

## Chapter 7

# Do You Communicate Your Core Thoughts and Feelings?



Joy



Sadness



Anger



Surprise



Disgust



Love



Fear

When people want to make personal improvements, many of us focus on changing how we feel. We say to ourselves, “I shouldn’t feel this way,” and then work on suppressing that feeling.

In recent decades, however, social scientists have concluded that **our emotions originate from our thoughts.**

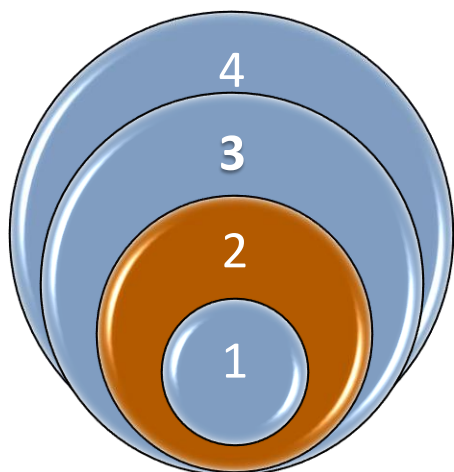
For example, you expect your spouse to be home for dinner at 6:00 pm. It is now 6:05 pm, and from your bedroom, you hear noises coming from the front door. You’re glad because you believe your spouse is home. You go to the front door with your arms open wide.

On the other hand, if you hear sounds and muffled voices near your front door at 3 am, you become scared because you aren't expecting anyone. You call 911. The point is our thoughts come before whatever emotion we experience.

Therefore, if we have uncomfortable feelings, the way to deal with them is not by trying to suppress or ignore them. *We deal with our uncomfortable emotions by examining the validity of the thoughts and interpretations behind those feelings.*

As the subtitle to one international bestseller puts it, "Change How You Feel by Changing the Way You Think."<sup>1</sup> Psychiatrist Dr. David Burns, who has treated tens of thousands of patients without drugs, has said the same thing. "When you change the way you think, you can change the way you feel... and this can happen really fast."<sup>2</sup>

The sequence of circles on the next page helps visualize the relationship between our thoughts and feelings.



## First Your Thoughts Then Your Emotions

Read from bottom up

- 4 Your Verbal &/or Behavioral Reaction
- 3 Your Emotional Reaction
- 2 Your Thoughts (Interpretation)**
- 1 Something Happens

### Explanation

1. Something happens (i.e., is said or done).
2. You *interpret* what happened. In marriage, your interpretation may apply to yourself, your spouse, and/or the relationship.
3. You emotionally react to your interpretation. You may express your emotion, suppress it, or express a different emotion altogether.
4. You outwardly react to how you interpret what happened and how you feel about it.

Given the close connection between one's thoughts and feelings, it is important that our interpretations are based in reality.

## The Lack of Transparency and Vulnerability: The Basis of Many Problems



From one thought, two emotions may emerge: core (primary) emotions, and secondary emotions. **Core emotions** touch upon one's feelings at one's innermost being.

Surprisingly, core emotions don't always get expressed. A man, for example, **thinks** his wife is flirting with other men at a party but doesn't immediately verbalize his dismay or feeling devalued. Later at home, he doesn't speak about feeling insecure. Rather, he explodes with anger, a **secondary** emotion to feeling devalued and insecure. This expressed emotion hides the pain of his core emotion.

The intensity of his anger and ensuing argument may then cause the couple to withdraw from one another and go to separate rooms. Ultimately, this happens because they didn't deal with the husband's deepest pain



I have created two scenarios based on the first two phases in the cycle above. (1) **“Julie complains,”** (2) **“Bryan gets quiet.”**

### **SCENARIO 1: Julie Does Not Share Her Core Emotion and Deepest Thought**

- 1. Something Happened:** Julie is unhappy with Bryan. Instead of coming home after work, he usually hangs out with friends for a half hour.
- 2. Her Interpretation:** Julie sees a deeper meaning in Bryan’s actions. She thinks, “After all my efforts to make this marriage work, I am still not a priority to Bryan.”
- 3. Her Emotions:** Julie’s perception of not being Bryan’s highest priority makes her sad and then mad.
- 4. Her Reaction:** Julie **complains** about how much time Bryan spends with his friends after work.

