6.3: Emotions and Interpersonal Communication

Learning Objectives

1. Define emotions.
2. Explain the evolutionary and cultural connections to emotions.
3. Discuss how we can more effectively manage our own and respond to others’ emotions.

Have you ever been at a movie and let out a bellowing laugh and snort only to realize no one else is laughing? Have you ever gotten uncomfortable when someone cries in class or in a public place? Emotions are clearly personal, as they often project what we’re feeling on the inside to those around us whether we want it to show or not. Emotions are also interpersonal in that another person’s show of emotion usually triggers a reaction from us—perhaps support if the person is a close friend or awkwardness if the person is a stranger. Emotions are central to any interpersonal relationship, and it’s important to know what causes and influences emotions so we can better understand our own emotions and better respond to others when they display emotions.

Emotions are physiological, behavioral, and/or communicative reactions to stimuli that are cognitively processed and experienced as emotional (Planlap, Fitness, & Fehr, 2006). This definition includes several important dimensions of emotions. First, emotions are often internally experienced through physiological changes such as increased heart rate, a tense stomach, or a cold chill. These physiological reactions may not be noticeable by others and are therefore intrapersonal unless we exhibit some change in behavior that clues others into our internal state or we verbally or nonverbally communicate our internal state. Sometimes our behavior is voluntary—we ignore someone, which may indicate we are angry with them—or involuntary—we fidget or avoid eye contact while talking because we are nervous. When we communicate our emotions, we call attention to ourselves and provide information to others that may inform how they should react. For example, when someone we care about displays behaviors associated with sadness, we are likely to know that we need to provide support (Planlap, Fitness, & Fehr, 2006). We learn, through socialization, how to
read and display emotions, although some people are undoubtedly better at reading emotions than others. However, as with most aspects of communication, we can all learn to become more competent with increased knowledge and effort.

Primary emotions are innate emotions that are experienced for short periods of time and appear rapidly, usually as a reaction to an outside stimulus, and are experienced similarly across cultures. The primary emotions are joy, distress, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust. Members of a remote tribe in New Guinea, who had never been exposed to Westerners, were able to identify these basic emotions when shown photographs of US Americans making corresponding facial expressions (Evans, 2001).

Secondary emotions are not as innate as primary emotions, and they do not have a corresponding facial expression that makes them universally recognizable. Secondary emotions are processed by a different part of the brain that requires higher order thinking; therefore, they are not reflexive. Secondary emotions are love, guilt, shame, embarrassment, pride, envy, and jealousy (Evans, 2001). These emotions develop over time, take longer to fade away, and are interpersonal because they are most often experienced in relation to real or imagined others. You can be fearful of the dark but feel guilty about an unkind comment made to your mother or embarrassed at the thought of doing poorly on a presentation in front of an audience. Since these emotions require more processing, they are more easily influenced by thoughts and can be managed, which means we can become more competent communicators by becoming more aware of how we experience and express secondary emotions. Although there is more cultural variation in the meaning and expression of secondary emotions, they are still universal in that they are experienced by all cultures. It’s hard to imagine what our lives would be like without emotions, and in fact many scientists believe we wouldn’t be here without them.

**Perspectives on Emotion**

How did you learn to express your emotions? Like many aspects of communication and interaction, you likely never received any formal instruction on expressing emotions. Instead, we learn through observation, trial and error, and through occasional explicit guidance (e.g., “boys don’t cry” or “smile when you meet someone”). To better understand how and why we express our emotions, we’ll discuss the evolutionary function of emotions and how they are affected by social and cultural norms.

**Evolution and Emotions**

Human beings grouping together and creating interpersonal bonds was a key element in the continuation and success of our species, and the ability to express emotions played a role in this success (Planlap, Fitness, & Fehr, 2006). For example, unlike other species, most of us are able to control our anger, and we have the capacity for empathy. Emotional regulation can help manage conflict, and empathy allows us to share the emotional state of someone else, which increases an interpersonal bond. These capacities were important as early human society grew increasingly complex and people needed to deal with living with more people.
Attachment theory ties into the evolutionary perspective, because researchers claim that it is in our nature, as newborns, to create social bonds with our primary caretaker (Planlap, Fitness, & Fehr, 2006). This drive for attachment became innate through the process of evolution as early humans who were more successful at attachment were more likely to survive and reproduce—repeating the cycle. Attachment theory proposes that people develop one of the following three attachment styles as a result of interactions with early caretakers: secure, avoidant, or anxious attachment (Feeney, Noller, & Roverts, 2000). It is worth noting that much of the research on attachment theory has been based on some societal norms that are shifting. For example, although women for much of human history have played the primary caregiver role, men are increasingly taking on more caregiver responsibilities. Additionally, although the following examples presume that a newborn's primary caregivers are his or her parents, extended family, foster parents, or others may also play that role.

