



Communicating Emotions

Emotionally Competent

Saarni (1990)

What do you think it means to be **emotionally competent**?

According to research by Saarni (1990), some of the variables involved include:

- Awareness of own emotions
- Ability to recognize and empathize with others' emotions
- Recognition of impact of own expression of emotions on others
- Sensitivity to cultural rules for expressing emotions

It sounds easy enough...**being aware of one's own emotions**. *Sure, I know how I feel*, right? Not necessarily. Some of us lack even a vocabulary to express or describe our emotions. Even when we recognize our emotions, we may not be able to express them clearly or constructively. To communicate effectively, we need skills in identifying and expressing our feelings appropriately.

Emotions are usually very complex and are experienced **holistically rather than individually**. In other words, you'll feel multiple emotions at the same time. At least to some degree, most emotions are socially constructed. Our social circumstances and individual perceptions influence our emotions and how we define those emotions.

Significant research by **Hochschild** has studied the interactive view of emotions, how social rules and perceptions shape what people feel and how feelings are expressed. Accepting the **interactive approach** to feelings implies that we are able to analyze our feelings and maybe change them or control them, rather than just instinctually react. This interactive view is based on three concepts: **framing rules, feelings rules, and emotion work**.

Framing Rules **Framing rules** are guidelines for defining the emotional meaning of situations. For example, in the U.S. we usually define funerals as sad occasions and have “rules” for expressing grief.

Think about the first funeral you ever attended. You probably modeled your behavior after others who were attending. In some cultures, there are more outward expressions than in others. We have different rules for weddings, family reunions, etc.

Feeling Rules **Feeling rules** relate to what we have right to feel or what we are expected to feel in particular situations. Such rules would determine whether we feel overwhelming individual pride at earning a doctoral degree or gratitude to family, faculty and community for this accomplishment.

Hochschild maintains that such rules help to maintain the social order, helping establish how you are “supposed to feel” or “should feel” at certain times. For example, I should feel protective toward my children; I should feel grateful when someone gives me a present.

Families vary in how they teach feeling rules, such as how to show gratitude (writing thank you notes or always saying “thank you”) or expressing affection to siblings (never saying you hate them or being jealous).

Emotion Work **Emotion work** refers to the effort we invest in generating what we think are appropriate feelings in particular situations. Emotion work concerns our attempt to mold how we feel, not necessarily the result of that attempt.

We may not succeed at squelching inappropriate feelings; there may be discrepancies between what we do feel and what we think we should feel. For example, when an enemy is hurt, we may feel compassion or satisfaction. When someone you don’t like has computer problems, do you feel empathy or justification?

Not Communicating

Reasons people may not communicate emotions

Among the reasons we don't communicate emotions are:

- **Social expectations**
(such as gender differences – “men don't cry”)
- **Vulnerability**
(fear that others might like us less or take advantage of us or lose respect for us)
- **Protecting others**
(avoid upsetting them or hurting others)
- **Social or professional roles**
(attorney neutrality; doctor's objectivity; teacher's impartiality)

Lack of vocabulary. Another reason for lack of communications could be lack of vocabulary. As an experiment, try to list as many feeling words as you can in just a couple of minutes. Some people have trouble getting beyond happy, sad, mad, glad. Frequently, women can list more words than men...but still only 20-30 words are common.

We usually have a conscious command of very few words. If you have studied the **Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis**, developed by anthropologist Edwin Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, you know their opinion that language limits our perception of reality. People with a limited feeling vocabulary are thought to experience a more limited emotional world. Having a wider array of choices of words helps us to express our feelings more clearly and understandably to others. The Sapir-Whorf theory also teaches us how limited English is in describing or expressing feelings. You might compare expressions with someone fluent in another language or raised in another culture.

Make a list of feeling words and practice using different ones. You might tape a copy of your list where you can see it frequently. Expand your awareness!

Ineffective Expression

Ineffective Expression of Emotion

- Speaking in generalities
(Use specifics; fewer abstracts)
- Not owning feelings (blaming others)

Research by Proctor (1991) has identified the significance of accepting responsibility for our own feelings.

Practice using “I statements” and compare the results with statements like “You make me so angry!”

Expressing Emotions

Expressing Emotions

- Recognize your feelings (multiple, complex set of emotions).
- Accept responsibility for feelings.
- Consider impact of expressing those feelings.
- Think about how to describe your feelings.
- Decide to whom, when and where you will express feelings.

Emotional intelligence, or EQ, (Goleman) is the ability to recognize which emotions are appropriate in which situations and the skill to communicate those feelings effectively. According to Goleman, high EQ leads to more satisfying relationships, more comfort with self, and even more satisfying careers.

Creating Verbal Peace

Much conflict is created by miscommunication or misperceptions and misinterpretations of verbal and nonverbal messages.

Sometimes we are the cause. Maybe we inadvertently use “trigger phrases” that make others see red. Maybe we let others’ words “fester” and infect our responses for years to come. Maybe we resent another’s tone. Whatever the cause, here are some suggested strategies for creating peace.

- Open your heart. Visualize the other person as an innocent baby. Focus on that image. Opening your heart may diffuse the hostility.
- Look for the good. If you can’t find at least one good thing about the other person, maybe you haven’t looked hard enough.
- Smile more often. Place a mirror by your computer or telephone and smile when talking or responding. See if anyone notices a difference (besides you!)
- Clear your mind. The old ideas of taking a deep, cleansing breath or counting to 10 really work. Clear your mind of negativity about the other person. Take a “mental vacation” to get focused.
- Listen. Focus on the sounds around you other than your own voice. Be aware of your environment.
- Let others speak. Avoid interrupting. Maybe you need a “trick” to help you. If so, place the tip of your tongue between your two front teeth and exert slight pressure. Literally biting your tongue reminds you not to interrupt and give someone else a turn.
- Laugh at yourself. Lighten up and detach yourself from protecting your ego or your image. Willingly admit your mistakes or flaws or weird habits.

Some of these strategies may be more effective in Western culture than others. For more ideas, discuss and compare different approaches for verbal peace making with friends from other cultures.