

# Chapter 3

## IDENTIFYING THE SEQUENCE OF FEELINGS

# INTRODUCTION

IN THE previous chapter we discussed the broad scope feelings we all experience and we presented some exercises that would help you identify your own feelings. In this chapter, we want to expand on this concept of feelings and discuss sequences of feelings sequences that can, under certain circumstances, lead to feelings which are crippling or destructive in interpersonal relationships.

The most intense feeling a person has in a given situation is often not the first feeling experienced in that situation. It may, however, be the first feeling that registers (i.e., is noticed, responded to, etc.). As we discuss the sequences of feelings, you will find that we generally have to think carefully to identify the initial feeling in a sequence-whereas later feelings are often very obvious and often cause us to act.

The initial or primary feelings in the sequence can be the cause of later or second guessing feelings. For example, the father who is angry with his son who has just returned home at 2 o'clock in the morning probably recognizes he is *angry* and will act upon that anger. But what caused the anger? The feelings preceding his anger (his primary feelings) were probably his *fears* that something had happened to the boy, he's *hurt* that his son did not care enough to call to say he would be out so late, and his *frustration* at not knowing how to get in touch with the boy to find out if he was safe. Recognizing and explaining these primary feelings to his son would probably be more productive have a better effect on the relationship and have more effect on the son's subsequent behavior than will the actions that are likely to result from the secondary feeling of *anger*. Exploring the underlying primary feelings will also be more productive for the father in helping him calm down and think of alternative things to say and do when he does confront his son.

Generally, identifying primary feelings is a very productive activity, especially in situations where destructive secondary feelings have arisen or are likely to arise. What we are saying is that although expressing your feelings is crucial to constructive communication, the expression of some feelings is more constructive than the expression of others. Expressing anger, resentment, or jealousy often leads to defensiveness and to arguments. When you are feeling and behaving defensively, you are usually not expressing your true feelings and are striking out at the other person instead. Obviously, this is not very constructive. Expressing hurt, pain, frustration, or fear does not lead to defensiveness as often because these feelings aren't usually directed toward hurting someone. We won't be telling you not to express anger, resentment, etc., but we would like you to be aware of their negative effects so you can begin to find alternatives to avoid destructive anger. Anger is usually much harder on you than the person you are angry with.

Think about the last time you were angry, and think about the energy it took to deal with it. When you feel anger, we encourage you to work back to the feelings underlying

the anger and resentment and express these less destructive feelings. You will often find that once you have expressed these feelings, your anger will go away, subside, or not develop at all. That is the major advantage of learning to recognize and express primary feelings.

But before we can express these primary feelings, we must learn to identify them; and since these feelings are often not registered or are overlooked as one progresses through a sequence of feelings, most of us need some instruction before we are able to identify and express them.

## **GOAL**

We want you to be able to recognize when you are expressing secondary feelings (such as anger, resentment, and hostility) because they are indicators that primary feelings (like fear, frustration, emotional hurt, physical pain) have been aroused. Once you learn to identify secondary feelings, you can use this recognition as a trigger or mechanism for beginning an exploration of underlying primary feelings. This exploration will pave the way for a more productive expression of your feelings.

In this chapter, you'll be taking your first step toward the goal of expressing feelings more productively - the identification of primary and secondary feelings.

In an emotional situation, an individual is likely to experience a variety of emotional and physical feelings. Often these feelings overlap, and at times are even contradictory. Most of these feelings can be identified as either primary or secondary feelings. They are labeled as such because of the order in which they occur. Primary feelings precede secondary feelings, even if only fleetingly. We'll talk about secondary feelings first since they are generally stronger, more prone to produce action, and are most readily recognized.

