**Chapter 7**

**Emotional Messages**

Can you choose the emotions you feel? Or do outside circumstances make you feel different emotions? It’s a difficult question and 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, in control of the ways in which you express your emotions. Whether you choose to express your emotions depends on your own attitudes about emotional expression. You may wish to explore your attitudes about expressing feelings by responding to the following questions. Respond 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 a generally false description of your attitudes.

 \_\_\_\_ 1. Expressing feelings is healthy; it reduces stress and prevents wasting energy on concealment. \_\_\_\_ 2. Expressing feelings can help others understand you.

\_\_\_\_ 3. Emotional expression is often an effective means of persuading others to do as you wish.

 \_\_\_\_ 4. Expressing feelings can lead to interpersonal relationship problems.

\_\_\_\_ 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.

These statements are arguments that are often made for and against expressing emotions. Statements 1, 2, and 3 are arguments made in favor of expressing emotions; statements 4, 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, 2, and 3 and “false” responses to statements 4, 5, and 6 indicate a favorable attitude to expressing feelings. “False” responses to statements 1, 2, and 3 and “true” responses to statements 4, 5, and 6 indicate a negative attitude. There is evidence suggesting that expressing emotions can lead to all six outcomes, both positive and negative, and underscores the importance of critically assessing your options for emotional expression and being flexible, remembering that what will work in one situation will not work in another. If you decide to communicate your feelings, you need to make several decisions. For example, you have to choose how to do so—face-to-face, letter, social media post, phone, e-mail, text message, or office memo. And you have to choose the specific emotions you will and will not reveal. Finally, you have to choose the words and nonverbals you’d use in expressing your emotions. Some of the more difficult interpersonal communication situations are those that involve emotions, which we can define simply as strong feelings. This chapter addresses this crucial topic; it offers insight into the nature of emotions and emotional expression, discusses some of the obstacles to communicating emotions, and presents suggestions for communicating emotions and for responding to the emotions of others.

 A useful backdrop to this discussion is to identify some of the reasons you communicate emotions—whether happy news (getting a large bonus or finding the love of your life) or sad news (the death of a loved one or getting fired). Here are just three (Rime, 2007; Dean, 2011):

• You want/need to vent. You want catharsis, to reveal your feelings.

 • You want/need attention, support, or advice. You want/need people to pay attention to you, to offer you consolation, or to give you suggestions for what you should do now. • You want/need to bond—to strengthen your relationship—and so you might share similar emotional experiences to show your understanding and empathy.

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**Principles of Emotions and Emotional Messages**

7.1 Describe the principles governing emotions and emotional expression. Communicating emotions, or feelings, is difficult. It’s difficult because your thinking often gets confused when you’re intensely emotional. It’s also difficult because you probably weren’t taught how to communicate emotions—and you probably have few effective models to imitate. Communicating emotions is also important. Feelings constitute a great part of your meanings. If you leave your feelings out, or if you express them inadequately, you fail to communicate a great part of your meaning. For example, 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 more popular. So important is emotional communication that it is at the heart of what is now called emotional intelligence or social intelligence (Goleman, 1995a). One very important aspect of emotional intelligence is that it enables you to distinguish between those emotions that are relevant to your choices and those emotions that are irrelevant and thereby improve your decision making (Yip & Cote, 2013; Dean, 2013). This chapter is, in fact, a primer of emotional intelligence. The inability to engage in emotional communication—as sender and as receiver—is part of the learning disability known as dyssemia, a condition in which individuals are unable to read appropriately the nonverbal messages of others or to communicate their own meanings nonverbally (Duke & Nowicki, 2005). Persons suffering from dyssemia, for example, look uninterested, fail to return smiles, and use facial expressions that are inappropriate to the situation and the interaction. As you can imagine, people who are poor senders and receivers of emotional messages likely have problems in developing and maintaining relationships. When interacting with such people, you’re likely to feel uncomfortable because of their inappropriate emotional communication (Goleman, 1995a). Let’s look first at several general principles of emotions and emotional expression; these will establish a foundation for our consideration of the skills of emotional competence.

