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SCALE UP

# EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

A module about the importance of emotional intelligence and empathy and how to practice them.

Scaling-up Skills for  
Strengthening Inclusion  
and Youth Employability

Project Number: KA210-YOU-2F49B5FD-2



DEVELOPIA  
Foundation



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# Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, the participants will have gained the following results:

- Deeper understanding of the importance of soft skills
- A clear understanding of the importance of emotions and emotional intelligence
- A clear understanding of empathy
- Ability to work on their emotions
- Insights into some games to raise emotional intelligence levels

# Introduction

Soft skills are important **personal attributes** that allow people to **interact with other people more effectively**. They can be useful in both personal and professional spaces.

These skills – also known as “people skills” or “interpersonal skills” – include **several competencies that can be developed effectively through practice**. The list of soft skills is consistent, including time management and clear communication (Forbes, 2024).

However, this module will focus on the importance of **emotional intelligence and empathy**.

# Why Soft Skills Matter

The importance of soft skills is two-fold: they can be useful to improve interpersonal relations in private life but also in working/public life. The worry about the job market is growing and it is an issue that also concerns young people. A survey conducted on young Europeans showed that there is a generally negative perspective about working conditions among youngsters, both in those who are still in school and in those who have already entered the job market. Some factors might contribute to this negative view, including higher education and previous unemployment. In fact, Reeskens & van Oorschot found that those with higher education tend to be more negative than those with lower education. Similarly, those who have been unemployed for more than three months tend to be more worried and negative towards the conditions of the job market. Finally, another factor shaping the worry about youth unemployment is the nation of origin: people who come from a country with higher unemployment rates tend to be more worried about their future career prospects (Reeskens & van Oorschot, 2012).

In this context, it is fundamental to train youths to develop strong interpersonal skills that can help them improve their chances of landing a good job or their daily work life. Pooja Chhabria, career expert and head of editorial for Asia-Pacific at LinkedIn, stated “One of the challenges that young workers may face is lack of experience as they enter the workforce.” However, according to Chhabria, there has been a shift towards worrying about a “traditional experience-based” approach to an approach based more on soft skills. This is due to a couple of reasons, including the need for new employees to face the rapidly changing needs of new businesses. Chhabria continued by saying that “87% of recruiters believe skills are crucial as they vet candidates. A skills-based approach also creates a much broader talent pool, and diversity of talent is necessary for remaining competitive in today’s marketplace” (CNBC, 2023).

Overall, we can say that soft skills are a set of transversal skills that can help recent graduates and youth stand out in the pool of growing competitiveness they face in today’s job market. Developing these skills is, therefore, imperative.

# The Link Between Emotional Intelligence and Empathy

The present module will focus on empathy and emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is a soft skill that is connected to empathy, meaning that the latter cannot be present without the former, as empathy is a manifestation of high levels of emotional intelligence. Let's start with the definitions.

## Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence: **“the ability to perceive, interpret, demonstrate, control, evaluate, and use emotions to communicate with and relate to others effectively and constructively.”**

(Cherry, 2023).



This skill can aid us in expressing and controlling our emotional state as well as helping us understand, interpret, and respond to the emotions of others. Some experts suggest that emotional intelligence is even more important than IQ for success in life (Cherry, 2023).

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines emotions as “conscious mental reactions (such as anger or fear) subjectively experienced as strong feelings usually directed toward a specific object and typically accompanied by physiological and behavioural changes in the body.” It is important to not confuse emotions with moods, as the latter are short-lived emotional states with short intensity, while emotions are more long-lasting and are more in-depth (APA, 2023).



According to authors Don Hockenbury and Sandra E. Hockenbury,  
**any emotional experience has three components:**

1

**Subjective experience:** refers to emotions derived from personal experiences, which can be as simple as seeing your loved ones or seeing your favourite colour to losing someone you love.

2

**Physiological experience:** refers to emotions derived from a reaction from the autonomic nervous system, the fight or flight response our body triggers as soon as we experience fear.

3

**Behavioural or expressive response:** refers to the actual expression of the emotion, which can include a laugh, smile, or sigh, depending on the situation; behavioural responses are signals of how we feel.

Frederick and Pausic (Forbes, 2023) highlighted some of the **characteristics of high levels of emotional intelligence**. Here is a breakdown.

