



The Art and Science of Lovemaking



Putting Feelings into Words

THE GOTTMAN INSTITUTE Gott Sex?

Putting Your Feeling Into Words

There are many good reasons to focus on your emotions, give them a name, and then talk about them.

One, naming your feelings engages the part of the brain that controls the functions of logic and language. So when you identify your feelings and put them into words, you get a better sense of control over them. This can help you to cope with negative emotions like fear, anger, or sadness.

Two, naming your feelings and talking about them is essential for connecting with others; people around you can't know for certain what you're feeling unless you tell them.

Relationships grow when one person helps the other to name his or her emotions. Here's a simple example: Your friend tells you that his favorite aunt just died. If you say, *"That must be very sad for you,"* you show that you understand your friend's experience, which helps you to connect emotionally.

What's even more helpful, however, are those instances when a friend is not sure what he's feeling and you help him figure it out:

"Jenny left last night without even saying good-bye."

"That must have been upsetting."

"It was. I didn't know what to think."

"Were you angry?"

"Sort of. But it was more than that. We've always been so close."

"It sounds like you're kind of disappointed and sad."

"Yes, I'm really sad. And kind of scared, too. I don't know what I'd do if she left for good."

The ability to identify feelings and express them in words comes easily for some. These people are often quite aware of what they're feeling moment by moment and have a rich vocabulary with which to describe their emotions.

But other people struggle all their lives to understand their feelings, name them, and converse about them. They may know they're feeling something, but they're just not sure what the feeling is. For those who have this kind of challenge, it may be helpful to take an intellectually based,

or “cognitive,” approach to exploring emotion. This involves remembering recent experiences in your life and thinking about the way such experiences typically lead people to feel.

Here’s an example: Carl comes home from work and finds a note from his wife. It says she’s gone to a PTA meeting, his son has gone to a movie, and his daughter is off with her girlfriends. He rummages through the refrigerator, finds some leftover pizza, heats it in the microwave, and settles in front of the television to watch a news program. The topic: The unstable economy.

Later that night, as Carl is lying in bed, he’s aware that he feels vaguely uncomfortable, but he’s not sure why. In fact, he’s not sure that he wants to know why. But he’s tired of this undefined angst that seems to be haunting him and he’d like to get to the bottom of it. So he begins to think about this negative energy he’s experiencing.

At this point, he can only describe his feelings as being “unsettled.” Then he starts to reflect back on the evening’s events—how unpleasant it was to come home to a dark, empty house when he was expecting to see his wife, his kids, and dinner on the stove. There was definitely something missing for him in this situation. And he knows that when things are missing from people’s lives they often feel sad.

So he concludes,

“I wanted to be with my family and they weren’t here. This made me feel lonely. Lonely and disappointed.”

Still, Carl feels there’s more to the evening’s negative energy. He thinks about the TV program. The economy had been strong for so long and he and his wife have enjoyed a nice sense of economic security. But the program talked about how volatile the markets have become—how investors could lose a great deal very quickly. The program made him realize that his investments might not be that secure after all. And he knows what happens when people question their safety. They begin to feel anxious and fearful.

“So this energy I’m feeling is more than loneliness and disappointment about not seeing my family,” he tells himself. “It’s also anxiety. I’m anxious about our investments.”

Now that his feelings of loneliness, disappointment, and anxiety are defined, Carl decides he can do something about the discomfort he’s feeling. He can talk to his wife about how he missed seeing her and the kids that night; perhaps they can plan to do something fun together in the next few days. He can talk to his financial advisor and his wife about their investments and make some adjustments if they decide that’s a prudent course.

Exploring emotions in such an analytical way may seem strange to people who have a more intuitive sense of what they’re feeling moment

“ *this*
exercise
may
also
help
you
to be
a better
listener ”

by moment. But this cognitive approach can be a real benefit to people like Carl, who lack easy access to words and concepts that can help them cope with their feelings. Rather than expressing a vague sense of irritation at his family about who-knows-what, Carl can now talk specifically about what he's feeling. This puts him in a better position to express his needs and to connect with others emotionally. Identifying his emotions in an analytical way gives him the structure he needs to take steps toward feeling more settled and peaceful.

