rising in your body, or something like that.

So your history can also be really helpful. Like what sensations am *I* likely to feel when I feel certain emotions? But this also requires cultivating that awareness or mindfulness about different sensations.

Rashi: I think the word I liked—that you used also—is this sense of curiosity, right? I like the idea of being curious about your own bodily sensations and that's—I feel like, especially in a culture like India, we seem to be much more comfortable with talking about our bodily functions than anything else.

Ahla: Yeah.

Rashi: We are a culture that talks a lot about our bodies and our aches and pains, and stuff like that. And that serves—Like I know I've had an anxious couple of days when my jaw hurts because I've been clenching so hard, right? And that's something that I wouldn't have noticed otherwise if I did not know that clenching the jaw is a sign of anxiety so this is a great—

Ahla: Yeah. It's a great tool because it's also a habit that you can kind of deliberately cultivate where, you know, if you're having a busy work day and you're moving from one meeting to the other and to the other, just having two minutes in between where you can just pause and say, "How am I feeling right now?" Just to check in with yourself like "What's going on with me?"

Or at the end of the day, just having a check-in with yourself can be really helpful to recognise and be in touch with yourself.

Rashi: So I think what we covered is Recognise and we talked about a couple of ways to do it, obviously looking at your bodily sensations seems like the best kind of way—at least for me.

So what about 'U'? How do we deal with Understanding?

U—Understanding

Ahla: So the Understanding part is more to do with context. A little bit more context of your emotions.

Rashi: Okay.

Ahla: So it's asking questions like, basically the 'why'. What caused me to feel the way that I'm feeling at the moment? So some of the questions—Actually, before going into the questions, let's talk about that curiosity a little bit more.

A lot of the times, when we ask the question "Why am I feeling the way that I'm feeling?", it's usually coming from a very judgmental place of "Tch, why am I feeling this way? I wish I didn't feel this way." It's a very judgmental place to come at it from.

So here, what we want to say is that you want to be curious about your emotions, but not furious about it. So curious but not furious.

Rashi: I like that line.

Ahla: So you're taking a very—Yeah, I really love that phrase as well. It's very helpful, I think, where you can adopt a very non-judgmental stance, where you're just being inquisitive, curious about what's going on with you rather than judging yourself.

So, considering multiple reasons or causes for why you could be feeling a certain way—what just happened? Just looking at what just happened which could have caused me to feel this way. Or what happened before I felt this way, you know? What are other feelings or events or people connected with what I'm feeling right now?

Again, here, your past history or biography can be really important in figuring out what am I feeling right now, or what caused what I'm feeling right now. Like for example, if you've experienced being criticised or being shamed for disagreeing—Say you had a parent who criticised or shamed you for disagreeing with them or having a different viewpoint, then it is possible that when you have a disagreement, say for example, at your workplace or in your relationship, you experience a disproportionate amount of anxiety.

So when you're asking these questions of "Why am I feeling this way?" it could also be connected to your history. It might not just be that you're responding to your immediate environment and people in the immediate environment, it could also be possible that you're responding to something that happened in your history as well.

So kind of taking all of that context—your own experiences, the environment, all of that—into account is the second step which is Understanding your emotions.

Rashi: So I feel like, when you're talking about Understanding—Like the difference that we spoke about emotions and feelings is that emotions are things you have in your body or they're cues that you get. Similarly, I feel like once you recognise it, you take all these cues and you kind of try to arrange them to make sense. And

that's what Understanding is—Just building a coherent story around, not necessarily why are you feeling this way, but more to understand. Like I think that's a very—

Ahla: Gathering information.

Rashi: —Creating a story out of the information that you have or even trying to go out and look for more information, to create more of the story.

Ahla: Yeah.

Rashi: Yeah! I really want to reiterate the importance of curiosity and not—Being curious and not furious at yourself. So you're not coming from a point of judgement of "Why am I feeling this way" and "Why am I not feeling a pleasant-er emotion?" I guess. But you're coming to say—

Ahla: Yeah.

Rashi: And we're going to talk about—

Ahla: Or even feeling like other people wouldn't feel this way so why do I feel this.