## **Secondary Feelings**

The most common secondary feelings are anger, hostility, and resentment; however, there are many variations of these feelings, (e.g., irritation, rage, hysteria, despair, and defensiveness). Having experienced these feelings at one time or another, you can recognize how powerful they are. They require an enormous amount of your energy to deal with, and they tend to interfere with your control of your behavior. In addition, they are coercive because they often produce behavior which is used to defend and hurt. An angry or jealous individual very often tries to pressure his or her partner into feeling guilty or inferior by what he or she says or does. When you act on secondary feelings, you are usually not in control of your behavior and, therefore, are likely to behave in a manner that you later regret. At the same time, these powerful feelings tend to conceal some of the other important feelings that provide useful information about yourself. These are primary feelings.

## Primary Feelings

Primary feelings include emotional feelings of hurt, fear, and frustration, as well as physical feelings of pain, hunger, thirst, sexual arousal, and fatigue. Having experienced these feelings at some time, you are aware that some of them may be uncomfortable and can require massive amounts of your energy to deal with. They can also interfere with your control of your behavior, just as secondary feelings do. But, losing control at the primary level is not usually as destructive to others as it is at the secondary level. For example, if you lose control of your behavior while you are angry, you are very likely to try to hurt someone else, physically or emotionally. However, if you lose control while feeling sad or hurt, you are less likely to strike out at those you care for or try to make them feel guilty or inferior.

An important point to be made is that any secondary feeling has been preceded by one or more primary feelings, but these primary feelings are often concealed and overpowered by the secondary feelings. So what we say about primary feelings is true only when the individual is aware of their existence and is not experiencing only his or her secondary feelings. It is also important to note that since you are less likely to lash out at your partner when you are aware of your primary feelings, emotions can be much easier for both of you to deal with productively. Defensiveness can be minimized.

## Recognizing Potential Dangerous Secondary Feelings

One of the most important reasons for learning how to work back to primary feelings is that very intense secondary feelings can be extremely destructive and even life-threatening. Extreme anger and rage have been known to result in violence and homicide. Some statistics show that as many as 20 percent of homicides occur between husbands and wives. In most of these cases, one partner has become enraged and lost control of his or her behavior. Many of these individuals would almost certainly have acted differently had they been more in tune with their primary feelings.

Every secondary feeling has an extremely intense form that is potentially very destructive. Jealousy, anger, and resentment can all lead to uncontrollable rage or fury. You can see that it is essential that you deal with your feelings before you become so angry or desperate that you can't control your behavior. Identifying and expressing your primary feelings is one of the best ways to do this.

Let's take for example a woman who has just discovered that her partner has been having an affair with another woman for a number of years. She becomes uncontrollably angry, runs out of the house, and drives away. Eventually she calls her partner and tells him that she's going to commit suicide. Even if she doesn't actually kill herself, this woman's actions are terribly destructive both to her partner and to herself. If she has children, she may especially regret the effect it has on them. She is, of course, angry, resentful, and jealous, but primarily she is terribly hurt and afraid. Had she been more aware of these primary feelings, she probably would have chosen a less destructive course of action.

Here's another example. Most child or partner abuse is caused by an individual who has lost control of his or her behavior. For instance, a man who beats up his partner has gone beyond the kind of anger that he can control. For this man, it is absolutely essential that he learn enough about his primary and secondary feelings to recognize the point at which he loses control. It is in his best interest to avoid reaching that point, because once he goes beyond it, he becomes incapable of acting in his best interest. He is not exercising self-responsibility if he becomes so angry or desperate that he can't control his behavior.

# EXAMPLES

**F**OLLOWING ARE three examples that show how primary feelings precede secondary feelings. For each example, a scenario is presented describing an individual's reaction to a situation. Then the primary feelings experienced are listed. Finally, there is a commentary giving further details.