**Emotions Occur in Stages**

 Although there are conflicting theories about emotions, all agree that emotions occur in stages. Consider how you would describe what happens when you experience emotional arousal. Most people would identify these stages: (1) An event occurs. (2) You experience an emotion such as surprise, joy, or anger. (3) You respond physiologically; your heart beats faster, your face flushes, and so on. The process would go like this:

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Psychologist William James and physiologist Carl Lange offered a different explanation to the previous “commonsense” theory. Their theory places the physiological arousal before the experience of the emotion. The sequence of events according to the James– Lange theory is: (1) An event occurs. (2) You respond physiologically. (3) You experience an emotion; for example, you feel joy or sadness. This process would look like this:

According to a third explanation, the cognitive labeling theory, you interpret the physiological arousal and, on the basis of this, experience the emotions of joy, sadness, or whatever (Reisenzein, 1983; Schachter, 1971). The sequence 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. (4) You experience the emotion. Your interpretation of your arousal depends on the situation you’re in. For example, if you experience an increased pulse rate after someone you’ve been admiring smiles at you, you may interpret this as joy. If three suspicious-looking strangers approach you on a dark street, however, you may interpret that same increased heartbeat as fear. It’s only after you make the interpretation that you experience the emotion, for example, the joy or the fear. This process looks like this: process. Each of these diagrams needs another stage, the stage of expression, the stage at which you make a choice about what to do and what to say.

**Emotions May Be Primary or Blended**

How would you feel in each of the following situations? • You won the lottery. • You got the job you applied for. • Your best friend just died. • Your parents tell you they’re 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 are some similarities. For example, most people would agree that the first two sets of feelings are more similar to each other than they are to the last two. Similarly, the last two are more similar to each other than they are to the first two. To capture the similarities and differences among emotions, one researcher identifies the basic or primary emotions (Havlena, Holbrook, & Lehmann, 1989; Plutchik, 1980): joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, anger, and anticipation (Figure 7.1). This model of emotions is especially useful for viewing the broad scale of emotions, their relationships to each other, and their varied combinations. View it as a wheel spread out. Emotions that are close to each other on this wheel are also close to each other in meaning. For example, joy and anticipation are more closely related than are joy and sadness or trust and disgust. Emotions that are opposite each other on the wheel are also opposite each other in their meaning. For example, joy is the opposite of sadness; anger is the opposite of fear.

DeVito, Joseph A.. Interpersonal Communication Book, The (Page 172). Pearson Education. Kindle In this model there are also blends. These blended emotions 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 trust. Remorse is a blend of disgust and sadness. Similar but milder emotions appear in lighter shades (for example, serenity is a milder joy) and stronger emotions appear in darker shades (for example, terror is a stronger fear).

**Emotions Involve Both Body and Mind**

Emotion involves both the body and the mind; when you experience emotion, you experience it both physically and mentally. Bodily reactions (such as blushing when you’re embarrassed) and mental evaluations and interpretations (as in estimating the likelihood of getting a yes response when you propose) interact. • The Body. Bodily reactions are the most obvious aspect of our emotional experience because we can observe them easily. Such reactions span a wide range and include, for example, the blush of embarrassment, the sweating palms that accompany nervousness, and the gestures (such as playing with your hair or touching your face) that go with discomfort. 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 damp hands, vocal hesitations, and awkward movements. • The Mind. The mental or cognitive part of emotional experience involves the evaluations and interpretations you make on the basis of what you experience. For example, leading psychotherapist Albert Ellis (1988; Ellis & Harper, 1975), whose insights are used throughout this chapter, 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 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.

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**Emotions Are Influenced by a Variety of Factors**

The emotions you feel at any one time and the ways in which you interpret the emotions of others are influenced by a variety of factors. Some of the most important are culture, gender, personality, and relationships. • Culture. The cultural context—the culture you were raised in and/or the culture you live in—gives you a framework for both expressing feelings and interpreting the emotions of others. 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 she was not clear in her lecture. In other words, the culture—whether American or Chinese— influenced the interpretation of the students’ feelings. Another example: in one study, Japanese students, when asked to judge the emotion shown in a computer icon, looked to the eyes to determine the emotion. Students from the United States, however, focused on the mouth (Masuda, Ellsworth, Mesquita, Leu, Tanida, & van de Veerdonk, 2008; Yuki, Maddux, & Masuda, 2007). • Gender. Researchers agree that men and women experience emotions similarly (Cherulnik, 1979; Oatley & Duncan, 1994; Wade & Tavris, 2007). The differences that are observed are differences in the way emotions are expressed, not in the way they are felt. Men and women seem to have different gender display rules for what is and what isn’t appropriate to express, much as different cultures have different cultural display rules. We look into this topic of display rules in more detail in the next principle. • Personality. Your personality influences the emotions you feel, the extent to which you feel them, and, perhaps most important for our purposes, the ways in which you express or conceal these emotions. Extroverted people likely express emotions more readily and more openly, while those who are more introverted or suffer from communication apprehension are much less likely to express emotions. • Relationships. Relationships—whether friends, lovers, or family—can help to reduce stress. For example, in one study, those who had lots of friends on Facebook experience less stress, a greater sense of well-being, and fewer physical illnesses (Nabi, Prestin, & So, 2013). Of course, other types of relationships can increase stress.