Rashi: Yeah, yeah. I do see how this will feed into the next couple of podcasts also. We're gonna talk about one very important thing about jealousy, so I can see why that would happen like "Why am I feeling jealous in this situation?" And we're gonna talk more about it.

We're also gonna be talking a little bit more about anger and guilt, throughout the upcoming podcasts so that would be a great way to tackle all these questions of negative emotions. I don't want to call them negative in a way but it's—It's unpleasant emotions.

Ahla: Unpleasant, yeah.

Rashi: Those are the ways to put it. So we've done R and we've done U and now we're coming to L. And this, I think, is a tricky one because language. Just in India, right? We have so many languages!

Ahla: Yeah.

Rashi: So how do you tackle this Labelling when language is such an issue.

L—Labelling

Ahla: Hmm, yeah. So, Labelling is basically asking the question of "What word or phrase can I best use to describe what's happening to me right now?" To describe what I'm experiencing right now.

And like you said, it's a tricky space to be in because language. And sometimes I think in our regional languages, especially in Malayalam, I would say that it's very difficult to find words that kind of explain the nuance of what I'm feeling right now. And sometimes I think, in regional languages, we might not use just a word to describe a feeling? We might use idioms or phrases or even like—There might be other ways of expressing certain emotions.

And we'll talk about the expressing part of emotions when we get to the 'E' part of the word but just talking about Labelling—So there's this—And I'm sure that some of us may be very familiar with this chart. So there is this chart which is called as a Mood Meter, that is given by the Yale Center of Emotional Intelligence, where the X-axis (which is the horizontal axis) tracks pleasantness of the feeling? How unpleasant or how pleasant the feeling is. And the Y-axis tracks the energy that you experience.

So the pleasantness is the subjective experience of your emotion, and the energy is the physiology of the emotion that you're experiencing. So there are four quadrants: if you're feeling high energy and low pleasantness, then you're likely to feel the red zone—which is anger, frustration, anxiety, furious, all of those emotions.

If you're feeling low energy but low pleasantness, then you are in the blue zone—which is sadness, depression, apathy—

Rashi: Gloomy.

Ahla: —exhaustion, yeah. All of the blue emotions that you might—

Rashi: Monday emotions.

Ahla: Yeah. And if you have high energy, high pleasantness, you are in the yellow zone—which is joy, excitement—

Rashi: Friday evening.

Ahla: —all of that. [laughs] I love how you're categorising according to weekdays.

Then you have the green zone, which is high unpleasantness but low energy—which is peaceful, tranquil, content.

Rashi: I have no idea which day this fits into.

Ahla: Yeah, it just feels like that's the farthest—

Rashi: Yeah! So the red zone, I can see it on Sunday evening. You're like "Why is the weekend over?" Right?

Ahla: Yeah.

Rashi: The blue Zone where you're like "Ugh, Monday morning", just energy is really low. You just want to get started because you know, once you pick momentum, it'll be easier. And then when you're happy and you're like "Friday evening, finally done with this." But I don't know what the other days are, or where does this—

Ahla: I guess green could be when you're on a vacation, perhaps? Or when you're surrounded—For me, green is like when I'm in nature. You feel a bit calmer, you feel relaxed, you feel tranquil. Or after you meditate.

Rashi: If you're the kind, yeah.

Ahla: This is great. So this Mood Meter can be helpful also in just the Recognising aspect as well. Like am I feeling high energy, low energy, or am I feeling high unpleasantness, low unpleasantness. And then it can be helpful to get more nuanced with words, right?

Like, for example, a lot of the time when you ask people, "How are you feeling?" the answers that you get are "I'm feeling okay" or "I'm feeling good/bad." Happy/sad. Right? So, adding to our vocabularies is also emotional literacy. If you have more words to describe your emotions, it's very granular and nuanced when you want to talk about it.

Rashi: So then you can kind of make the difference between anger, annoyed, furious.

Ahla: Yeah.

Rashi: So I think the two things we will link up in the end is the Feeling Wheel that we often use in therapy, to help clients do this and also the Mood Meter. We'll link it so that people can actually use it for themselves.