Individuals with a secure attachment style report that their relationship with their parents is warm and that their parents also have a positive and caring relationship with each other. People with this attachment style are generally comfortable with intimacy, feel like they can depend on others when needed, and have few self-doubts. As a result, they are generally more effective at managing their emotions, and they are less likely to experience intense negative emotions in response to a negative stimulus like breaking up with a romantic partner.

People with the avoidant attachment style report discomfort with closeness and a reluctance to depend on others. They quickly develop feelings of love for others, but those feelings lose intensity just as fast. As a result, people with this attachment style do not view love as long lasting or enduring and have a general fear of intimacy because of this. This attachment style might develop due to a lack of bonding with a primary caregiver.

People with the anxious attachment style report a desire for closeness but anxieties about being abandoned. They regularly experience self-doubts and may blame their lack of love on others' unwillingness to commit rather than their own anxiety about being left. They are emotionally volatile and more likely to experience intense negative emotions such as anxiety and anger. This attachment style might develop because primary caregivers were not dependable or were inconsistent—alternating between caring or nurturing and neglecting or harming.

This process of attachment leads us to experience some of our first intense emotions, such as love, trust, joy, anxiety, or anger, and we learn to associate those emotions with closely bonded relationships (Planlap, Fitness, & Fehr, 2006). For example, the child who develops a secure attachment style and associates feelings of love and trust with forming interpersonal bonds will likely experience similar emotions as an adult entering into a romantic partnership. Conversely, a child who develops an anxious attachment style and associates feelings of anxiety and mistrust with forming...
interpersonal bonds will likely experience similar emotions in romantic relationships later in life. In short, whether we form loving and secure bonds or unpredictable and insecure bonds influences our emotional tendencies throughout our lives, which inevitably affects our relationships. Of course, later in life, we have more control over and conscious thoughts about this process. Although it seems obvious that developing a secure attachment style is the ideal scenario, it is also inevitable that not every child will have the same opportunity to do so. But while we do not have control over the style we develop as babies, we can exercise more control over our emotions and relationships as adults if we take the time to develop self-awareness and communication competence—both things this book will help you do if you put what you learn into practice.

### Culture and Emotions

While our shared evolutionary past dictates some universal similarities in emotions, triggers for emotions and norms for displaying emotions vary widely. Certain emotional scripts that we follow are socially, culturally, and historically situated. Take the example of “falling in love.” Westerners may be tempted to critique the practice of arranged marriages in other cultures and question a relationship that isn’t based on falling in love. However, arranged marriages have been a part of Western history, and the emotional narrative of falling in love has only recently become a part of our culture. Even though we know that compatible values and shared social networks are more likely to predict the success of a long-term romantic relationship than “passion,” Western norms privilege the emotional role of falling in love in our courtship narratives and practices (Crozier, 2006). While this example shows how emotions tie into larger social and cultural narratives, rules and norms for displaying emotions affect our day-to-day interactions.

Display rules are sociocultural norms that influence emotional expression. Display rules influence who can express emotions, which emotions can be expressed, and how intense the expressions can be. In individualistic cultures, where personal experience and self-determination are values built into cultural practices and communication, expressing emotions is viewed as a personal right. In fact, the outward expression of our inner states may be exaggerated, since getting attention from those around you is accepted and even expected in individualistic cultures like the United States (Safdar et al., 2009). In collectivistic cultures, emotions are viewed as more interactional and less individual, which ties them into social context rather than into an individual right to free expression. An expression of emotion reflects on the family and cultural group rather than only on the individual. Therefore, emotional displays are more controlled, because maintaining group harmony and relationships is a primary cultural value, which is very different from the more individualistic notion of having the right to get something off your chest.

