



The Tells

Naming a feeling by starting from the outside

One question before you fill anything in, and there is nowhere to write the answer. When someone asks how you are, how long does it take you to answer, and is the answer ever a feeling?

Most advice for this hands you a wheel of feeling words and asks you to find yours on it. That assumes the hard part is vocabulary. Often the hard part is earlier: the feeling is not available to look at, so there is nothing to hold the words against. "Look inward and report back" is the one instruction that cannot work.

Some people track the room rather than themselves. You notice that someone went quiet, that a meeting turned, that a friend is off before they say so. That is a real skill and it points outward, so this sheet points it at you instead.

A tell is a piece of evidence somebody could have observed from outside. Something your body did, something you did, something another person would have seen. You do not have to feel anything to notice a tell. Collect them first; the name comes afterwards, and it comes from them.

Name the stretch

A day, an evening, a week in the last month or so when something was off. You do not have to know what it was. Not knowing is the reason this sheet exists.

The stretch.

What a tell looks like

Say the stretch was a Tuesday you cannot account for.

Body: jaw tight by mid-morning, no lunch.

Did: read one email four times, did not reply.

Wanted to: delete the whole thread and say nothing.

Someone watching: you left the room when the phone rang.

Different that day: your brother messaged the night before.



Five kinds of tell

Fill in whatever you can. A blank box is information too; it usually means that kind of tell is not one you tend to watch.

What your body did

Not what it felt like; what it did. Jaw, shoulders, stomach, sleep, appetite, breath, headaches, the thing that always goes first.

What you did

What you avoided, re-read, cancelled, cleaned, checked twice, snapped at, poured, scrolled, worked late to miss.

What you felt like doing and did not

An urge is easier to catch than a feeling because it has a shape: leave, snap, hide, fix it, say nothing, go again. What did you want to do?

What someone watching would have seen

Picture a person who knows you, in the room, with the sound off. What would they have noticed before you did?

What was different that day

What happened just before. Who was there, what was said, what got decided, what did not.



Working backwards

Read your five boxes as though they belonged to somebody else, which is how you read other people already. The left column below is situations rather than feelings, because a situation is something you can recognise from outside. Find the rows that match what you wrote, not the ones that sound most like you.

WHAT WAS GOING ON

Something is coming and you cannot control it

Something was taken, or ended

A line got crossed

You were seen falling short

You have been carrying it by yourself

Too much, for too long

You wanted something and did not say so

WHAT IT USUALLY GOES BY

anxious, dread, keyed up

grief, sad, flat

angry, resentful

shame, embarrassed, small

lonely, unsupported

exhausted, done, numb

frustrated, restless

The name I would put on it.

More than one row can be right at once. If two fit, write both.

How sure are you of that name?

Rate 1 to 10. 1 = it is a guess. 10 = I am certain.

A guess is a real answer here, and a low number does not mean you did this wrong. You are working from evidence rather than from certainty, which is the honest way round when the feeling itself is hard to see.

One more look. Which row did you read and move past?

Not the one you chose; the one you skimmed. The rows people move past quickly are usually the ones carrying the most.



Saying it to one person

Naming a feeling to yourself takes some of the heat out of it, quietly enough that you may not notice it working. Saying it to somebody else is the part that changes anything, and it is the part most people skip.

You do not have to say "I feel". That sentence is hard to get out when you are not sure it is true. Lead with the evidence instead and let the name come along behind it, which is the same order this whole sheet ran in.

The sentence, written out.

The shape: "I have been ____ lately. That might mean I am ____." If your number was low, keep the word "might". It is doing real work in that sentence.

Who.

One person. Not the most important one; the easiest one.

There is no date on this. Deciding who is most of the work, and a deadline would turn an offer into a test you could fail. If nobody comes to mind who feels safe yet, that is worth knowing, and it is worth saying to a counsellor before it is worth saying to anyone else.

Before you put this down.

Without looking back: name the five kinds of tell, and say which box was easiest to fill.

You were never bad at noticing. You were pointed the other way.

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