Ahla: Absolutely, yeah.

Rashi: Sorry, you were saying something.

Ahla: Another way of looking at labelling is also looking at certain themes of emotions. Like, for example, if you're feeling confused about like—I'm feeling high energy and some amount of unpleasantness but I don't know what emotion I'm actually feeling, you could look at what is the theme behind what you're experiencing right now.

Like, for example, anger is an emotion that's related to injustice or unfairness that has happened. Disappointment, on the other hand, is an emotion that is related to when expectations are unmet. You expected something and it didn't happen, that's disappointment. Joy is related to achieving a goal and sadness is related to not being able to achieve that goal, or loss of some form.

So looking at different themes, related to all these emotions can also help understand and label, correctly, what am I feeling.

Rashi: I really like—I think one of the things you also said in terms of—You might not necessarily find words that explain what you feel, that you might have phrases or images that might help you.

Ahla: Yeah, absolutely. And in regional languages, especially in Malayalam—For example, my parents use a lot of these idioms and phrases that convey particular emotions which I might have difficulty translating into English.

Rashi: Give an example. Do something for the Malayali-speaking—Malayalam-speaking.

Ahla: Oh, Malayalis don't come to [laughs]. This is one of the things that my dad says: *vazhikkallu vadi kuthiya pole*. So the literal translation is like, holding a stick down on a slippery surface, like a moss-covered surface maybe. So that's uncertainty. He's trying to say that everything about you is so uncertain, like your life plans or whatever.

Rashi: [laughs]

Ahla: So he's trying to convey that but he uses—He might not have the emotion words to say that but he uses a particular, very commonly used and culturally understood phrase.

Rashi: That's amazing. And the other way of saying things is "What is a game for the cat is death for the mouse." So you are hurting me but—You think it's games and you think it's jokes for you but it's killing me. So, [laughs] it's just so profound that I am—

Ahla: Like wow. Yeah.

Rashi: Yeah. So labelling, I think is such a cultural thing, right? People who speak the same language but from different cultures might experience it differently and what better example than UK and US expressions, to give us a clue of that.

So moving on, I think after Labelling comes Expressing? I don't like this part.

E—Expressing

Ahla: This is, yeah. This part is also tricky I think. So the first three parts—the recognising, understanding and labelling—is a very individual process. In the sense that you're in your head, you're thinking about it, you're feeling these feelings, you're labelling it. Everything to do about you.

But this part, the expressing part is to do about your environment and the people around you as well. So this part is where, basically you're asking the question "How do I let people know what I'm experiencing?" That's the question that you're trying to answer. And what you want to think about is "What is the best way that I can express what I'm feeling right now?"

There's obviously healthy ways of expressing your emotions and unhealthy ways of expressing your emotions. We're all bound by social and cultural norms when it comes to expressing emotion.

I think the biggest example that I can think of is patriarchy. What is allowed? What kind of emotions are sanctioned and allowed to express? Which gender is allowed to express it? What is not okay, what is shameful to express, and all of that. So a lot of the times, when women cry it's seen as—

Rashi: Absolutely fine.

Ahla: It's fine and it's a normal thing to do. But when men do it, it's seen as abnormal or odd or, you know, you're a sissy and all of that. The same with anger but the opposite way. Like women are not allowed to express anger, and anger is actually encouraged in men and seen as a sign of masculinity and all of that.

So there's a lot of policing about what emotions are okay to express and what emotions are not okay to express. For example, with children, they can express disappointment through crying and all of that but when they get angry, it's always seen as a problem behaviour. The children are not allowed to express anger, anger is disrespectful, all of those rules come with our culture. Especially in our culture, I think.

Rashi: Absolutely.

Ahla: And also, it's basically the where, when, how, with whom can you express your emotions. For example, at the workplace—can you express anxiety at the workplace? Can you express emotions like anger, explosive anger at the workplace. Or can you cry at the work place? Emotions are often seen as unprofessional at the workplace, but it can often be an effective tool in working with teams and stuff.