**Emotional Expression Uses Multiple Channels**

 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. Conversely, you decode the emotional messages of others on the basis of their 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. This principle has special implications for communication that’s exclusively text-based. When we express emotions in a face-to-face situation, we express the emotions with our words but also with our facial expressions, our body posture and gestures, our eye movements, our touching, and even the distance we maintain from others. In text-based messages, these cues are unavailable and so substitutes need to be found. There are two major substitutes. The first is to use words that describe the nonverbals that you would normally express. And so you’d talk about your smiling as you looked at the photo, your rapid heartbeat when the message came in, your scratching your head over the puzzle, and so on. That is, your words would depict your nonverbals. The other substitute is the emoticon or the Japanese emoji. These emotional symbols can, in many cases, very effectively substitute for the nonverbals that normally occur during face-to-face interaction.

**Emotional Expression Is Governed by Display Rules**

Display rules govern what is and what is not permissible emotional communication. Even within U.S. culture, there are differences. For example, in one study, Americans classified themselves into four categories: Caucasian, African American, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino. Just to make the point that different cultures teach different rules for the display of emotions, here are a few of the study’s findings (Matsumoto, 1994, 2009): (1) Caucasians found the expression of contempt more appropriate than did Asians; (2) African Americans and Hispanics felt that showing disgust was less appropriate than did Caucasians; (3) Hispanics rated public displays of emotion as less appropriate than did Caucasians; and (4) Caucasians rated the expression of fear as more appropriate than did Hispanics. Women talk more about feelings and emotions and use communication for emotional expression more than men do (Barbato & Perse, 1992). Perhaps because of this, they also express themselves facially more than men. Even junior and senior high school students show this gender difference. Research findings suggest that this difference may be due to differences in the brains of men and women; women’s brains have a significantly larger inferior parietal lobe, which seems to account for women’s greater awareness of feelings (Barta, 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 (DePaulo, 1992; Fischer, 1993; Wade & Tavris, 2007). Similarly, women are more effective at communicating happiness, and men are more effective at communicating anger (Coats & Feldman, 1996). Women also cry more than men (Metts & Planalp, 2002). In an extensive survey of emotions in the workplace, women were found to cry more than men (41 percent of the women surveyed had cried on the job but only 9 percent of the men had [Kreamer, 2011]). But women were more disapproving of those who cry than were men; 43 percent of the women and 32 percent of the men considered those who cry on the job to be “unstable.” Further, women feel worse after crying; men feel better.

**Emotions May Be Adaptive and Maladaptive**

Emotions are often adaptive; that is, they can help you adjust appropriately to situations. For example, if you feel anxious about not doing well on an exam, it may lead you to study harder. If you fear losing your partner, you may behave more supportively and lovingly. If you’re worried that someone might not like you, your worry may motivate you to be especially nice to the person. If you feel suspicious of someone following you down a dark street, you may take safety precautions. All of these situations are examples of emotions aiding you in accomplishing useful goals. At other times, however, emotions may be maladaptive and may get in the way of your accomplishing your goals. For example, you may be so anxious about a test that you stop thinking and do more poorly than you would have if you walked in totally cold. Or you may fear losing your partner and, as a result, may become suspicious and accusatory, making your relationship even less likely to survive. In extreme cases, emotional upset may lead to inflicting harm on oneself (as in cutting) or even committing suicide. And, of course, computer programs are currently being designed to investigate the ways and means to detect extreme emotional distress from the words people use in their social media communication. Certain words seem to suggest an intent to commit suicide, for example (Innis, 2013). Go to the Durkheim Project homepage where this research is discussed in detail. Another way in which emotions may create problems is in a tendency that some theorists have cleverly called catastrophizing (or awfulizing): taking a problem—even a minor one—and making it into a catastrophe. For example, you may feel that “If I don’t do well on this test, I’ll never get into law school” or “If this relationship doesn’t work, I’m doomed.” As you convince yourself of these impending catastrophes, your emotional responses can easily get out of hand (Bach & Wyden, 1968; Willson & Branch, 2006). The important point is that emotions can work for you or against you. And the same is true of emotional communication. Some of it is good and is likely to lead to positive outcomes (a more secure relationship or a more positive interaction, say). But some of it is bad and may aggravate a conflict, alienate friends, or lessen your relationship satisfaction. Or emotional communication may simply be thought inappropriate and thus give others a bad impression.