### **Bryan**

- 1. Something Happened:** Bryan thinks about Julie’s complaint. “There she goes again. She never stops hounding me.”
- 2. His Interpretation:** Bryan interprets Julie’s complaint as follows, “She always wants to control me.”
- 3. His Emotions:** Bryan’s interpretation of Julie’s complaint makes him feel beat down and demoralized.

- 4. His Reaction:** Bryan gets quiet because he has learned that arguing is pointless and draining and he just wants some peace.

*The cycle on the previous page continues*

## **SCENARIO 2: Julie Expresses Her Core Emotion and Deepest Thought**

- 1. Something Happened:** Julie is unhappy with Bryan. Instead of coming home after work, he usually hangs out with friends for a half hour.
- 2. Her Interpretation:** Julie sees a deeper meaning in Bryan's actions. She thinks to herself, "After all my efforts to make this marriage work, I am still not a priority to Bryan."
- 3. Her Emotions:** Julie's perception of Bryan's rejection makes her sad and then mad.
- 4. Her Reaction:** Julie complains to Bryan that he is rejecting her and this is hurting her.

*A shift occurs.*

*Julie now communicates her primary emotion, not her secondary one. As a result, the cycle is finally interrupted.*

## **Bryan Now Responds Differently**

- 1. Something Happened:** Bryan says to himself regarding Julie's complaint, "What does she mean I'm rejecting her?"

2. **His Interpretation:** Bryan is confronted with Julie's interpretation of his actions. As a result, his understanding of the situation is different. "She believes I am rejecting her and that our relationship is not my top priority."
3. **His Emotions:** Understanding Julie's interpretation and genuine emotions makes Bryan feel sad and empathetic.
4. **His Reaction:** Bryan verbally reaffirms his love for Julie and commits to making her feel secure in the truth that Julie (and his family) is most important to him. They then discuss and agree on what that will look like in the future.



### **Five Observations**

- (1) Julie's emotion of anger was based on her thoughts & interpretation of the situation.



- (2) Julie's primary emotion was one of sadness. However, Julie initially hid her sadness with her secondary emotion, which in this case was anger. As long as the couple dealt with Julie's anger, they focused on the wrong problem.
- (3) The cycle of conflict stopped when Julie identified her core emotion and the reason behind it. In other words, the conflict ended when Julie stopped pointing the finger at Bryan and shared what she was thinking and feeling deep within.
- (4) Interestingly, the potential solution to Julie's genuine concern may or may not include Bryan spending less time with his friends as long as Julie feels like a priority.
- (5) Proposed fixes to problems that do not address core emotions make a couple's cycle of conflict more intractable. Over time, the couple not only feels frustrated but hopeless because "nothing works."

### **The Point**

When you both reveal to the other your most heartfelt feelings and the thoughts behind them, you will much more fully understand each other. This, in turn, can quickly result in a stronger, more peaceful, and loving bond.

Remember, ***transparent, emotional connection is at the heart of every healthy marriage.***



## Contemplate

Which emotions do you express to your spouse, primary or secondary? Ask yourself:

1. In conflict, what emotions do I most often express to my spouse?
2. What other emotions do I feel?
3. Which of these emotions comes first?
4. What is preventing me from sharing the thoughts behind my core emotions?



## Discuss

### How Accurate Are Your Thoughts and Interpretations?

1. Think of a recent argument
2. What is your interpretation of events?
3. What mood did this thinking put you in?
4. What is your evidence that this interpretation is correct?
5. What does your spouse say as to the accuracy of your interpretation?
6. If your partner says your interpretation is wrong, learn why. Even if you don't agree, you will both know your actual areas of conflict instead of going down rabbit trails.

## Endnotes

The first five expressions at the beginning of this chapter are of Vanesa Van Edwards. [www.scienceofpeople.com/microexpressions](http://www.scienceofpeople.com/microexpressions) Used with permission.

<sup>1</sup> Greenberger, D. and Padesky, C. *Mind Over Mood*.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. David Burns. *Feeling Great*. chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> This chart is from the book, “[Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy for Dummies](#),” by Brent Bradley, Ph.D. and James Furrow, Ph.D., chapter 13.

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