

# UNIT 20

## Emotional Communication



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*Emotions are an essential part of interpersonal communication but are often extremely difficult to express effectively. In this unit, you'll learn*

- ▶ the nature of emotions and how they function
- ▶ the skills for expressing and listening to emotions effectively

## EMOTIONS AND EMOTIONAL MESSAGES

Communicating emotions is both difficult and important. It's difficult because our thinking often gets confused when we are intensely emotional. It's also difficult because we are not taught how to communicate emotions and we see few effective models we might imitate.

Yet communicating emotions is also most important. Feelings represent a great part of your meanings. If you leave your feelings out, or if you communicate these feelings inadequately, you will fail to communicate a great part of your meaning. Consider what your communications would be like if you left out your feelings when talking about failing a recent test, winning the lottery, becoming a parent, getting engaged, driving a car for the first time, becoming a citizen, or being promoted to supervisor. Emotional expression is so much a part of communication that even in the cryptic e-mail message style, emoticons are becoming increasingly popular (see Unit 8 and specifically Table 8.1). Two excellent websites that contain extensive examples of smileys and emoticons and acronyms and shorthand abbreviations are [www.netlingo.com/smiley.cfm](http://www.netlingo.com/smiley.cfm) and [www.netlingo.com/emailsh.cfm](http://www.netlingo.com/emailsh.cfm).



### The Body, Mind, and Culture in Emotions

Emotions involves at least three components: bodily reactions (such as blushing when we're embarrassed); mental evaluations and interpretations (as in calculating the odds of drawing an inside straight at poker); and cultural rules and beliefs (for example, in the pride parents feel when their child graduates from college).

Bodily reactions are the most obvious aspect of our emotional experience, because we can observe

them easily. Such reactions span a wide range. They include, for example, the blush of embarrassment, the sweating palms that accompany nervousness, and the self-touching that goes with discomfort as well as facial expressions, gestures, and vocalizations. When you judge people's emotions, you probably look to these nonverbal behaviors. You conclude that Ramon is happy to see you because of his smile and his open body posture. You conclude that Lisa is nervous from her sweating hands, vocal hesitations, and awkward movements.

The mental part of emotional experience involves the evaluations and interpretations you make on the basis of your behaviors. For example, leading psychotherapist Albert Ellis (1988; Ellis & Harper, 1975), whose insights underlie many points made throughout this unit, claims that your evaluations of what happens have a greater influence on your feelings than what actually happens. Let us say, for example, that your best friend, Sally, ignores you in the college cafeteria. The emotions you feel will depend on what you think this behavior means. You may feel pity if you figure that Sally is depressed because her father died. You may feel anger if you believe that Sally is simply rude and insensitive and snubbed you on purpose. Or you may feel sadness if you believe that Sally is no longer interested in being friends with you.

In an interesting study that illustrates how our interpretations influence the emotions we experience, students were asked how they felt when they failed or did well on a college examination (Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1979). Students who did poorly felt *anger* or *hostility* if they believed that others were responsible for their failure; for example, if they felt the instructor gave an unfair examination. Those who believed that they themselves were responsible for the failure felt *guilt* or *regret*. Students who did very well felt *pride* and *satisfaction* if they believed their success was due to their own efforts. Or they felt *gratitude* and *surprise* (some even felt *guilt*) if they believed that their success was due to

luck or chance. Have your own interpretations ever influenced the emotions you experienced? Have they ever not influenced the emotions you felt?

The culture you were raised in and live in gives you a framework both for interpreting the emotions of others and, as we'll see below in the section on "Emotions, Culture, and Gender," for expressing emotions. A colleague of mine gave a lecture in Beijing, China, to a group of Chinese college students. The students listened politely but made no comments and asked no questions after her lecture. At first my colleague concluded that the students were bored and uninterested. Later, however, she learned that Chinese students show respect by being quiet and seemingly passive. They think that asking questions would imply that, for example, a professor was not clear in her lecture. In other words, the culture—whether American or Chinese—influenced both the students' expression of their feelings and the professor's interpretation of those feelings.

## Emotions, Arousal, and Expression

How would you feel in each of the following situations?

1. You have just heard that you won the lottery.
2. Your best friend just died.
3. You were just told you got the job you applied for.
4. Your parents just told you they are getting divorced.

You would obviously feel very differently in each of these situations. In fact, each feeling is unique and unrepeatable. Yet amid all these differences there is some similarity. For example, most people would claim that the feelings in scenarios 1 and 3 are more similar to each other than are the feelings in 1 and 2. Similarly, 2 and 4 are more similar to each other than are 3 and 4.

### Your Basic Emotions

To capture the similarities among emotions, many researchers have tried to identify basic or primary emotions. Robert Plutchik (1980; Havlena, Holbrook, & Lehmann, 1989) developed a most helpful model (Figure 20.1).