**Emotions Can Be Used Strategically**

Although you may at first think of emotional expression as honest reflections of what a person is feeling, emotions can be and often are used strategically. In strategic emotionality, emotions (for example, crying, ranting, screaming, and threatening to commit self-harm) are used for one’s personal ends. Such emotions can take a variety of forms and serve a variety of purposes. But the basic idea behind strategic emotionality is to control the situation or the other person. For example, in a conflict situation, emotions are often used to win. If someone cries enough and loud enough, the other person may just give in. It works for the baby who wants to be picked up, and it often works for the adult and enables the person to win the fight. This strategy is more likely to be used by members of individualist cultures that emphasize the winning of a conflict rather than compromise or negotiation (which would be more likely in collectivist cultures). One frequent emotional strategy is emotional blackmail where there is a clear threat if the other person doesn’t comply: If you don’t do as I say, you’ll never see the kids again. If you see that person again, I’ll kill myself. Sometimes, the threat is never really stated but somehow you know that if your romantic breakup is not friendly, your social media contacts will all hear about it. This strategy, which is essentially one of manipulation, often creates resentment and perhaps a desire to retaliate—neither of which is good for a relationship. Another negative outcome of this strategy is that the other person can never be sure how accurately his or her partner’s emotional displays reflect the partner’s true feelings, and this is likely to create communication problems whenever emotions are involved. The effect of this lack of transparency—of not knowing if one’s partner is trying to manipulate or if she or he is expressing strong and honest feelings—is likely to be greatest in intimate relationships, where these expressions are likely to have long-term effects. Earlier we considered the fundamental attribution error in which too much emphasis is placed on internal factors (for example, personality) and too little emphasis is placed on external factors (for example, the workload) in explaining a person’s behavior. This is exactly what happens when the emotional behavior of men and women is “explained.” Specifically, a woman’s anger was most often attributed to her personality (she’s unstable or out of control), whereas a man’s anger was more often attributed to external factors (the report was inadequate or the work was late). As you can imagine, women’s anger was seen as unjustified, whereas men’s anger was judged justifiable (Kreamer, 2011).

**Emotions Have Consequences**

Like all communications, emotions and emotional expression have consequences and affect your relationships in important ways. By revealing your emotions, you may create close bonds with others. At the same time, you may also scare people with too much and too intimate disclosure. Revealing your emotions communicates important information about who you are and how you feel about those with whom you are communicating. If you talk about your loneliness, then you’re revealing important information about yourself and also expressing a confidence in the person with whom you’re talking. It also tells people what’s really important to you. Do realize that in revealing strongly felt emotions, you may be exposing vulnerabilities or weaknesses that conceivably could be used against you. Emotions and emotional expression also affect your work life and, in fact, organizations are devoting energy to dealing with workers’ emotion, trying to turn the negative into the positive. Among the most significant negative emotions experienced at work are frustration over feeling stuck in a rut; worry and anxiety over job security; anger over the actions or decisions of others; dislike of others you work with and for; disappointment over your position, accomplishments, and prospects (Fisher, 1997). As you can see, all of these are unproductive from the point of view of management as well as for the individual.

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**Emotions Are Contagious**

Emotional messages are often contagious (Cappella & Schreiber, 2006). If you’ve ever watched an infant and mother interacting, you can readily see 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 children get older, they begin to pick up more subtle expressions of emotions. For example, children quickly identify and often mimic a parent’s anxiety or fear. Even among college roommates, the depression of one roommate spread to the other over a period of just three weeks (Joiner, 1994). In short, in emotional contagion, emotions pass from one person to another. Women, research shows, are especially prone to this process (Cappella & Schreiber, 2006; Doherty, Orimoto, Singelis, Hatfield, & Hebb, 1995). 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, or it can be unproductive when the emotions are unproductive. Emotional contagion applies to both happiness and depression; interacting with happy people is likely to increase your own happiness, and interacting with depressed people is likely increase your own level of depression (Hamilton, 2011). Emotional contagion has even been proposed as a skill for both socializing and seduction (Amante, 2013). One view of this process goes like this (Figure 7.2): 1. You perceive an emotional expression of another. 2. You mimic this emotional expression, perhaps unconsciously. 3. The feedback you get from expressing the emotion creates in you a replication of the other person’s feelings. Emotional contagion also occurs in online interactions (Jain, 2010). For example, you are much more if you have a direct network connection (say, with a best friend) who is also lonely. If the connection is between you and a friend of a friend of a friend, your likelihood of experiencing loneliness is only 15 percent more. You see another variant of intentional emotional contagion in attempts at persuasion that utilize emotional appeals. One popular appeal, which organizations use frequently in fund-raising for needy children, is to the emotion of pity. By showing you images of hungry and destitute children, these fund-raisers hope to get you to experience so much pity that you’ll help finance their efforts. Similarly, people who beg for money often emphasize their difficulties in an effort to evoke pity and donations. Emotional contagion also seems the goal of certain organizational display rules. For example, a company may require (or at least expect) that the sales force cheer enthusiastically as each new product is unveiled. This cheering is extremely useful and is likely to make the sales representatives more enthusiastic about and more emotionally committed to the product than if they didn’t engage in this cheering. Another popular appeal is to guilt. If someone does something for you, he or she may try to make you feel guilty unless you do something in return. Or someone may present him- or herself as in desperate need of money and make you feel guilty for having what you have and not sharing it. Sometimes people encourage others to feel guilty to make them more easily manipulated. If you can make a person feel guilty for having a great deal of money while others have little, you are on the road to persuading the person to give some of that money away.

