Positioning and Differentiation from Affect Labeling and Related Concepts

A Choosing Emotions Media Room White Paper

By D. Earl ("Doug") Johnston — August 17, 2026

> *"I became interested in what happens when we put precise words to what we are feeling. Over nine years I researched 8,000 phrases and quotes about 272 emotions from 1,800 thinkers across 25 centuries. One of my conclusions is:"*
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> ***Science measures from the outside.***
> ***Emotions measure from the inside.***

Is Choosing Emotions Similar to "Affect Labeling," "Self-Distancing," and Related Concepts?

Over the past two decades, a small group of researchers has built the scientific case for why naming emotions precisely matters. Dr. Matthew Lieberman (UCLA) pioneered *affect labeling* research, using clinical fMRI testing to show that putting feelings into words measurably calms the brain's threat response. Building on that work, Dr. Daniel Siegel (UCLA) coined the now-famous phrase **"name it to tame it"** — five words that have carried this finding into everyday language. Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett (Northeastern) established *emotional granularity*: the more finely grained a person's emotional vocabulary, the more precisely the brain can construct — and manage — emotional experience. And Dr. Ethan Kross (Michigan) has shown, through his research on *self-distancing*, that the specific words we use to talk to ourselves shape our ability to regulate our own emotions.

Choosing Emotions' "emotionary" format is unique, and it supports — rather than duplicates — this research. It is a first-ever, ground-up catalog of the actual words and phrases people use to describe their emotional experience, functioning as a "go-by" to expand emotional command in the moment. The book answers two everyday questions: "How do I say it?" and "Are there other ways to express myself that feel best to me?" There is true relief — even joy — in being able to "nail it" when we communicate with others.

This is the day-to-day dialogue, the middle ground between advanced science and daily life — where Barrett's emotional granularity and Siegel's name it to tame it are put directly into practice, through actual phrases and quotes from 1,800 thought leaders across every discipline and every walk of life.

Sources

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