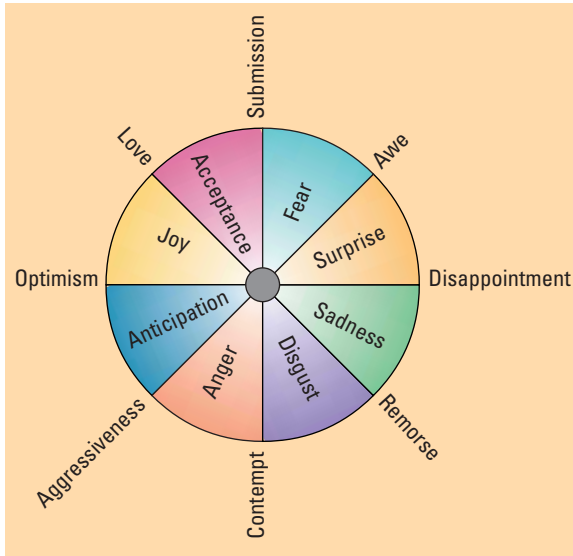
The eight pieces of the pie in Plutchik's model represent the eight basic emotions: joy, acceptance, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, anger, and anticipation. Emotions that are close to each other on this

## BUILDING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

### Communicating Your Emotions

Communicating emotions is one of the most difficult of all communication tasks. Here are some situations to practice on. Visualize yourself in each of the following situations and respond as you think an effective communicator would respond.

1. A colleague at work has revealed some of the things you did while you were in college—many of which you would rather not have others on the job know about. You told your colleague these things in confidence, but now just about everyone on the job knows. You're angry and decide to confront your colleague.
2. A close friend comes to your apartment in deep depression and tells you that her husband (or his wife) of 22 years has fallen in love with another person and wants a divorce. Your friend is at a total loss as to what to do and comes to you for comfort and guidance.
3. A neighbor who has lived next door to you for the last 10 years and who has had many difficult financial times has just won a lottery jackpot worth several million dollars. You and the neighbor meet in the hallway of your apartment house.
4. Your grandmother is dying and calls you to spend some time with her. She says she knows she is dying and wants you to know how much she has always loved you; she says that her only regret in dying is not being able to see you anymore.



**Figure 20.1**

**A Model of the Emotions**

Do you agree with the basic assumptions of this model? For example, do you see love as a combination of joy and acceptance and optimism as a combination of joy and anticipation?

Source: From *Emotion: A Psychoevolutionary Synthesis* by Robert Plutchik. Copyright (c) 1980 by Robert Plutchik. Reprinted by permission of Allyn & Bacon.

wheel are also close to each other in meaning. For example, according to this model joy and anticipation are more closely related than are joy and sad-

ness or acceptance and disgust. Emotions that are opposite each other on the wheel are also opposite each other in their meaning. For example, according to this model, joy is the opposite of sadness and anger is the opposite of fear.

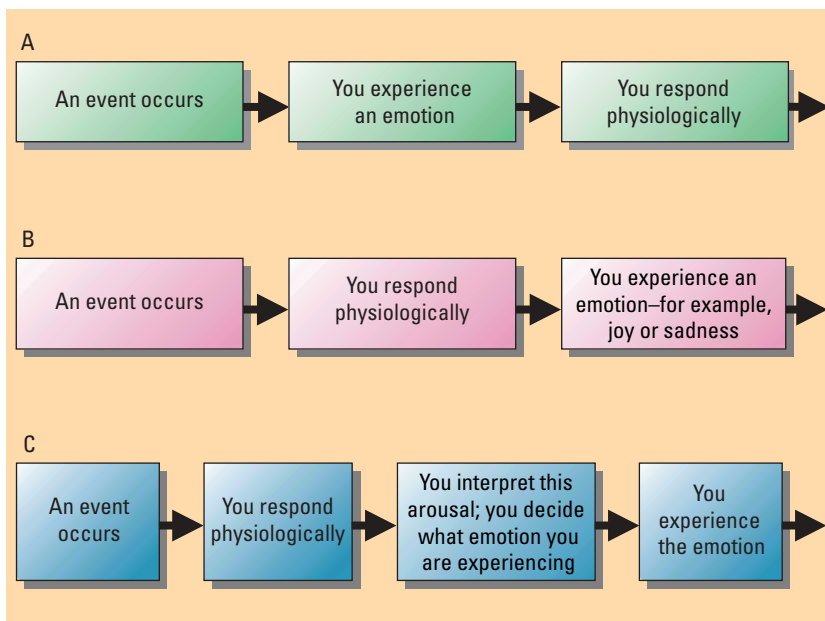
In this model there are also blends. These are emotions that are combinations of the primary emotions. These are noted outside the emotion wheel. For example, according to this model, love is a blend of joy and acceptance. Remorse is a blend of disgust and sadness.

**Emotional Arousal**

If you were to describe the events leading up to emotional arousal, you would probably describe three stages: (1) An event occurs. (2) You experience an emotion; for example, you feel surprise, joy, or anger. (3) You respond physiologically; your heart beats faster, your face flushes, and so on. Figure 20.2 (a) depicts this commonsense view of emotions.

Psychologist William James and physiologist Carl Lange offered a different explanation. Their theory places the physiological arousal before the experience of the emotion. The James–Lange theory proposes the following sequence: (1) An event occurs; (2) you respond physiologically; and (3) you experience an emotion such as joy or sadness. Figure 20.2 (b) depicts the James–Lange view of emotions.

Psychologist Stanley Schachter (1964; Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 1999) has presented evidence for a



**Figure 20.2**

**Three Views of Emotion**

How would you describe emotional arousal?

Source: From Joseph A. DeVito, *Messages: Building Interpersonal Communication Skills*, Fifth Edition. Copyright © 2002 by Allyn & Bacon. Reprinted by permission.