There are also cultural norms regarding which types of emotions can be expressed. In individualistic cultures, especially in the United States, there is a cultural expectation that people will exhibit positive emotions. Recent research has documented the culture of cheerfulness in the United States (Kotchemidova, 2010). People seek out happy situations and communicate positive emotions even when they do not necessarily feel positive emotions. Being positive implicitly communicates that you have achieved your personal goals, have a comfortable life, and have a healthy inner self (Mesquita & Albert, 2007). In a culture of cheerfulness, failure to express positive emotions could lead others to view you as a failure or to recommend psychological help or therapy. The cultural predisposition to express positive emotions is not universal. The people who live on the Pacific islands of Ifaluk do not encourage the expression of happiness, because they believe it will lead people to neglect their duties (Mesquita & Albert, 2007). Similarly, collectivistic cultures may view expressions of positive emotion negatively because someone is bringing undue attention to himself or herself, which could upset group harmony and potentially elicit jealous reactions from others.
Emotional expressions of grief also vary among cultures and are often tied to religious or social expectations (Lobar, Youngblut, & Brooten, 2006). Thai and Filipino funeral services often include wailing, a more intense and loud form of crying, which shows respect for the deceased. The intensity of the wailing varies based on the importance of the individual who died and the closeness of the relationship between the mourner and the deceased. Therefore, close relatives like spouses, children, or parents would be expected to wail louder than distant relatives or friends. In Filipino culture, wailers may even be hired by the family to symbolize the importance of the person who died. In some Latino cultures, influenced by the concept of machismo or manliness, men are not expected or allowed to cry. Even in the United States, there are gendered expectations regarding grieving behaviors that lead some men to withhold emotional displays such as crying even at funerals. On the other hand, as you can see in Video Clip 6.1, the 2011 death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-II brought out public mourners who some suspected were told and/or paid to wail in front of television cameras.

**Video Clip 6.1**

North Koreans Mourn Kim Jong-II's Death. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9shSgKbdON8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9shSgKbdON8)

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**Expressing Emotions**

Emotion sharing involves communicating the circumstances, thoughts, and feelings surrounding an emotional event. Emotion sharing usually starts immediately following an emotional episode. The intensity of the emotional event corresponds with the frequency and length of the sharing, with high-intensity events being told more often and over a longer period of time. Research shows that people communicate with others after almost any emotional event, positive or negative, and that emotion sharing offers intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits, as individuals feel inner satisfaction and relief after sharing, and social bonds are strengthened through the interaction (Rime, 2007).

Our social bonds are enhanced through emotion sharing because the support we receive from our relational partners increases our sense of closeness and interdependence. We should also be aware that our expressions of emotion are infectious due to emotional contagion, or the spreading of emotion from one person to another (Hargie, 2011). Think about a time when someone around you got the giggles and you couldn’t help but laugh along with them, even if you didn’t know what was funny. While those experiences can be uplifting, the other side of emotional contagion can be unpleasant. One of my favorite skits from *Saturday Night Live*, called “Debbie Downer,” clearly illustrates the positive and negative aspects of emotional contagion. In the skit, a group of friends and family have taken a trip to an amusement park. One of the people in the group, Debbie, interjects depressing comments into the happy dialogue of the rest of the group. Within the first two minutes of the skit, Debbie mentions mad cow disease after someone orders steak and eggs for breakfast, a Las Vegas entertainer being mauled by his tiger after someone gets excited about seeing Tigger, and a train explosion in North Korea after someone mentions going to the Epcot center. We’ve probably all worked with someone or had that family member who can’t seem to say anything positive, and Debbie’s friends react, as we would, by getting increasingly frustrated with her. The skit also illustrates the sometimes uncontrollable aspects of emotional contagion. As you know, the show is broadcast live and the characters occasionally “break character” after getting caught up in the comedy. After the comment about North Korea, Rachel Dratch, who plays Debbie, and Jimmy Fallon, another actor in the scene, briefly break character and laugh a little bit. Their character slip leads other actors to break character and over the next few minutes the laughter spreads (which was not scripted and not supposed to happen) until all the actors in the skit are laughing, some of them uncontrollably, and the audience is also roaring with laughter.
laughter. This multilayered example captures the positive, negative, and interpersonal aspects of emotional contagion.

In order to verbally express our emotions, it is important that we develop an emotional vocabulary. The more specific we can be when we are verbally communicating our emotions, the less ambiguous they will be for the person decoding our message. As we expand our emotional vocabulary, we are able to convey the intensity of the emotion we’re feeling whether it is mild, moderate, or intense. For example, happy is mild, delighted is moderate, and ecstatic is intense, and ignored is mild, rejected is moderate, and abandoned is intense (Hargie, 2011). Aside from conveying the intensity of your emotions, you can also verbally frame your emotions in a way that allows you to have more control over them.

We can communicate ownership of our emotions through the use of “I” language. This may allow us to feel more in control, but it may also facilitate emotion sharing by not making our conversational partner feel at fault or defensive. For example, instead of saying “You’re making me crazy!” you could say, “I’m starting to feel really anxious because we can’t make a decision.” However, there may be times when face-to-face communication isn’t possible or desired, which can complicate how we express emotions.