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**Obstacles to Communicating**

Emotions 7.2 Identify the major obstacles that could prevent the effective communication of emotions. The expression of feelings is part of most meaningful relationships. Yet it’s often very difficult. Three major obstacles stand in the way of effective emotional communication: (1) society’s rules and customs, (2) fear, and (3) inadequate interpersonal skills. Let’s look more closely at each of these barriers.

**Societal and Cultural Customs**

If you grew up in the United States, you probably learned that many people frown on emotional expression. This attitude is especially prevalent in men and has been aptly called the “cowboy syndrome,” after a pattern of behavior seen in old Westerns on film and television (Balswick & Peck, 1971). The cowboy syndrome characterizes the closed and unexpressive male. This man is strong but silent. He never feels any of the softer emotions (such as 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. Boys are taught early in life not to cry and not to be “babies” if hurt. All of this is not to suggest that men should 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. In fact, some research shows that the reason men are reluctant to provide sensitive emotional support—to the degree that women do, for example—is that men don’t want their behavior to be seen as feminine (Burleson, Holmstrom, & Gilstrap, 2005). Nor are women exempt from restraints on 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 being forced into the same cowboy syndrome. She is not allowed to cry or to show any of the once acceptable “soft” emotions. She is especially denied these feelings while she is on the job. And, of course, organizations have their own cultural norms for the expression of emotions. For example, in many organizations, employees are expected to pretend to be cheerful even when they are not and generally to display some emotions and to hide others. Differences between the emotions you feel and the emotions you express can create emotional dissonance, which in turn can lead to stress (Remland, 2006). For both men and women, the best advice (as with any of the characteristics of communication effectiveness discussed in this text) 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 of the elements that make up the communication act. And, most important, consider your choices for communicating emotions—not only what you’ll say but also how you’ll say it.

**Fea**r

A variety of types of fear stand in the way of emotional expression. This is true for both men and women but more so for men, who have greater difficulty expressing emotions (Zakowski et al., 2003). 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. When you expose a weakness, you can more easily be hurt by uncaring or insensitive others. Of course, you may also fear hurting someone else by, say, voicing your feelings about past loves. Or you may be angry and want to say something but fear that you might hurt the person and then feel guilty yourself. In addition, you may avoid revealing your emotions for fear of causing a conflict. Expressing your dislike for Pat’s friends, for example, may create difficulties for the two of you, and you may not be willing to risk the argument and its aftermath. Because of fears such as these, you may deny to others and perhaps even to yourself that you have certain feelings. In fact, this kind of denial is the way many people were taught to deal with emotions. As you can appreciate, fear can be adaptive; it may lead you to avoid saying things you may be sorry for later. It may lead you to consider more carefully whether you should express yourself and how you might do it. But when it debilitates you and contradicts what logic and reason might tell you, then the fear becomes maladaptive.

**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 cannot say, “I love you.” Expressing negative feelings is doubly difficult. Many of us 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 these feelings are concealed frequently and over a long time. Both communicating your emotions and responding appropriately to the emotional expressions of others are as important as they are difficult (Burleson, 2003). And to complicate matters further, emotional expression can be good and also bad, as noted in the self-test earlier in this chapter. On the one hand, expressing emotions can be cathartic to you. And, if appropriate communication is used, emotional expression, even of negative emotions, may actually benefit a relationship (Bloch, 2013). Expressing emotions can also help you air dissatisfactions and perhaps reduce or even eliminate them. Through emotional expression, you can 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. For example, expressing your dislike of a colleague’s customary way of answering the phone may generate hostility; expressing jealousy when your partner spends time with friends may cause your partner to fear being controlled and losing autonomy.

