

Expressing Feelings

NC STATE EXTENSION

Interpersonal Relationships

“Feelings are potentially highly constructive since it is through experiencing and expressing feelings that close friendships are built and maintained.”

– David Johnson, *Reaching Out* (page 87)

Why are feelings so important in interpersonal relationships? Because communication is at the heart of relationships, and feelings are at the heart of effective communication. When we are able to communicate at the feeling level, we can eliminate much of the misunderstandings that occur in most relationships.

Your quality of life can be greatly improved through the experience and expression of feelings. Your enjoyment of your home, a child, or a garden is limited by your capacity to feel and express the reality of the experience. So our search for quality of life is really a search for a greater range and wider variety of emotions and a desire to build relationships in which emotions are aroused, allowed positive expression and yet controlled, allowing joy for all involved.

Say It!

An expression of warmth toward another person almost always brings a response of acceptance, trust, and the desire for a closer relationship. Sharing feelings of warmth is a powerful tool in building and maintaining friendships. A climate of acceptance is fostered by the sincere expression of honest feelings. Many people, however, have trouble verbalizing their feelings.

Dealing with These Difficulties

Some people deny or ignore their own feelings, or dismiss the feelings of others. You have possibly heard someone express a feeling only to be told, “Don’t feel that way.” Persons who feel discouraged may be told, “Cheer up. Don’t let it get you down.” We may tell an angry person to simmer down. To an expression of joy, we may say, “Pride goes before a fall.” Our families, to a large extent, may have discouraged the expression of certain emotions, such as anger. Often, only positive feelings are allowed open expression. The so-called negative feelings are often denied, ignored, or repressed.

Things that are distant and remote seem easiest to discuss. Issues or feelings that pertain to the present are more difficult. Notice how the following topics become more and more difficult:

I tell you how Jane *felt* about John, neither person being present.

I tell you how Jane *feels* about John, neither person being present.

I tell you my *past* feelings about Sam, who is not present.

I tell you my *present* feelings about Sam, who is not present.

I tell you my *past* feelings *about you*.

I tell you my *present* feelings *about you*.

There are at least three reasons why they get “closer to home.” First, self-disclosure makes you open to rejection. Second, many people feel they are losing control over a relationship if they put their feelings out in the open, because the reactions of others cannot be predicted or controlled. Finally, many people do not recognize or accept many of their own feelings.

If You Hold Back

Society tells us that relationships improve as they become more rational, logical, and objective. To the contrary, a person’s interpersonal effectiveness is increased as all of his or her relevant feelings and information are expressed, discussed, and become controllable.

If you hide or suppress your feelings, your relationship may be affected in the following ways:

- If feelings are not dealt with, biased and nonobjective judgments will be made. For example, a good idea may be rejected because you are angry toward the person who offered it.
- Hidden feelings may well distort your perception of events and information. Unpleasant facts may be ignored. “Love is blind” expresses an unrealistic view of relationships.
- Suppressed feelings lead to barriers, increased conflicts, and the deterioration of the relationship.

Describing Your Feelings

The description of a feeling must be a personal statement, using “I,” “me,” or “my.” There are at least four ways to describe a feeling.

- Identify or name the feeling. “I feel loved,” or warmth, angry, sad, embarrassed, etc.
- Use similes or metaphors. “I feel like a cloud in the air,” or “I feel stepped on.”
- Report the action your feelings are urging you to do. “I feel like hugging you,” “I’d like to slap your face,” or “I feel like fighting.” Saying something is not the same **as** doing it.
- Use your own figures of speech to describe feelings, such as “I feel like God is smiling on me,” or “I feel like rain always falls on me.”

People who aren't aware of feelings, and can't accept and express them skillfully, have difficulty with relationships. The feelings come out in these negative ways:

- Labeling others. An angry person labels others as hostile, etc.
- Commands, such as "Shut up."
- Accusations, such as "You don't care about me."
- Name-calling, such as "You're a creep."
- Sarcasm, such as "You sure make a person feel appreciated."
- Unnecessary approval, such as "You're wonderful."
- Unnecessary disapproval, such as "You're terrible."

The person who works at clear and accurate communication of his or her feelings will find it helps interpersonal relationships. First, describing your feelings helps you clarify how you actually feel. Second, describing a feeling often initiates a discussion that will improve the relationship with another person. Even negative feelings, when clearly expressed, can serve to strengthen the relationship.

Nonverbal Expression

Many times, people can see how we feel much more accurately than we can describe our emotions. Nonverbal expressions of feelings account for about 65 percent of all social meanings given to our communication messages. Nonverbal expressions include the way you dress, your posture, body tension, facial expressions, degree of eye contact, hand and body movements, tone of voice, the amount of physical space between you and the other person, variations of speech, and any kind of touch. All of these are matters to be considered in the communication process.

Nonverbal expressions may be confusing or unclear. For example, a blush may indicate embarrassment, pleasure, or even hostility. Anger can be expressed by frozen stillness or by exaggerated bodily movements. Our nonverbal perception of a person's feelings must be checked with what he or she is really feeling.

A person may be saying one thing, while his body says another. Some examples of this are the parent who screams, "I want it quiet around this house!" or the teacher who says, "I always have plenty of time for my students," while glancing at the clock and putting papers into a briefcase. The listener gets a "mixed" message under these kinds of circumstances, and the nonverbal message usually speaks louder than the verbal message. Clear communication of feelings depends upon skill in verbal and nonverbal expression.

Author

Wayne Matthews

Associate Professor Emeritus Agricultural and Human Sciences

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