In a time when so much of our communication is electronically mediated, it is likely that we will communicate emotions through the written word in an e-mail, text, or instant message. We may also still resort to pen and paper when sending someone a thank-you note, a birthday card, or a sympathy card. Communicating emotions through the written (or typed) word can have advantages such as time to compose your thoughts and convey the details of what you’re feeling. There are also disadvantages, in that important context and nonverbal communication can’t be included. Things like facial expressions and tone of voice offer much insight into emotions that may not be expressed verbally. There is also a lack of immediate feedback. Sometimes people respond immediately to a text or e-mail, but think about how frustrating it is when you text someone and they don’t get back to you right away. If you’re in need of emotional support or want validation of an emotional message you just sent, waiting for a response could end up negatively affecting your emotional state and your relationship.

“Getting Critical”

Politicians, Apologies, and Emotions

Politicians publicly apologizing for wrongdoings have been features in the news for years. In June of 2011, Representative Anthony Weiner, a member of the US Congress, apologized to his family, constituents, and friends for posting an explicit photo on Twitter that was intended to go to a woman with whom he had been chatting and then lying about it. He resigned from Congress a little over a week later. Emotions like guilt and shame are often the driving forces behind an apology, and research shows that apologies that communicate these emotions are viewed as more sincere (Hareli & Eisikovits, 2006). However, admitting and expressing guilt doesn’t automatically lead to forgiveness, as such admissions may expose character flaws of an individual. Rep. Weiner communicated these emotions during his speech, which you can view in Video Clip 6.2. He said he was “deeply sorry,” expressed “regret” for the pain he caused, and said, “I am deeply ashamed of my terrible judgment and actions” (CNN, 2001).

1. After viewing Rep. Weiner’s apology, do you feel like he was sincere? Why or why not?
2. Do you think politicians have a higher ethical responsibility to apologize for wrongdoing than others? Why or why not?
Managing and Responding to Emotions

The notion of emotional intelligence emerged in the early 1990s and has received much attention in academic scholarship, business and education, and the popular press. Emotional intelligence “involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and action” (Salovey, Woolery, & Mayer, 2001). As was noted earlier, improving our emotional vocabulary and considering how and when to verbally express our emotions can help us better distinguish between and monitor our emotions. However, as the definition of emotional intelligence states, we must then use the results of that cognitive process to guide our thoughts and actions.

Just as we are likely to engage in emotion sharing following an emotional event, we are likely to be on the receiving end.
of that sharing. Another part of emotional intelligence is being able to appraise others’ expressions of emotions and communicatively adapt. A key aspect in this process is empathy, which is the ability to comprehend the emotions of others and to elicit those feelings in ourselves. Being empathetic has important social and physical implications. By expressing empathy, we will be more likely to attract and maintain supportive social networks, which has positive physiological effects like lower stress and less anxiety and psychological effects such as overall life satisfaction and optimism (Guerrero & Andersen, 2000).

When people share emotions, they may expect a variety of results such as support, validation, or advice. If someone is venting, they may just want your attention. When people share positive emotions, they may want recognition or shared celebration. Remember too that you are likely to coexperience some of the emotion with the person sharing it and that the intensity of their share may dictate your verbal and nonverbal reaction (Rime, 2007). Research has shown that responses to low-intensity episodes are mostly verbal. For example, if someone describes a situation where they were frustrated with their car shopping experience, you may validate their emotion by saying, “Car shopping can be really annoying. What happened?” Conversely, more intense episodes involve nonverbal reactions such as touching, body contact (scooting close together), or embracing. These reactions may or may not accompany verbal communication. You may have been in a situation where someone shared an intense emotion, such as learning of the death of a close family member, and the only thing you could think to do was hug them. Although being on the receiving end of emotional sharing can be challenging, your efforts will likely result in positive gains in your interpersonal communication competence and increased relational bonds.

**Key Takeaways**

- Emotions result from outside stimuli or physiological changes that influence our behaviors and communication.
- Emotions developed in modern humans to help us manage complex social life including interpersonal relations.
- The expression of emotions is influenced by sociocultural norms and display rules.
- Emotion sharing includes verbal expression, which is made more effective with an enhanced emotional vocabulary, and nonverbal expression, which may or may not be voluntary.
- Emotional intelligence helps us manage our own emotions and effectively respond to the emotions of others.

**Exercises**

1. In what situations would you be more likely to communicate emotions through electronic means rather than in person? Why?
2. Can you think of a display rule for emotions that is not mentioned in the chapter? What is it and why do you think this norm developed?
3. When you are trying to determine someone’s emotional state, what nonverbal communication do you look for and why?
4. Think of someone in your life who you believe has a high degree of emotional intelligence. What have they done that brought you to this conclusion?
References