Emotional Competence

7.3 Summarize and use the guidelines for emotional competence in your expression of, and response to, emotion. Much as emotions are part of your psychological life, emotional expression is part of your interpersonal life; it is not something you could avoid even if you wanted to. In specific cases, you may decide to hide your emotions and not express them, but in other cases, you’ll want to express your emotions and this calls for what we might

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call emotional competence, the skills for expressing and responding to the emotions of others. We can group these under three major headings: emotional understanding, emotional expression, and emotional responding (also see Table 7.2). Emotional Understanding Your first task is to develop self-awareness: recognizing what your feelings are, understanding why you feel as you do, and understanding the potential effects of your feelings (Stein & Book, 2006; Joseph, 2012). Ask yourself a few pertinent questions: • “What am I feeling, and what made me feel this way?” That is, understand your emotions. Think about your emotions as objectively as possible. Identify, in terms as specific as possible, the antecedent conditions that may be influencing your feelings. Try to answer the question, “Why am I feeling this way?” or “What happened to lead me to feel as I do?” • “What exactly do I want to communicate?” Consider also whether your emotional expression will be a truthful expression of your feelings. When emotional expressions are faked—when, for example, you smile though feeling angry or say, “I forgive you” when you don’t—you may actually be creating emotional and physical stress (Grandey, 2000). Remember, too, the irreversibility of communication; once you communicate something, you cannot take it back. • “What are my communication choices?” 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).

**Emotional Expression**

Your second step in emotional understanding is interpersonal. Here are a few suggestions for this type of special communication: • Be specific. Consider, for example, the frequently heard, “I feel bad.” Does it mean, “I feel guilty” (because I lied to my best friend)? “I feel lonely” (because I haven’t had a date in the last two months)? “I feel depressed” (because I failed that last exam)? Specificity helps. Describe also the intensity with which you feel the emotion: “I feel so angry I’m thinking of quitting the job.” “I feel so hurt I want to cry.” Also describe any mixed feelings you might have. Very often feelings are a mixture of several emotions, sometimes even of conflicting emotions. Learn the vocabulary (as well as the usefulness of smiley faces and emoticons) to describe your emotions and feelings in specific and concrete terms. Table 7.3 presents a list of terms for describing your emotions verbally. As you can appreciate, the more accurate you are in describing your emotions, the better the chances

are that you’ll be understood as you want to be and the better the chances are that others will be able to respond appropriately. • Describe the reasons you’re feeling as you are.“I’m feeling guilty because I was unfaithful.” “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.” • Address mixed feelings. If you have mixed feelings—and you really want the other person to understand you—then address these mixed or conflicting feelings. “I want so much to stay with Pat and yet I fear I’m losing my identity.” Or “I feel anger and hatred, but at the same time I feel guilty for what I did.” • In expressing feelings—inwardly or outwardly—try to anchor your emotions in the present. Coupled with specific description and the 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.” • Ask for what you want. Depending on the emotions you’re feeling, you may want the listener to assume a certain role or just listen or offer advice. Let the listener know what you want. 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.” Or “I need advice.” Or “I just need someone to listen to me.” • Respect emotional boundaries. Each person has a different level of tolerance for communication about emotions or communication that’s emotional. Be especially alert to nonverbal cues that signal that boundaries are near to being broken. It’s often useful simply to ask, “Would you rather change the subject?” At the same time, realize that you also have a certain tolerance for revealing your own feelings as well as for listening to and responding to the emotions of others. • Own your feelings; take personal responsibility for your feelings. 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.” In each of these statements, the speaker blames the other person for the way he or she is feeling. Of course, you know, on more sober reflection, that no one can make you feel anything. Others may do things or say things to you, but it is you who interpret them and give them meaning. That is, you develop feelings as a result of the interaction between what people say and your own interpretations. Owning feelings means acknowledging that your feelings are your feelings. The best way to own your statements is to use I-messages. With I-messages, 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.” As you can see, I-messages differ greatly from you-messages in several important ways: • Description versus evaluation. I-messages describe your feelings, whereas you-messages evaluate (negatively) another’s behavior. • Acknowledgment of responsibility versus blaming others. Imessages acknowledge responsibility for your feelings, whereas you-messages shift the responsibility to someone else, usually in a blaming kind of way. • Preserving versus attacking positive and negative face. I-messages preserve both positive and negative face, whereas you-messages attack the person for some wrongdoing (thus attacking positive face and the person’s self-image) and also imply that this person needs to do something about it (thus attacking negative face and the person’s autonomy). I-messages don’t attack the person or demand that the person change his or her behavior. • Openness versus withdrawal. I-messages encourage openness, whereas you-messages encourage defensiveness and a withdrawal from interpersonal interaction. No one wants to be attacked, and withdrawal is a common response. For good or ill, some social network sites (and blogs, too) make it very easy not to own your own messages by enabling you to send comments anonymously.