So here we are actively kind of thinking about what are the costs? Always weighing the pros and cons of expressing an emotion. And the ability to do that becomes very important: is it gonna be okay for me to express an emotion in this situation?

And we do that with friends and family as well, that I'm feeling a particular emotion so will I be able to express that with X person or Y person? Who feels more safe? And how much emotion can I express? Like if I'm feeling anger at my boss, how much anger can I express without getting fired? So we're constantly weighing all of these things when we're trying to express emotions.

When we're talking about expression, it doesn't always mean that you're always 100% of the time expressing like the full breadth, the full spectrum of your emotions. Neither are you trying to suppress or mask your emotions. Masking your emotions or not expressing can have a really detrimental effect on your body like it's connected with aches and pains, many psychosomatic issues. Your respiratory system can be affected, your digestive system—you can have a lot of GI problems. It's called as the debt of emotions like if you don't express your emotions, you're going to pay for it later in a different way.

Rashi: This is an interesting debt of emotions, yeah. I wonder how many men in India have it.

Ahla: Oh, I'm quite sure that they pay a heavy debt but it's almost seen as men's personality.

Rashi: And it might not always be them who are paying the debt of it, right? I mean, again—

Ahla: Yeah. The people in their lives have to pay the debt.

Rashi: Yeah. So now that we've got the expression—And I think I can summarise it by saying "a healthy expression" of emotions, so taking into context the social norms et cetera, how much can you express, is it safe for you to express and how much of it are you feeling comfortable expressing at the moment, all of that taking into account, right?

And that's why I think therapy is an important tool because a good therapy session would be a non-judgmental space where you can express the whole breadth of your emotions without worrying about judgment. So, at least the debt of you not expressing your emotions is not gonna come and bite you in the back, maybe 10 or 15 years later.

Ahla: Yeah.

R—Regulating

Rashi: Yeah. So what about now 'R'. I think this is a difficult part for me as well, so to understand and to regulate emotions.

Ahla: Yeah. Regulation is answering the question "What do we do with all of these feelings?" There are so many feelings, we experience so many—

Rashi: Is putting them in a box not an option?

Ahla: [laughs] It can be an option! Provided that you come back for it later.

Rashi: That's a perfect therapist answer.

Ahla: [laughs] I mean, I've been doing this job for a while, so. On a daily basis, we're experiencing so many emotions. Some we're aware of and so many we're unaware of. Like if you take the example of COVID itself, you're living with your family—most people are—or you're living absolutely alone and alienated from people. You're working from home, you're trying to figure out technology, you're trying to figure out how to connect with people, all of that. You're scared of falling

ill, you could be scared about the climate crisis, you could be worried about the state of your country—all of that can be happening, which is like 3000 emotions that you're currently feeling.

Rashi: Correct.

Ahla: So what do you do about all of these emotions, right? So regulation is basically, you think about it like a thermostat. Having a thermostat for your emotions. If I'm feeling a certain distressing emotion, I want to reduce the unpleasantness of the emotion. If I'm feeling a positive or a pleasant emotion, I want to stay in that emotion or I want to increase those feelings. So basically you're increasing the thermostat, decreasing the thermostat, remaining the same—all of that is regulation.

Now, we are always constantly regulating. It's a natural process for us, it just comes to us that we regulate in different ways. So some of these ways can be unhelpful and there are some ways that can be helpful. Unhelpful ways are—Okay, let me ask you. What do you do when you're feeling too many emotions? Like your go-to strategy.

Rashi: Sleep.

Ahla: Okay, you sleep.

Rashi: My body like shuts off. It's this natural reaction, it doesn't matter whether—It doesn't even have to be a bad emotion, even if it's too much happiness or too much joy, it's just like my body's like "Can't take it, bye. Goodnight."

Ahla: Yeah. So that's your body's way of regulating at the moment, which is that if there is an intense feeling coming up or intense unpleasantness coming up, I'm just going to go to sleep. And when I wake up, maybe I feel regulated, maybe I wake up feeling a different emotion. Right? Or maybe that emotion continues or shows up in different ways as I go on.