*cognitive labeling theory*. According to Schachter you interpret the physiological arousal and, on the basis of this, experience the emotions of joy, sadness, or whatever. The sequence of events goes like this: (1) An event occurs; (2) you respond physiologically; (3) *you interpret this arousal—that is, you decide what emotion you’re experiencing*; and (4) you experience the emotion. Further, your cognitive interpretation of the physiological arousal will depend on the situation you’re in. For example, if you experience an increased pulse rate when someone you’ve been admiring smiles at you, you may interpret this as joy. You may, however, interpret that same rapid heartbeat as fear if three suspicious-looking strangers approached you on a dark street. According to Schachter it’s only after you make the interpretation that you experience the emotion—the joy or the fear. This sequence of events is pictured in Figure 20.2 (c).

## Emotional Expression

Emotions are the feelings you have: your feelings of anger, sorrow, guilt, depression, happiness, and so on. Emotional expression, on the other hand, is the way you communicate these feelings. Theorists do not agree over whether you can choose the emotions you *feel*; some argue that you can, others argue that you cannot. You are, however, clearly in some control of the ways in which you *express* your emotions. You do not always have to express what you feel. Whether and how you choose to express your emotions will depend on your own attitudes about emotional expression, which you may wish to explore by taking the self-test below, “How do you feel about communicating emotions?”



## TEST YOURSELF

### How Do You Feel about Communicating Emotions?

Respond to each of the following statements with T if you feel the statement is a generally true description of your attitudes about expressing emotions or with F if you feel the statement is generally a false description of your attitudes.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Expressing feelings is healthy; it reduces stress and prevents wasting energy on concealment.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Expressing feelings can lead to interpersonal relationship problems.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Expressing feelings can assist others in understanding you.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Emotional expression is often an effective means of persuading others to do as you wish.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Expressing emotions may lead others to perceive you negatively.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Emotional expression can lead to greater and not less stress; expressing anger, for example, may actually increase your feelings of anger.

**How did you do?** These statements are arguments that are often made for and against expressing emotions. Statements 1, 3, and 4 are arguments made in favor of expressing emotions; 2, 5, and 6 are arguments made against expressing emotions. You can look at your responses as revealing (in part) your attitude favoring or opposing the expression of feelings. “True” responses to statements 1, 3, and 4 and “False” responses to statements 2, 5, and 6 would indicate a favorable attitude to expressing feelings; “False” responses to statements 1, 3, and 4 and “True” responses to statements 2, 5, and 6 indicate a negative attitude.

**What will you do?** Actually, expressing emotions can lead to all six outcomes—the positives and the negatives. Consider how you might regulate your expression of emotions—especially in light of the fact that, as these statements indicate, the consequences of emotional expression can be considerable. All the statements above underscore the importance of critically assessing your options for emotional expression. ✓

For example, if you feel anger, you may choose to express or not to express it. You do not have to express anger just because you feel angry. In fact, you may feel angry but outwardly act calmly, dispassionately, and lovingly. Suppose, for instance, that there are several promotions to be made in your office and you do not get the first one. You may feel anger, but you may decide that to show your anger could hurt your chances for getting one of the other promotions. You may, therefore, decide to respond calmly on the theory that this will help your advancement more than will an expression of anger.

Should you decide to communicate your feelings, you’d need to make several decisions. For example, you would have to choose how to do so—face-to-face or by letter, phone, e-mail, or office

memo. And you'd have to choose the specific emotions you would and would not reveal.

You'd also have to choose the language in which you'd express your emotions. Here is a list of terms for describing the eight primary emotions identified by Plutchik (1980). Notice that the terms included for each basic emotion provide you with lots of choices for expressing the level of intensity of your feelings. For example, if you're extremely happy, then *bliss*, *ecstasy*, or *enchantment* might be an appropriate word. If you're mildly happy, then perhaps *contentment*, *satisfaction*, or *well-being* would

be more descriptive. Look over the list and try grouping the terms into three levels of intensity: high, middle, and low. Before doing that, however, look up the meanings of any words that are unfamiliar to you.

- *Happiness*: bliss, cheer, contentment, delight, ecstasy, enchantment, enjoyment, felicity, joy, rapture, gratification, pleasure, satisfaction, well-being
- *Surprise*: amazement, astonishment, awe, incredulity; eye-opener, jolt, revelation, shock, un-

## BUILDING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

### Giving Emotional Advice

**F**or each of the following situations, identify (1) the nature of the problem—what is going wrong; (2) two or three possible solutions that might correct or at least lessen the problem; and (3) the one solution you would recommend to the parties involved.