**Handling Anger: A Special Case Illustration**

As a kind of summary of the guidelines for expressing your emotions, this section looks at anger. Anger is one of the eight basic emotions identified in Plutchik’s model (Figure 7.1). It’s also an emotion that can create considerable problems if not managed properly. Anger varies from mild annoyance to intense rage; increases in pulse rate and blood pressure usually accompany these feelings. Of all the emotions, anger is the one most likely to go viral on the Internet (Fan, Zhao, Chen, & Xu, 2013; Popkin, 2013). Anger is not always necessarily bad. In fact, anger may help you protect yourself, energizing you to fight or flee. Often, however, anger does prove destructive—as when, for example, you allow it to obscure reality or to become an obsession. Anger doesn’t just happen; you make it happen by your interpretation of events. Yet life events can contribute mightily. There are the road repairs that force you to detour so you wind up late for an important appointment. There are the moths that attack your favorite sweater. There’s the water leak that ruins your carpet. People, too, can contribute to your anger: the driver who tailgates, the clerk who overcharges you, the supervisor who ignores your contributions to the company. But it is you who interpret these events and people in ways that stimulate you to generate anger.

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Writing more than 100 years ago, Charles Darwin observed in his The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals (1872), “The free expression by outside signs of an emotion intensifies it . . . the repression, as far as this is possible, of all outside signs softens our emotions. He who gives way to violent gestures will increase his rage.” Popular psychology ignored Darwin’s implied admonition in the 1960s and 1970s, when the suggested prescription for dealing with anger was to “let it all hang out” and “tell it like it is.” Express your anger, many people advised, or risk its being bottled up and eventually exploding. This idea, called the ventilation hypothesis, holds that expressing emotions allows you to ventilate your negative feelings and that this has a beneficial effect on your physical health, your mental well-being, and even your interpersonal relationships (KennedyMoore & Watson, 1999; Spett, 2004). Later thinking has returned to Darwin, however, and suggests that venting anger may not be the best strategy (Tavris, 1989). Expressing anger doesn’t get rid of it but makes it grow: angry expression increases anger, which promotes more angry expression, which increases anger, and on and on. Some support for this idea that expressing emotions makes them stronger comes from a study that compared (a) participants who felt emotions such as happiness and anger with (b) participants who both felt and expressed these emotions. The results of the study indicated that people who felt and expressed the emotions became emotionally aroused faster than did those who only felt the emotion (Hess, Kappas, McHugo, & Lanzetta, 1992). And, of course, this spiral of anger can make conflicts all the more serious and all the more difficult to manage. Anger communication is not angry communication. In fact, it might be argued that the communication of anger ought to be especially calm and dispassionate. Here, then, are a few suggestions for communicating your anger in a nonangry way: • Get ready to communicate calmly and logically. First, relax. Try to breathe deeply; think pleasant thoughts; perhaps tell yourself to “take it easy,” “think rationally,” and “calm down.” Try to get rid of any unrealistic ideas you may have that might contribute to your anger. For example, ask yourself if this person’s revealing something about your past to a third party is really all that serious or was really intended to hurt you. • Examine your communication choices. In most situations, you’ll have a range of choices. There are lots of different ways to express yourself, so don’t jump to the first possibility that comes to mind. Assess your options for the form of the communication—should you communicate face-to-face? By e-mail? By telephone? Similarly, assess your options for the timing of your communication, for the specific words and gestures you might use, for the physical setting, and so on. • Consider the advantages of delaying the expression of anger. For example, consider writing the e-mail but sending it to yourself, at least until the next morning. Then the options of revising it or not sending it at all will still be open to you. • Remember that different cultures have different display rules—norms for what is and what is not appropriate to display. Assess the culture you’re in as well as the cultures of the other people involved, especially these cultures’ display rules for communicating anger. • Apply the relevant skills of interpersonal communication. For example, be specific, use I-messages, avoid allness, avoid polarized terms, and in general communicate with all the competence you can muster. • Recall the irreversibility of communication. Once you say something, you’ll not be able to erase or delete it from the mind of the other person. These suggestions are not going to solve the problems of road rage, gang warfare, or domestic violence. Yet they may help—a bit—in reducing some of the negative consequences of anger and perhaps even some of the anger itself.