My go-to strategy—again, is not a very helpful strategy—it's doomscrolling or binge-watching. It's, again, a numbing activity. Both these activities I think are numbing activities. Sleeping is also a numbing activity and doomscrolling or watching hours of Netflix is also a numbing activity.

So these are ways in which we're trying to regulate ourselves. We're trying to reduce the unpleasantness of the emotion or trying to distract ourselves from it,

trying to get away from it. These *can* be effective; not to say that these don't work, these can be effective but in the long run, it can be quite unhelpful.

Rashi: I think it's still—I mean, something that you said about putting it in a box, right? I feel like it's the same. It's like "Hey, I need to put it in a box for a couple of—" I don't know, doomscrolling could mean a couple of minutes or couple of hours. Same way with sleep right? Just gonna put it in a box! I'm not ready to deal with it.

Ahla: Yeah, yeah. It can feel like it's not the right circumstances for me to process this emotion, it can feel like I don't have the right kind of people around me to help me process this emotion, I don't have the right kind of community support to process this emotion. These emotions all feel very big and scary to me so I am—The way that I figured out to regulate it is by setting it aside or putting it in a box or whatever.

All of these behaviours—drinking, smoking, doomscrolling, binge-eating—all of these behaviours can be ways in which we're trying to regulate ourselves. If you're constantly feeling unpleasant emotions, the frequency of these behaviours can also increase.

But when we're talking about regulation, what we want to talk about are: What are helpful behaviours? What can enhance your wellbeing? What are behaviours that you can engage in that's going to help you deal with these emotions and lessen the impact or lessen the distress that you experience?

One important thing to remember is that, when we say regulate emotions, we are not meaning to say "Stop feeling your emotions."

Rashi: Okay.

Ahla: Right? So a lot of the times you can see people say that "Hey, I don't have any issues regulating emotions because I don't feel any emotions at all." And that's not regulation. Regulation is not absence of emotions. Regulation is permitting yourself to feel the things that you're feeling, you're giving yourself permission to feel those emotions but you're not giving them the power. They're not so bigger than you that they take over everything that you're experiencing, right?

So, again, all of the strategies—There can be so many different strategies for emotional regulation. And all of these strategies are also very similar to stress-reducing strategies because it's essentially the same biological process.

When you're experiencing an unpleasant emotion in your body, it's almost the same biological process as you experiencing stress.

So things like going for a walk, or playing with a pet, or reaching out for emotional connection. Safe social connection can be a great way to regulate your emotions. Calling up a friend or a confidante to talk about how you're feeling, talking about your feelings can be a very good way to release.

I think that's a huge part of how therapy works as well. Just to be able to talk about the source of the stress and talk about what these intense feelings feel like, can itself alleviate a lot of that stress that you might be feeling.

Breathing—My favourite way to regulate emotions is just a deep breath. Like deep breathing can be quite helpful in just moving through that emotion. So again, when we're saying regulating, we're not saying that once you take a deep breath, once you meditate, your anxiety is going to go away and never come back. What we're saying is that it gives you some amount of power—

Rashi: Correct, correct.

Ahla: —that it's not completely overwhelming. It can kind of reduce the volume a little bit and make it a bit more manageable.

Movement, any kind of movement can be helpful. If you just want to get out of the house, take a 5 minute walk, take a 10 min walk. You don't necessarily have to go to the gym and do cardio or stuff like that to feel good or to alleviate some stress. You can even just like dance around in your room, you can jump up and down. Any kind of movement can be helpful—Play a game? A sport. Some amount of physical activity—cycling, tennis, football, whatever you like to play. It can be helpful, dance can be helpful.

Sleep, I think sleep is also a major part, being able to have sleep hygiene, focus, prioritise your sleep. Make sure that you are getting good, uninterrupted, eight hours of sleep. That can be really helpful. A lot of emotions also, I feel like, get processed when you get good, healthy sleep.

Rashi: I completely agree.

Ahla: Yeah, [laughs] of course you agree. So—And there can also be cognitive strategies as well. A lot of the strategies that we spoke of now are physical strategies like movement and sleep and breath and all of that. There can also be cognitive strategies like—Okay, can I take a step back and just re-evaluate the

situation that's causing this intense emotion? Are there different ways that I could look at it that would be helpful to me, that would be better for my wellbeing? Can I enlist the help of another person who could give me a different perspective on the situation?