1. Joe is extremely honest and open. Maybe a bit too honest, in fact; he regularly says everything he feels without self-censorship or self-monitoring. Not surprisingly, he often offends people. Joe is entering a new work environment and worries that his total honesty may not be the best way to win friends and influence people.
2. Marie and Tom have been married for several years. Marie is extremely expressive, yelling one minute, crying the next. Tom, on the other hand, is the stereotypical nonexpressive male; rarely can you tell what he's thinking or feeling. Recently this difference has been causing interpersonal problems. Tom feels that Marie doesn't think through her feelings but just reacts impulsively; Marie feels that Tom is unwilling to share his inner life with her.
3. Alex and Deirdre have dated steadily for the last four years. Deirdre is extremely unexpressive but believes that Alex, because of their long and close relationship, should know how she's feeling without her having to spell it out. When Alex doesn't respond appropriately, Deirdre becomes angry and says that Alex doesn't understand her because he doesn't really love her; if he did, she says, he would know what she's feeling without her being explicit. Alex says this is crazy; he's no mind reader and never claimed to be. If Deirdre wants something, he says, she has the obligation to say so; he doesn't feel it's his job to guess what is going on in Deirdre's head.
4. Tobin has recently been put in charge of a group of blue-collar workers at a small printer repair firm. Tobin is extremely reserved and rarely reveals any extreme emotion. He gives the workers instructions, praises them, and criticizes them all with the same tone of voice and facial expressions. As a result, the workers sense that he's insincere and isn't really feeling what he says.
5. Shasta always smiles: No matter what she is saying, she smiles and expresses herself in a lilting tone that leads most people to feel she is pleased. In her job as a high school history teacher, this tendency seems to have created problems. When the students don't do their homework or otherwise violate established rules, Shasta's criticism seems to carry no weight. The students never feel she is really serious about chastising them. It has gotten to the point where she has lost all control and authority in the classroom.

expectedness; wonder, startle, catch off guard; unforeseen

- *Fear*: anxiety, apprehension, awe, concern, consternation, dread, fright, misgiving, phobia, terror, trepidation, worry, qualm, terror
- *Anger*: acrimony, annoyance, bitterness, displeasure, exasperation, fury, ire, irritation, outrage, rage, resentment, umbrage, wrath, hostility; tantrum
- *Sadness*: dejected, depressed, dismal, sorrowful, distressed; grief, loneliness, melancholy, misery, unhappiness
- *Disgust*: abhorrence, aversion, loathing, repugnance, repulsion, revulsion, sickness, nausea; offensiveness
- *Contempt*: abhorrence, aversion, derision, disdain, disgust, distaste, indignation, insolence, ridicule, scorn, snobbery, revulsion, disrespect
- *Interest*: attention, concern, curiosity, fascination, notice; appeal, spice, zest; absorb, engage, engross

## Emotions, Culture, and Gender

The anecdote about my colleague's experience in Beijing provided an excellent example of the influence of culture on emotional expression and illustrated the role of *cultural display rules*. These are cultural teachings that tell people which emotions are permissible to express as well as delineating the circumstances or contexts in which emotional expression is appropriate. For example, in one study, Japanese and American students watched a particularly unpleasant film of an operation (Ekman, 1985). The students were videotaped both during an interview about the film and while watching the film alone. When alone, American and Japanese students showed very similar reactions. But in the interview, American and Japanese students followed different rules for the display of emotions: The American students readily displayed facial expressions indicating displeasure, whereas the Japanese students did not display any great emotion. Similarly, cultural display rules influence what is and what is not considered appropriate emotional expression in a romantic relationship, depending on the stage your relationship is at. For example, you're more likely to inhibit any expression of negative emotions in early stages of a relationship; such inhi-

bition tends to decrease after you've achieved some level of involvement or intimacy (Aune, Buller, & Aune, 1996).

Cultural differences also exist in the ways we decode the meanings of facial expressions. For example, American and Japanese students were asked to judge the meanings of a smiling and a neutral facial expression. The Americans rated the smiling face as being more attractive and more intelligent and as displaying greater sociability than the neutral face. The Japanese, however, rated the smiling face as more sociable but not as more attractive. The Japanese, in fact, rated the neutral face as the more intelligent (Matsumoto & Kudoh, 1993).

Similarly, Japanese women are not supposed to reveal broad smiles and so will hide their smile, sometimes with their hands (e.g., Ma, 1996). Recall from Table 8.1 that even the emoticon for a smiling woman in Japan is with a closed mouth (^.^). Women in the United States, on the other hand, have no such restrictions and so are more likely to smile openly.

Most Americans are more apt to express negative emotions to their friends and positive emotions to relative strangers. In contrast, Poles and Hungarians are more likely to express negative emotions to strangers and positive emotions to friends (Matsumoto, 1996).

And of course within U.S. culture there are differences in display rules. For example, in one study Americans classified themselves into four categories: Caucasian, African American, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino. Here are a few findings just to make the point that different cultures teach different rules for the display of emotions (Matsumoto, 1994):

- Caucasians rated the expression of contempt as more appropriate than did Asians.
- African Americans and Hispanics felt that showing disgust was less appropriate than did Caucasians.
- Hispanics rated public displays of emotion as less appropriate than did Caucasians.
- Caucasians rated the expression of fear as more appropriate than did Hispanics.

Researchers agree that men and women experience emotions similarly (Oatley & Duncan, 1994; Cherulnik, 1979; Wade & Tavis, 1998). However, gender differences in emotional expression are abun-

dantly evident. Men and women seem to have different *gender display rules*, much as different cultures have different cultural display rules. For example, women talk more about feelings and emotions and use communication for emotional expression more than men (Barbato & Perse, 1992). Perhaps because of this, they also express themselves facially more than men. Even junior and senior high schoolers show this gender difference. Recent research has found that this difference may well be due to differences between the brains of men and women; women's brains have a significantly larger inferior parietal lobule which seems to account for women's greater awareness of feelings (Frederikse et al., 1999).