## EXAMPLE 1

### Scenario

Kay and her children are spending the day waterskiing. At one-point Kay is driving the boat and towing her son, Jeff. Suddenly a power boat going very fast cuts in front of Jeff and causes him to fall. Kay's immediate reaction is fury and she screams at the driver of the other boat. Kay's extreme anger is an intense secondary feeling. Let's take a look at the other things going on for Kay. The feelings immediately preceding her anger were:

- *fear* that her son had been hurt.
- *frustration* at not being able to prevent the near accident.
- *frustration* at not being able to get to her son any faster to see if he was okay.
- *hurt* that Jeff was frightened so badly by the other driver's carelessness.

### COMMENTARY

Note that all of these primary feelings flash through Kay's mind so rapidly that she probably failed to register them. This is typical in such a situation.

## EXAMPLE 2

### Scenario

Cora and Ben have been together for about 15 years. Most of the time when they have intercourse, Ben ejaculates too soon for Cora. Lately, whenever this happens, Cora becomes very resentful and hostile. These are secondary feelings. It may appear, at first, that Cora had no primary feelings that came before her anger. In Cora's case, this situation has been going on for so many years that she no longer feels the primary feelings. Her feelings go immediately to resentment and hostility. However, years ago she registered some very intense primary feelings. Let's take a look at those feelings. Years ago, when Ben ejaculated too soon for her, Cora felt:

- *hurt* because she thought he didn't care enough to wait.
- *fear* that this would always happen and she would always be left unsatisfied.
- *fear* that there was something physically wrong with him.
- *frustrated* at not knowing what to do.
- *fear* that somehow her inadequacy was the cause of the problem.
- *hurt* for him because he would be upset too.
- *frustration* due to frequent sexual arousal without being orgasmic.
- *pain*, occasional pelvic cramping and heaviness due to unrelieved sexual tensions.

### COMMENTARY

These primary feelings gradually stopped registering as Cora became hardened to the situation. Then and now, it would be far more constructive for Cora to focus on and express her primary feeling.

## EXAMPLE 3

### Scenario

Gordon 's 13-year-old son has become an avid carpenter, and he frequently borrows Gordon 's tools. Most of the time he fails to put them away and, consequently, Gordon can never find them when he wants them. Some of the tools have been lost. Gordon has asked his son repeatedly to put the tools away, pointing out the obvious reasons for doing so. One afternoon, he drives up and his tools are scattered all over the driveway along with one of his son's projects. The boy is nowhere to be seen. Gordon becomes very angry, which is a secondary feeling. Let's take a look at the primary feelings that, at present and over time, preceded the anger. Before getting angry, Gordon felt:

- *frustrated* and *inadequate* because he didn't know how to get his son to pick up after himself.
- *hurt* and *disregarded* that his son didn't seem to care about his wishes or respect his property.
- *fear* that his son would develop even more thoughtless habits.

### COMMENTARY

Gordon would probably find it much more effective to express primary feelings to his son rather than only his anger.



# PRACTICE

**F**OLLOWING IS a practice exercise. Unlike other chapters where you don't have to do all of the practice, in this chapter we'd like you to complete the entire exercise. Be sure to write out your answers. You'll notice that at the end of the exercise you are directed to go through the practice again with several other incidents. It's up to you how many times you practice, but you'll find this type of exercise valuable in helping you get into the habit of identifying your feelings.

# PRACTICE

Think back to the last time you were *angry* and work through the incident to identify the sequence of your feelings. We suggest that you record the following:

1. Your immediate reaction. Describe actions and behaviors taken.

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2. As you recall that moment, what was the most prevalent thought that came into your awareness at the time?

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3. Was the immediate reaction the result of primary or secondary feelings?

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4. Work back to the primary emotions that preceded your anger and record these primary feelings.

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5. Describe your secondary emotions.

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6. Now, as you recall that angry moment, your actions at the time, your thoughts and emotions at the time, direct your attention inward. Where in your body do you sense the event now? Can you describe the sensation? What is that sensation telling you now?

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7. If you could relive the experience, how would you handle it differently?

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Practice this exercise with several incidents where you have experienced anger or other secondary emotions.