- **Self-awareness.** Self-awareness is the capability to concentrate on yourself and how your actions, emotions and thoughts do or do not agree with your inside standard. People that are highly self-aware can evaluate themselves objectively, manage their emotions, link their behaviour with their values and infer how other people perceive them. Finally, self-motivation stands for driving individuals to follow their goals even if they face setbacks, to take up opportunities and show dedication to every goal they want to achieve. Individuals are not born totally self-aware: although children do have a basic sense of self-awareness (even newborns are capable of understanding the difference between self and non-self touch), a more complicated sense of self-awareness emerges approximately during the first year of age and becomes developed enough by around eighteen months of age.



- **Ability to regulate a full range of emotions** so that they do not have a negative impact on our daily lives.
- **Motivation** to pursue goals without allowing negative self-talk to hinder your progress.
- Ability to **let go of mistakes** and grudges.
- A **curiosity** about others and their feelings.
- **Empathy** and understanding of others' emotions and feelings.
- **Effective communication skills**, including the ability to use "I statements," such as "I'm hearing you say X," instead of accusatory "You-statements," such as "You said you're underappreciated as an employee."
- Ability to **manage relationships** and respond appropriately to conflict.

The emotions we feel have a strong impact on our daily lives because they influence how we act and think. Therefore, working to understand them and learning how to manage them is of uttermost importance.

“Being aware of our internal emotional state and being more mindful and present with how our mind and body respond to situations enables us to manage stress better,” says Annie Miller, licensed therapist. “We can then have improved emotional regulation, as well as emotional resilience and lower levels of anxiety” (Cherry, 2023).

Learning how to manage your emotions and, overall, increasing emotional intelligence levels, can lead to several improvements in our overall well-being. Two important components of well-being are characteristic mood and self-esteem.

**Mood**, in particular, is extremely important as it is not only a state component but also a lasting characteristic, similar to a personality trait.

**Self-esteem**, on the other hand, is an individual’s positive or negative affective self-evaluation: when you feel you are doing well, you have higher self-esteem. High self-esteem is associated with less depression, less anxiety, less loneliness, less social anxiety and less alcohol and drug abuse.

Increasing emotional intelligence levels has been found to help maintain a positive mood and high self-esteem even when faced with a negative situation. (Schutte et al., 2002).

Individuals are expected to be able to manage their emotions and not let them take over and dictate how they act and what they say. Think about a time you were angry about something and you took it out on your partner or one of your friends. These responses can negatively affect your relationships as well as your mental health.

**Some steps to better regulate our emotions:**

- **Awareness:** being aware of how we feel.
- **Rationalization:** naming our emotions and trying to understand them better.
- **Reflection:** give ourselves time to reflect on our emotions.
- **Acceptance:** accepting that we feel both positive and negative emotions.
- **Kindness:** not judging ourselves for how we feel.

- **Practice:** practising mindfulness and engaging in positive self-talk
- **Patience:** being patient to ourselves and choosing how to respond.

For all the reasons above, emotional intelligence is an extremely important skill to develop. It is so important that Forbes ranked it among the 11 essential soft skills for 2024. Especially in the work environment, emotional intelligence enables individuals to improve their teamwork as well as navigate complex social dynamics more efficiently. Moreover – and potentially more important if we consider our relationships with other people – having high levels of emotional intelligence allows us to give constructive feedback in a more mindful way, leading to more successful outcomes and stronger relationships (Forbes, 2024)). In this context, we cannot avoid mentioning empathy.

## Empathy

The concept of empathy is a long-standing one. It was coined over 100 years ago by the psychologist Edward Titchener (1867–1927). However, there are several definitions of empathy (Cuff et al., 2014). Overall, we can say that **empathy is the ability to feel the emotions of others, or the ability to imagine what others are thinking and feeling**. It means being able to feel what someone who has lost a loved one or someone who has just given birth is going through at that moment.

Empathy: **“the act of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and indirectly experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another.”**

(Merriam-Webster)

This definition highlights one of the issues with empathy: it can be fairly easy, or at least manageable, to adapt and understand our own emotions; however, putting ourselves in another person’s shoes can be tougher. Nonetheless, working on empathy is important because it can make our interactions with other people easier.



Psychologist Daniel Goleman defined empathy in terms of **five basic elements**:

1

**Understanding others.** People who can successfully understand others are good at verbal and nonverbal communication and can follow emotional cues.