Women are also more likely to express socially acceptable emotions than are men (Brody, 1985). For example, women smile significantly more than men. In fact, women smile even when smiling is not appropriate—for example, when reprimanding a subordinate. Men, on the other hand, are more likely than women to express anger and aggression (Fischer, 1993; DePaulo, 1992; Wade & Tavis, 1998). Similarly, women are more effective at communicating happiness and men are more effective at communicating anger (Coates & Feldman, 1996).

Some research has also looked at reactions to emotional expression on the part of men and wo-

## BUILDING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

### Changing from Ineffective to Effective Emotional Communication

The 10 statements below are all ineffective expressions of feelings. For each statement (1) identify why the statement is ineffective (for example, what problem or distortion does the statement create?) and (2) rephrase the statement into a more effective message in which you:

- describe your feelings and their intensity as accurately as possible
  - identify the reasons for your feelings and what influenced or stimulated you to feel as you do
  - anchor your feelings to the present
  - use I-messages to own your own feelings and to claim responsibility for these feelings
  - use I-messages to describe what (if anything) you want the other person to do because of your feelings
1. Your lack of consideration makes me so angry I can't stand it anymore.
  2. You hurt me when you ignore me. Don't ever do that again.
  3. I'll never forgive that louse. The hatred and resentment will never leave me.
  4. I hate you. I'll always hate you. I never want to see you again. Never.
  5. Look. I really can't bear to hear about your problems of deciding who to date tomorrow and who to date the next day and the next. Give me a break. It's boring. Boring.
  6. You did that just to upset me. You enjoy seeing me get upset, don't you?
  7. Don't talk to me in that tone of voice. Don't you dare insult me with that attitude of yours.
  8. You make me look like an idiot just so you can act the role of the know-it-all. You always have to be superior, always the damn teacher.
  9. I just can't think straight. That assignment frightens me to death. I know I'll fail.
  10. When I left the interview, I let the door slam behind me. I made a fool of myself, a real fool. I'll never get that job. Why can't I ever do anything right? Why must I always make a fool of myself?

men. Participants in one study, watching a video of a courtroom trial, rated women most guilty when they displayed extremely high or extremely little emotion. Women were rated least guilty when they expressed moderate levels of emotion. Men, on the other hand, were rated similarly guilty regardless of the level of emotions they displayed (Salekin, Ogloff, McGarland, & Rogers, 1995).

Research has also found that, contrary to popular belief, women like men who openly express emotion, even when they cry. Women, on the other hand, are not liked when they cry (Labott, Martin, Eason, & Berkey, 1991; Werrbach, Grotevant, & Cooper, 1990).

## Principles of Emotional Communication

Identifying several major principles of emotional communication should further explain how emotions work in communication.

### Emotions Are Always Important

Although emotions are especially salient in conflict situations and in relationship development and dissolution, they are actually a part of all messages. Emotions are always present—sometimes to a very strong extent, though sometimes only mildly—and they must be recognized as a part of the communication experience. This is not to say that emotions should always be talked about or that all emotions you feel should be expressed; in some instances, as already noted, you may want to avoid revealing your emotions. For example, you may not want to reveal your frustration over a customer's indecision, or you may not choose to reveal to your children your doubts about your ability to find a job.

### Emotional Feelings and Emotional Expression Are Not the Same

Recall from the discussion of facial management techniques in Unit 8 that emotions are frequently disguised. Remember that you can intensify, deintensify, neutralize, or mask your emotions so that others will think you're feeling something different from what you really are feeling. From this simple principle two useful corollaries can be derived:

- You cannot tell what someone is feeling simply from observing the person, so don't assume you

can. It's far better to ask the person to clarify what he or she is feeling.

- Others cannot always tell what you're feeling from the way you act. So if you want others to know how you feel, it's probably a good idea to tell them.

### Emotions Are Communicated Verbally and Nonverbally

As with most meanings, emotions are encoded both verbally and nonverbally. Your words, the emphasis you give them, and the gestures and facial expressions that accompany them all help to communicate your feelings. And conversely, emotions are decoded on the basis of both verbal and nonverbal cues. And of course emotions, like all messages, are most effectively communicated when verbal and nonverbal messages reinforce and complement each other.

### Emotional Expression Can Be Good and Bad

Expressing emotions can be cathartic to individuals and can sometimes benefit relationships. Expressing emotions can help you air dissatisfactions and perhaps reduce or even eliminate them. Through emotional expression partners can often come to understand each other better, which may lead to a closer and more meaningful relationship.

On the other hand, expressing emotions may cause relationship difficulties. Expressing your anger with a worker's customary way of answering the phone, for example, may generate hostility; expressing jealousy when your partner spends time with friends may cause your partner to fear being controlled and losing autonomy.