Rashi: So, I—

Ahla: Can I monitor—Yeah?

Rashi: I was just gonna say that we're gonna talk a little bit more also about the immediate reaction that you have the stress. The flight fight freeze fawn response that we have. I just want to say that having another person can actually give you that distance that you need to do the flight fight freeze fawn response in your own time, and have another person do the cognitive aspect of it.

So if you feel like—Like sometimes, you know—My default reaction is freeze and I'm saying that we will be talking about this in detail, in another podcast or a video or something, cos this is an important conversation as well. To say that—You know, you can't get out of that situation. I can't get out of freeze, irrespective of how much I try, because that's such a primal kind of a response to have to a situation.

So getting somebody in and saying, "Can you please help me make sense of this emotion? Because my body and my entire cognitive resources are going in unfreezing so I can't make sense of the emotion right now, I can't make sense of the situation at all. So having a community support—And that, I think, goes back to the importance of having a community, having people around you who can constantly—I think it keeps coming back to that and I don't want to be that person right now but also therapy is really important.

If you can't find a community for whatever reason—because it is tough and COVID has made it even tougher to find community support. Therapy is an excellent thing to get into at this time so yeah.

Ahla: Yeah. And I think that's exactly emotional literacy or emotional intelligence, whatever you want to call it, is so important. Because if your community members also know that this is how you're feeling, they might be able to help you better. Or if they have this information about emotions—about their own emotions and your emotions—help can be made a little bit more smoother and easier as well.

And yeah, another cognitive strategy is also to monitor your self-talk. How are you speaking to yourself? Can you take a moment to kind of assess what is the story that I'm telling to myself about the situation or about this relationship? How am I

talking to myself? Is there a better way that I could talk to myself for my mental health, that'll be better for my mental health?

So yeah, these are some—Again, this is not an inexhaustible list, it's huge. There are many different ways to regulate your emotions but these are some strategies that can be used.

Rashi: And I agree, I do think that we need to have a separate segment altogether on regulation, on tips and things that could work. But I think this was a great conversation for the beginning.

Ahla: Yeah.

Rashi: We covered a lot; we covered what are emotions, what are feelings, what are moods, and we spoke extensively about RULER which I think is an amazing tool, now that I think about it. And I'm trying to process all that I have learned, even though we've had a conversation about this before but I think hearing it in totality is completely different. It's great to kind of understand where things might be coming from for me as well.

Especially when you have mental illness, emotions are such a huge part of...yeah. So you're like "Am I anxious today because I didn't eat? Am I anxious today because I'm anxious? What is happening?" And that is such an important cue to have with you at all times.

So thank you so much, Ahla. Thank you for this, thank you for the time.

Ahla: Yeah.

Rashi: As always—

Ahla: It's been great.

Rashi: As always it's been a great pleasure, yeah.

Ahla: Yeah, I always—

Rashi: Sorry, [laughs] go on.

Ahla: Yeah I always enjoy talking about emotions. I also want to add one resource. So there's this book by Marc Brackett called "[Permission to Feel](#)". It can be a good starting point to learn about RULER and to learn about emotions. It's a very easy,

digestible, comprehensive way to read about emotions. Less scientific and accessible.

Rashi: I think we'll put a link to that as well, maybe an Amazon link or something like that, if people want to read more about it. So apart from all of this, if you want to seek therapy, our website is alternativestory.in, which is where the podcast will be hosted along with the other podcasts and videos as well.

And if you have any questions about anything, feel free to write into us at hello@alternativestory.in. And that's it for now, hope to see you guys next time. Do let us know what you thought about this episode and if you have topics that you would like us to cover!

Okay, thank you, bye bye.

Outro: Thank you for listening in to The Alternative Story podcast. We would love to hear your thoughts on this episode. You can share them with us on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, or LinkedIn. If you would like to book an appointment with us or be a part of one of our support groups, please log on alternativestory.in. Until next time, bye bye!