2

**Developing others,** which means mobilizing them in the face of their needs and concerns and helping them develop to their full potential.

3

**Having a service orientation.** In this way, it is to understand the people you serve and to try to offer the best alternative for them.

4

**Leveraging diversity.** It means interacting with different people as they need to. It is recognizing that different types of people bring different opportunities and developments.

5

**Political awareness.** This shows individuals the importance of collective work.





Although empathy can look different among people, because everybody has a different way of showing comprehension and worry in another person's experience, we can highlight **some of the characteristics that empathic people share** (Cherry, 2023):

- Being good at listening to what other people have to say.
- Being open to discussing other people's problems.
- Understanding how other people are feeling.
- Thinking and worrying about other people's feelings.
- Advising other people.
- Feeling overwhelmed by tragic events.
- Helping other people who are suffering.
- Being good at telling when people aren't being honest.
- Feeling drained in social situations.



However, working on empathy and living life more empathically can come with some difficulties. Stein and Book (2001, in Singh, 2014) highlight **three problems that hinder people from using empathy to their advantage:**

- Some people confuse empathy with “being nice”
- Some people confuse empathy and sympathy
- Some people confuse being empathic with agreeing with another person’s statement.

These misconceptions can lower the chances of someone choosing to be empathic. Nonetheless, learning about empathy and emotional intelligence is important and can improve the conditions of the workplace as well as our interactions in daily life.





Going back to work life, empathy is regarded as a great tool to increase the level of trust and motivation in the workplace, making this soft skill important for learning how to work better together at all levels. This is all the more necessary considering that today's work environments are culturally different and present several challenges that require putting ourselves in the other person's shoes. Employees, in fact, need to adapt to "multicultural differences, have exceptional knowledge of business operations, have effective time management skills, and be able to act and think beyond traditional boundaries."

# How to increase emotional intelligence levels

Now that we have seen the main characteristics and concepts related to emotional intelligence and empathy, we will focus on some ways in which we can increase our emotional intelligence levels.

First off, it is important to point out that some emotional intelligence abilities can be trained while others have a strong genetic basis. Moreover, emotional intelligence levels vary over time. Various studies have shown that, for example, emotional intelligence levels can rise after short intensive training but, after six months, return to previous levels if the skills are no longer practised. Moreover, emotional intelligence grows progressively from childhood to adolescence and tends to increase during adult years due to more maturity and life experiences (Năstasă et al., 2021).



Two research-based approaches to increase the levels of emotional intelligence in young people:

- 1 **The RULER approach**, designed to improve the quality of classroom social interactions.
- 2 **The Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programmes**, aimed at improving and developing emotional recognition, stress management, empathy, problem-solving and decision-making skills.

These two approaches are proven to increase the levels of **emotional intelligence** in **four branches**, as investigated by Năstasă et al. (2021):

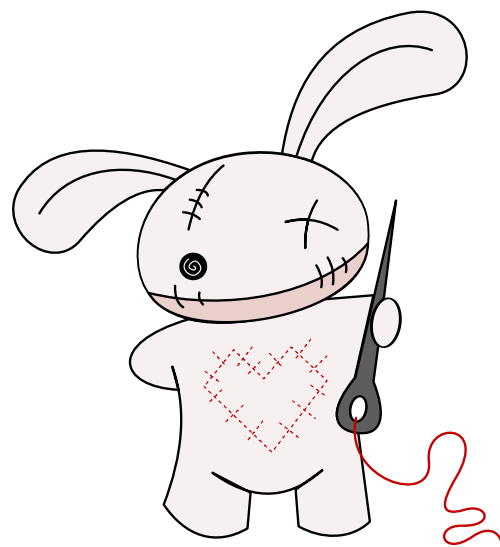
- **Emotional perception**
- **Use of emotions**
- **Emotional understanding**
- **Emotional management**

Let's take a look at some of the group activities that can be done as exercises to increase the levels of emotional intelligence.

## The puppet of Emotions (emotional perception)

The participants are seated in a circle and tasked to focus on themselves and identify the emotions they feel while listening for 10 min to relaxing music in the background. After that, they write them down on one of the sheets of paper received, taking care not to let the others see what they wrote.

Then, each of the participants shapes their puppets to express the emotions identified before. Taking turns, each participant then shows their puppet to the others, who have to identify the emotions shown and write it down on a piece of paper.