### Emotions Are Often Contagious

If you've ever watched an infant and mother interacting, you've probably seen how quickly the infant mimics the emotional expressions of the mother. If the mother smiles, the infant smiles; if the mother frowns, the infant frowns. As the child gets older he or she begins to pick up more subtle expressions of emotions. For example, a child quickly identifies and often mimics a parent's anxiety or fear or anger. In a study of college roommates, the depression of one roommate spread to the other over a period of just three weeks (Joiner, 1994). In short, emotions are contagious and are easily passed from

## BUILDING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

### Listening to the Emotions of Others

Expressing your own feelings is only half the process of emotional communication; the other half is listening. Sometimes you may feel awkward listening to the feelings of others, as if you're overhearing matters that are really too personal. At other times you may feel awkward because you don't quite know what to say. Here are a few guidelines for making an often difficult process a little easier. As you read these suggestions, consider how you'd use them in listening to a situation such as the following: *Your best friend tells you that he suspects his girlfriend is seeing someone else. He's extremely upset and tells you that he wants to confront her with his suspicions but is afraid of what he'll hear.*

- ▶ Don't equate (as the stereotypical male supposedly does) "responding to another's feelings" with "solving the person's problems" (Tannen, 1990). It's usually more productive to view your task in more limited terms: to encourage the person to express and perhaps to clarify his or her feelings and to provide a supportive atmosphere.
- ▶ Empathize with the person. Try to see the situation from the point of view of the speaker,

to put yourself into the position of the other person. Be especially careful to avoid evaluating the other person's feelings. For example, saying "Don't cry; (s)he wasn't worth it" or "You'll get promoted next year" can easily be interpreted as meaning "Your feelings are wrong or inappropriate."

- ▶ Focus on the other person. Avoid responding with your own problems. It's very easy, when hearing a friend talk of a broken love affair, to interject with your own similar past situations. And although this can be a useful technique for showing your understanding, it creates problems if it refocuses the conversation on you and away from the person who needs to talk.
- ▶ Show your interest by encouraging the person to explore his or her feelings. You might, for example, use simple encouragers like "I see" or "I understand." Or ask questions that let the speaker know that you're listening and that you're interested in hearing more.

one person to another. In conversation and in small groups, the strong emotions of one person can easily prove contagious to others present; this can be productive when the emotions are productive, but unproductive when the emotions are unproductive.

### OBSTACLES IN COMMUNICATING EMOTIONS

The expression of feelings is a part of most meaningful relationships. Yet it's often very difficult. For that reason we need to consider the obstacles to effective emotional expression and to suggest some guidelines. Three major obstacles stand in the way of effective emotional communication: (1) society's

rules and customs, (2) fear, and (3) inadequate interpersonal skills.

### Societal Rules and Customs

If you grew up in the United States, you probably learned that many people frown on emotional expression. This attitude is especially prevalent among men and has been aptly called the "cowboy syndrome"—an allusion to a pattern of behavior seen in the old cowboy movies (Balswick & Peck, 1971). The cowboy syndrome is characteristic of the closed and unexpressive male. This man is strong but silent. He never feels any of the softer emotions (for example, compassion, love, or contentment). He would never ever cry, experience fear, or feel sorry

for himself. Unfortunately, many men grow up trying to live up to this unrealistic image. It's a syndrome that prevents open and honest expression. Researcher Ronald Levant (*Time*, January 20, 1992, p. 44) has argued that men's inability to deal with emotions as effectively as women is a "trained incompetence." Such training begins early in life when boys are taught not to cry and to ignore pain. This is not to suggest, however, that men should therefore communicate their emotions more openly. Unfortunately, there are many who will negatively evaluate men who express emotions openly and often; such men may be judged ineffective, insecure, or unmanly.

Nor are women exempt from the societal "rules" about emotional expression. At one time our society permitted and encouraged women to express emotions openly. The tide now is turning, especially for women in executive and managerial positions. Today the executive woman is often forced into that same cowboy syndrome. She is not allowed to cry or to show any of the once acceptable "soft" emotions, especially while she is on the job.

For both men and women, the best advice—as with self-disclosure (Unit 6) or any of the characteristics of communication effectiveness (Unit 9)—is to express your emotions selectively. Carefully weigh the arguments for and against expressing your emotions. Consider the situation, the people you're with, the emotions themselves, and all the elements that make up the communication act. And, most important, consider your options for communicating—not only what you'll say but also how you'll say it.

## Fear

A variety of fears often stand in the way of emotional expression. Emotional expression exposes a part of you that makes you vulnerable to attack. For example, if you express your love for another person, you risk being rejected. That is, by exposing a "weakness," you can now be easily hurt by someone who is uncaring or insensitive. Or you may fear hurting someone else by, say, voicing your feelings about past loves. Or you may be angry and want to

## BUILDING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

### Expressing Negative Feelings Positively

**H**ere are three situations that would normally engender negative feelings. For each, indicate how you would express your negative feelings while at the same time working to preserve and even improve the relationship you have with the other person.

1. The last four times you have talked with your friend Jane, you have been the one who made the phone call; Jane never seems to call you. You feel hurt and annoyed that Jane doesn't take the initiative and call you. You decide you have to tell her how you feel.
2. You and Ted have made an appointment to go to breakfast at 9:00. At 10:30 Ted shows up with only a general and seemingly flimsy excuse. You have been waiting since 9:00 and are angry that he doesn't seem to care about the time you wasted. You don't want this to happen again, so you decide to tell him how you feel.
3. You've been dating Chris for about six weeks. Everything seemed to be going fine until your birthday, when Chris simply sent you a card. You expected something more. After all, you have been dating each other exclusively for six weeks. You feel that this shows that Chris does not really place much importance on the relationship and you want to get this feeling into the open.

Why is it more difficult for most people to express negative than to convey positive feelings? Does your culture influence your willingness to express negative feelings? Are men and women expected to communicate negative feelings in different ways?

say something but fear that you might hurt the person and then feel guilty yourself.

