

Learning to Identify Feelings as a First Step in Communicating Them

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Couples often come into counseling with one spouse complaining about the other spouse's lack of emotional involvement in the relationship. They each give very different meaning to the interaction that they have in their relationship. The spouse that has been described as emotionally unavailable or uninvolved, often views the other partner as critical and demanding, and feels as if s/he is in a no-win situation.

In some ways each party is probably trying very hard to show the other partner that he or she is loved. The problem is that each brings to the relationship beliefs, attitudes, and emotional baggage about how to go about it. Unfortunately, most couples will not share the same beliefs, attitudes, and early life learning. So, of course their ideas and their methods will not match the other person's expectations. They won't give the same meaning to the same events.

Each party wants to feel loved, important, valued, and respected. Many times, one or both partners expect the other partner to know what they want or need, and to give it to them without having to ask for it. This expectation of mind-reading gets in the way of feeling loved and important. It gets in the way of effective communication and problem solving. It virtually guarantees that the person expecting the other "to know" will be hurt and disappointed. Most couples are not so "tuned in" to each other that they finish each other's sentences. Yet that is often an expectation of the one of the partners.

It is crucial when trying to communicate, and ultimately to problem solve on relationship issues in your life, that you have the ability to identify and communicate feelings. Many people have a difficult time identifying exactly what it is that they do feel. Some people have had inadequate training in recognizing that they are having a feeling then appropriately labeling that feeling. It is very difficult to tell someone else what you are feeling if you don't have the vocabulary to accomplish it. To assist in correctly identifying and labeling the feeling, use this exercise:

Remember a recent event when you felt angry. Then explore these questions:

- What does anger feel like in your body?
- Does your heart beat faster/race?
- Does your breathing quicken?
- Do you breath more shallowly or more deeply?
- What does your stomach/guts do? Are they churning; do they feel hard, or do you feel nauseated?
- What do your muscles do? Are you tense? Does your hand ball up into a fist?
- Does Your blood pressure go up? Do you turn red? Do you have a vein that sticks out and throbs.

- Is your chest tight?
- Do you experience high energy or low energy. Do you feel compelled to take some action? What kind of action?

What does your body feel like when you experience fear? Does your body experience some of the same things that you do with anger? What is the difference? Can you tell the difference when you experience either feeling?

What does hurt feel like?

- Heart beat/pulse fast or slow
- Breathing fast or slow; deep or shallow
- Stomach/Guts nausea or churning or knotted
- Muscles tense, weak
- Temperature hot or cold
- Chest tightness or heaviness
- Energy high or low
- Action compelled to act or unable to act

Use this list of physical reactions of feelings to identify how your body reacts to each of the feelings listed below. This list encompasses common reactions for emotions, but there is a great deal of variability possible. You might have some different physical reactions to feelings that are not given here. It is important to identify what your body does with a specific feeling so that you can correctly label the feelings you have.

- Fear
- Anger
- Shame
- Guilt
- Hurt
- Sad
- Lonely
- Helpless
- Joy

It is vitally important to know appropriate labels for your feelings. If you only know two labels for feelings-angry and happy-and you experience hurt, the label that you choose to communicate your feeling of "hurt" to your loved one will probably be "anger". Your communication of anger will probably hamper your attempts to effectively reveal what is going on with you. Your loved one probably will not be able to read between the lines and see the "hurt". They will probably take you at your word, that you feel "angry". You will not have successfully communicated your feeling.

It is important to be able to distinguish between and among feelings because feelings often get paired up quite quickly. Common pairings are "fear and anger" and "hurt and anger". Sometimes people experience different feelings in rapid fire fashion. It can

happen so quickly that you may not even be aware of the first feeling before it turns to something else - usually anger. Often, the first feeling that you experience is the most important one to communicate with significant others. The second feeling may be a defense or a guard against experiencing the first feeling. An example of how the first feeling may have more significance for the relationship is when a parent has been waiting up all night for an adolescent who has missed curfew, to get home. When the adolescent opens the door at 3:00 in the morning, the abject terror and fear of what might have happened to the child, gives way to the anger. It is, of course, typically the anger that is expressed. If the fear gets expressed at all, it is usually much later. The erring child hears the anger and not the fear.

As with any skill, practice makes for improvement. Human beings experience a range of emotions, not just "anger" and "happy". The more skilled that people are at identifying and communicating this range of emotions, the better able they are to problem solve and work through feelings. The less skilled that you are in identifying and communicating feelings, the more likely you are to act them out in ways that are detrimental in various areas of your life.

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