At the end of the activity, each participant answers these questions, leading to a group discussion:

- What helped you to identify your own emotion and then express it?
- What caused difficulties in identifying your own emotion and/or in expressing it?
- What did you like? What did you dislike?
- How did you feel to be in the shoes of the person who modelled the puppet?
- How did it feel when the other participants identified your emotions correctly (or not)?

## The Theatre of Emotions (using emotions)

Different pieces of paper with different parts and different life situations are distributed to the participants. These can include:

- “Imagine that you want very much to hold a surprise party for a friend, and you need to decorate your room. What kind of mood would be most useful for the decoration to be a success and for the friend to be happy?”
- “Imagine that you want to prepare a surprise dinner for someone dear to you. You wish to prepare a new, complicated recipe that demands time and energy. What kind of mood would be most useful for the dinner to be a success and for the person invited by you to be happy?”
- “Imagine that you have been assigned to compose a song to represent you. What state of mind would be useful to you throughout the creative process?”





- “Imagine needing to mediate a conflict between three younger students in your school. Each of them presents his own story that differs greatly from the others. It is imperative to get all the details of the event and to analyze every action of those involved. What state of mind might help you identify what caused the conflict among the students?”

The participants are asked to take two pieces of paper randomly: one with a body part and one with a situation. Then, they have to mimic the emotion described in the paper using the body parts indicated on the other piece of paper. The other participants have to guess the emotion.

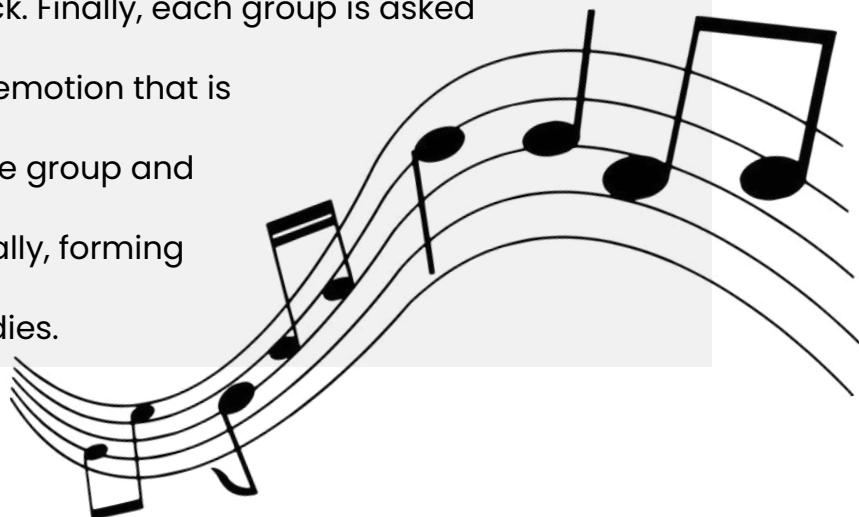


## The Flower of Feelings (emotional understanding)

For this activity, we will need several paper circles of 4cm in diameter with various feelings written on them. These circles are placed face down. Each group of participants (3-5 people per group) receives three things: a piece of A3 paper, paper flowers petals and glue. Then, each group chooses a circle from the table. The chosen circle is glued to the A3 sheet as the centre of a flower and the group members have to think of emotions that would be combined to create the feeling depicted on the flower centre, write these emotions on petals and glue them around the centre. They also have to find a creative way of presenting their “flower of feelings” and challenge their colleagues to experience the emotions they identified. Finally, they have to discuss how easy or hard it was to identify the component emotions of the target feeling and what was perceived as helpful or as difficult in this process.

## Farewell Thoughts (emotional management)

For this activity, four musical pieces of different genres are prepared, as stimuli that challenge participants to reflect. Four numbered A3 sheets of paper are also provided. The participants are invited to walk through the room, listen to the musical piece that is playing and reflect on the past activities they had with the development group. The musical pieces are played one after the other. After the first song is over, each participant is invited to write on the respective sheet of paper the first word that comes to mind. This process is repeated with songs 2, 3, and 4. Then, four groups are formed and each receives one of the four sheets of paper and is asked to create feedback for the activity in the form of a story, poetry, play or dialogue, using all the words, and then to present the feedback. Finally, each group is asked to choose a common emotion that is illustrative for the whole group and to express it non-verbally, forming a statue from their bodies.



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