In addition, you may hesitate to reveal your emotions for fear of causing a conflict. Expressing how much you dislike Pat's friends, for example, may just create difficulties for the two of you; you may not be willing to risk the argument and its aftermath.

Because of these and other fears, you may often deny to others and perhaps even to yourself that you have certain emotions. And in fact **denial** is the tactic many people are taught for dealing with uncomfortable emotions.

## Inadequate Interpersonal Skills

Perhaps the most important obstacle to effective emotional communication is lack of interpersonal skills. Many people simply don't know how to express their feelings. Some people, for example, can express anger only through violence or avoidance. Others can deal with anger only by blaming and accusing others. And many people cannot express love: They literally are unable to say "I love you."

Expressing negative feelings is doubly difficult. As we've just seen, many people suppress or fail to communicate negative feelings for fear of offending the other person or making matters worse. But failing to express negative feelings will probably not help the relationship, especially if feelings are bottled up frequently and over a long time.

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## GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNICATING EMOTIONS

Communicating your emotions and responding appropriately to the emotional expressions of others are as important as they are difficult. Your first task, or series of tasks, is intrapersonal: to understand your emotions, to decide if you wish to express them, and to assess your communication options should you decide to express your emotions. Let's focus on these tasks first; then we'll consider some guidelines for the actual expression of emotions.

Your first task is to *understand the emotions you're feeling*. For example, consider how you would feel if your best friend just got the promotion that you wanted or if your brother, a police officer, was shot while breaking up a street riot. Think about your emotions as objectively as possible. Think about

both the bodily reactions you'd be experiencing and the interpretations and evaluations you'd be giving to these reactions. Further, identify the antecedent conditions (in as specific terms as possible) that might influence your feelings. Try to answer the question "Why am I feeling this way?" or "What happened to lead me to feel as I do?"

Your second task is to *decide if, in fact, you want to express your emotions*. It's not always possible to stop and think about whether you wish to express your emotions—at times you may respond almost automatically. More often than not, however, you will be able to ask yourself whether you wish to express your emotions. When you do have this chance, remember that it isn't always necessary or wise to express every feeling you have. For example, what are the benefits or disadvantages of communicating your feelings of inadequacy to your spouse, your parents, your children, or your best friend? Another issue to consider is whether or not your emotional expression will be a truthful expression of your feelings. When emotional expressions are faked—when, for example, you smile though feeling angry—you may actually be creating emotional and physical stress (Grandey, 2000). Remember, too, the irreversibility of communication discussed in Unit 2: once you communicate something, you cannot take it back. Therefore, consider carefully the arguments for and against each decision you make regarding expressing your emotions.

If you decide to express your emotions, your third task is to *evaluate your communication options* in terms of both effectiveness (what will work best and help you achieve your goal) and ethics (what is right or morally justified). When thinking in terms of effectiveness, consider, for example, the time and setting, the persons you want to reveal these feelings to, and the available methods of communication. For example, should you arrange a special meeting with your supervisor to discuss your being passed up for promotion? Or do you simply let your anger out immediately after you hear about it? Is it better to ask for a date, confess your love, or ask for a divorce on the telephone, by letter, or face-to-face?

When thinking in terms of ethics, consider the legitimacy of appeals based on emotions. As a parent, for example, is it ethical to use appeals to fear to dissuade your teenage children from engaging in sexual relationships? From smoking? From taking drugs? From associating with people of another race or affectional orientation? Is your motive relevant

to your decision as to whether such appeals are ethical or unethical? Is it ethical to use emotional appeals (say, to guilt or to fear or to sympathy) to get a friend to loan you money? Take a vacation with you? Have sex with you?

Having understood your emotions, decided that you want to express them, and carefully assessed the effectiveness and ethics of your available communication options, consider the following guidelines for emotional expression. Because, as already suggested, negative emotions are often the most difficult to express effectively and often cause interpersonal conflict, these suggestions focus more on these negative emotions.

## Describe Your Feelings

Although you experience many emotions and feelings, you probably use few terms to describe them. Learn to describe emotions and feelings in specific and concrete terms. General and abstract statements of emotional expression are usually ineffective. Consider, for example, the frequently heard “I feel bad.” Does it mean “I feel guilty” (because I lied to my best friend)? Does it mean “I feel lonely” (because I haven’t had a date in the last two months)? Does it mean “I feel depressed” (because I failed that last exam)? Clearly, specificity helps. Describe also the intensity with which you feel the emotion. *I feel so angry I think I could have quit that job. I feel so hurt I want to cry.*

## Identify the Reasons for Your Feelings

It’s important to identify the reasons for your emotions. “I’m feeling guilty because I lied to my best friend.” “I feel lonely; I haven’t had a date for the last two months.” “I’m really depressed from failing that last exam.” If your feelings were influenced by something the person you’re talking to did or said, describe this also. For example, *I felt so angry when you said you wouldn’t help me. I felt hurt when you didn’t invite me to the party.*

Identifying the reasons for your emotions will enable you to accomplish two important goals. First, it will help you to understand not only *how* you feel but also *why* you feel as you do. Second, it will help you tell what you must do to reduce or get rid of negative feelings. In the examples used, these

might include avoiding lying, being more enterprising about getting dates, and studying harder.