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**Emotional Responding**

Expressing your feelings is only half of the process of emotional communication; the other half is listening and responding to the feelings of others. Here are a few guidelines for making an often difficult process a little easier: • Look at nonverbal cues to understand the individual’s feelings. For example, overly long pauses, frequent hesitations, eye contact avoidance, or excessive fidgeting may be a sign of discomfort that might be wise to talk about. Similarly, look for inconsistent messages, as when someone says, “Everything is okay” while expressing facial sadness; these are often clues to mixed feelings. But be sure to use any verbal or nonverbal cues as hypotheses, never as conclusions. Check your perceptions before acting on them. Treat inferences as inferences and not as facts. • Look for cues about what the person wants you to do. Sometimes all the person wants is for someone to listen. Don’t equate (as the stereotypical male supposedly does) “responding to another’s feelings” with “solving the other person’s problems.” Instead, provide a supportive atmosphere that encourages the person to express his or her feelings. • Use active listening techniques. These will encourage the person to talk should he or she wish to. Paraphrase the speaker. Express understanding of the speaker’s feelings. Ask questions as appropriate. • Empathize. See the situation from the point of view of the speaker. Don’t evaluate the other person’s feelings. For example, comments such as, “Don’t cry; it wasn’t worth it” or “You’ll get promoted next year” can easily be interpreted to mean, “Your feelings are wrong or inappropriate.” • Focus on the other person. Interjecting your own similar past situations is often useful for showing your understanding, but it may create problems if it refocuses the conversation away from the other person. Show interest by encouraging the person to explore his or her feelings. Use simple encouragers like “I see” or “I understand.” Or ask questions to let the speaker know that you’re listening and that you’re interested. • Remember the irreversibility of communication. Whether expressing emotion or responding to the emotions of others, it’s useful to recall the irreversibility of communication. You won’t be able to take back an insensitive or disconfirming response. Responses to another’s emotional expressions are likely to have considerable impact, so be especially mindful to avoid inappropriate responding.

**Communicating with the Grief-Stricken:**

A Special Case Illustration Communicating with people who are experiencing grief, a common but difficult type of communication interaction, requires special care (Zunin & Zunin, 1991). Consideration of this topic will also offer a useful recap of some of the principles of responding to the emotions of others. A person may experience grief because of illness or death, the loss of a job or highly valued relationship (such as a friendship or romantic breakup), the loss of certain physical or mental abilities, the loss of material possessions (a house fire or stock losses), or the loss of some ability (for example, the loss of the ability to have children or to play the piano). Each situation seems to call for a somewhat different set of dos and don’ts. Consider, for example, the following expression of sympathy:

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it’s for the best. I mean the man was suffering. I remember seeing him last month; he could hardly stand up, he was so weak. And he looked so sad, so lonely, so depressed. He must have been in constant pain. It’s better this way; believe me. He’s at peace now. And you’ll get over it. You’ll see. Time heals all wounds. It was the same way with me and you know how close we were. I mean we were devoted to each other. Everyone said we were the closest pair they ever saw. And I got over it. So, how about we’ll go to dinner tonight? We’ll talk about old times. Come on. Come on. Don’t be a spoilsport. I really need to get out. I’ve been in the house all week and you know what a drag that can be. So, do it for me; come to dinner. I won’t take no for an answer; I’ll pick you up at seven. Obviously, this is not the way to talk to the grief-stricken. In fact, this paragraph was written to illustrate several popular mistakes that the following guidelines address. After you read these guidelines, you may wish to return to this “expression of sympathy,” reanalyze it, and rework it into an effective expression of sympathy. • Confirm the other person and the person’s emotions. A simple, “You must be worried about finding another position” or “You must be feeling very alone right now” confirms the person’s feelings. This type of expressive support lessens feelings of grief (Reed, 1993). • Give the person permission to grieve. Let the person know that it’s acceptable and okay with you if he or she grieves in the ways that feel most comfortable— for example, crying or talking about old times. Don’t try to change the subject or

interject too often. As long as the person is talking and seems to be feeling better for it, be supportive. • Avoid trying to focus on the bright side. Avoid expressions such as, “You’re lucky you have some vision left” or “It’s better this way; Pat was suffering so much.” These expressions may easily be seen as telling people that their feelings should be redirected, that they should be feeling something different. • Encourage the person to express feelings and talk about the loss. Most people will welcome this opportunity. On the other hand, don’t try to force people to talk about experiences or feelings they may not be willing to share. • Be especially sensitive to leave-taking cues. Behaviors such as fidgeting or looking at a clock and statements such as “It’s getting late” or “We can discuss this later” are hints that the other person is ready to end the conversation. Don’t overstay your welcome. • Let the person know you care and are available. Saying you’re sorry is a simple but effective way to let the person know you care. Express your empathy; let the grief-stricken person know that you can feel (to some extent) what he or she is going through. But don’t assume that your feelings, however empathic you are, are the same in depth or in kind. At the same time, let the person know that you are available—“If you ever want to talk, I’m here” or “If there’s anything I can do, please let me know.” Even when you follow the principles and do everything according to the book, you may find that your comments are not appreciated or are not at all effective in helping the person feel any better. Use these cues to help you readjust your messages.

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