## Anchor Your Feelings to the Present

In expressing feelings—inwardly or outwardly—try to link your emotions to present circumstances. Be especially careful not to fall into the trap of believing negative things you may say about yourself. Statements such as “I’m a failure” or “I’m foolish” or “I’m stupid” are especially destructive. These statements imply that failure, foolishness, and stupidity are *in* you and will *always* be in you. Instead, include references to the here and now. Coupled with specific description and identification of the reasons for your feelings, such statements might look like this:

“I feel like a failure right now; I’ve erased this computer file three times today.”

“I felt foolish when I couldn’t think of that formula.”

“I feel stupid when you point out my grammatical errors.”

## Own Your Own Feelings

Perhaps the most important guideline for effective emotional communication is this: Own your feelings; take personal responsibility for your feelings (Proctor, 1991). Consider the following statements:

“You make me angry.”

“You make me feel like a loser.”

“You make me feel stupid.”

“You make me feel like I don’t belong here.”

Note that in these statements the speaker is blaming the other person for the way he or she is feeling. Of course, you know—on more sober reflection—that no one can make anyone feel anything. Others may do things or say things to us, but it is we who interpret them. It is we who develop feelings as a result of the interaction between, for example, what others say and our own interpretations. When we own our feelings, we take responsibility for them. We acknowledge that our feelings are *our* feelings. The best way to own our statements is to use *I-messages*, rather than the *you-messages* that were used above. With this acknowledgment of responsibility, the above statements would look like these:

"I get angry when you come home late without calling."

"I begin to think of myself as a loser when you criticize me in front of my friends."

"I feel so stupid when you use medical terms that I don't understand."

"When you ignore me in public, I feel like I don't belong here."

Note that these rephrased statements do not attack the other person or demand that he or she

change certain behaviors. They merely identify and describe your feelings about those behaviors. The rephrased statements do not encourage defensiveness. With I-message statements, it's easier for other people to acknowledge their behaviors and to offer to change them.

Also use I-messages to describe what, if anything, you want the listener to do: *I'm feeling sorry for myself right now; just give me some space. I'll give you a call in a few days.* Or, more directly: *I'd prefer to be alone right now.*

## SUMMARY

In this unit we explored the nature and role of emotions in interpersonal communication. We examined the roles of the body, mind, and culture in defining emotions, and we looked at some basic or primary emotions. We also focused on the obstacles to meaningful emotional communication and considered guidelines that can help you communicate your feelings and respond to the feelings of others more effectively.

1. Emotions consist of a physical part (our physiological reactions), a cognitive part (our interpretations of our feelings), and a cultural part (the influence of our cultural traditions on our emotional evaluations and expressions).
2. Our primary emotions, according to Robert Plutchik, are joy, acceptance, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, anger, and anticipation.
3. Psychologists have proposed different explanations of how emotions are aroused. One reasonable sequence is this: An event occurs, we respond physiologically, we interpret this arousal, we experience the emotion.
4. Emotional expression is largely a matter of choice, though it is heavily influenced by your culture and gender.
5. Useful principles of emotional communication include the following: Emotions are always important;

emotional expression and emotional feeling are not the same thing; emotions are communicated both verbally and nonverbally; emotional expression can be both good and bad; and emotions are contagious.

6. In responding to the emotions of others try to see the situation from the perspective of the other person. Avoid refocusing the conversation on yourself. Show interest and provide the speaker with the opportunity to talk and explore his or her feelings. Avoid evaluating the feelings of the other person.
7. Among the obstacles to effective communication of feelings are societal rules and customs, fear of making oneself vulnerable, denial, and inadequate communication skills.
8. The following guidelines should help make your emotional expression more meaningful: Understand your feelings; decide if you wish to express your feelings (not all feelings need be or should be expressed); assess your communication options; describe your feelings as accurately as possible; identify the reasons for your feelings; anchor your feelings and their expression to the present time; and own your own feelings.

## KEY TERMS

emotions  
James–Lange theory  
cognitive labeling theory  
emotional expression

cultural display rules  
gender display rules  
cowboy syndrome  
owning feelings

I-messages  
emotional appeals



## THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT



### Emotional Communication

1. There is some evidence that it's actually more difficult to judge when an intimate is lying than when a stranger is lying (Metts, 1989). Do you find this generally true?
2. Some societies permit and even expect men to show strong emotions. They expect men to cry, to show fear, to express anger openly. Other societies—including many groups within general U.S. culture—criticize men for experiencing and expressing such emotions. What did your culture teach you about gender and the expression of emotions—particularly strongly felt emotions and emotions seen as indications of weakness (such as fear, discomfort, or uncertainty)?
3. One implication of the cognitive labeling theory of emotions is that you and only you can make yourself feel angry or sad or anxious. This view might be phrased, “Other people can hurt you only physically; only you can hurt yourself emotionally.” Do you agree with this? What evidence can you advance to support or refute this position?
4. A popular belief about relationships is that if a relationship is not characterized by strong emotions and emotional expression, then there must be something wrong with it. Would you agree with this?
5. Can you think of a specific instance in which failing to appreciate cultural and/or gender differences in emotional expression led you to miss another's meaning?
6. How might confusing emotional expression with feelings lead you to make risky inferential leaps—say, inferring from a person's facial expression that he or she feels depressed? Can you recall an instance when someone confused your emotional expression with your actual feelings?