EXERCISE: What Am I Feeling?

This exercise is designed to help you to define what you're feeling and to put your emotions into words. It may also help you to be a better listener—somebody who helps others to name their feelings and talk about them.

As a beginning, think of a statement that is absolutely true about you, like “I love puppies.” Now say the opposite of your truth over and over again in your mind. See how your body feels as you do this. Do you feel tense, uncomfortable, or queasy? Where in your body do you feel this discomfort? Now change and say the truth over and over (“I love puppies”). Now notice what is happening in your body. Do you feel an easing of tension, a relaxation, or rightness? Where do you notice this in your body?

Now think about a recent experience that left you feeling uncomfortable or unsettled in a way that was hard for you to define. Write down a short description of the incident in a notebook – this can be your Emotion Log.

Now look at the following series of questions, which are intended to help you determine in a general way what you might have been feeling at the time. Check in your body again. Which word or words give you that same “true for me” feeling again in your body?

After you've answered these questions, scan the “emotional vocabulary” list to find more specific ways to describe your feelings.

Once you've identified the emotions you were feeling, do you feel like you have a better idea of how to express those feelings to people that matter? Can you think of steps you could take to soothe uncomfortable feelings or to solve problems that are causing the discomfort?

First ask yourself, is the emotion you're experiencing pleasant (positive) or unpleasant (negative)?

If the feeling is pleasant:

Do you think you'd like to explore some topic or get to know some person better? If so, you're probably feeling interested

Did something good happen? If so, you're probably feeling happy

If the feeling is unpleasant:

Do you think that something is lost, absent, or missing from your life that ought to be there? If so, then you're probably feeling sad

Do you think there's an obstacle to what you're trying to accomplish? If your goal is blocked, then you're probably feeling angry

Are you thinking that there are things that are unsafe in your world? If so, then you're probably feeling fearful

Are you thinking that someone or something should be judged as beneath you or against your values and morals? If so, then you're probably feeling contemptuous

Are you thinking that you just can't tolerate things as they are anymore, or that you just can't "swallow" a current situation? If so, then you're probably feeling disgusted or angry

Emotional Vocabulary List

Describing your feelings can help you to connect emotionally. It can also help you to cope with difficult emotions. This list, divided into general categories of emotion, may help you to name your feelings and to talk about them.

INTERESTED

Stimulated	Involved	Anticipatory	Amused
Fascinated	Attentive	Looking forward to	Intrigued
Engrossed	Eager	In awe	Engrossed
Engaged	Excited	Entertained	Enthralled

HAPPY

Pleasantly surprised	Appreciative	Delighted	Blissful
Pleased	Grateful	Loving	Joyful
Contented	Feeling good	Liking	Ecstatic
Satisfied	Gratified	Attached to	Elated
Cheerful	Proud	Affectionate toward	Euphoric
Glad		Adoring	

SAD

Unhappy	Discouraged	Dismayed	Miserable
Sorry	Disappointed	Down in the dumps	Disheartened
Sorry for	Dejected	Blue	Despairing
Regretful	Glum	Heartbroken	Grieving
Depressed	Despondent	Heartsick	

ANGRY

Displeased	Frustrated	Irate	Furious
Envious	Annoyed	Heated	Livid
Jealous	Irritated	Crabby	Enraged
Resentful	Mad	Bitchy	Outraged
Offended	Fuming	Exasperated	

FEARFUL

Timid	Afraid	Apprehensive	Petrified
Nervous	Disturbed	Anxious	Terrified
Uncomfortable	Uneasy	Worried	Horried
Scared	Concerned	Dread	

CONTEMPTUOUS

Offended	Indignant	Disdaining	Despising
Appalled	Judgmental	Disrespecting	Bitter

DISGUSTED

Dislike	Repelled by	Aversion to	Sickened
Hate	Repulsed by	Revulsion	Aghast
Loathe			

Metaphorically Speaking

Just as the voice provides clues to what's happening in the hearts of people talking, so do the metaphors they choose.

Many of us learned about metaphors in a high school literature class, and often during a poetry lesson. Reading Alfred Noyes' words, "The road was a ribbon of darkness over the purple moor," we understood that the road wasn't really a ribbon. It was made of soil and rocks, after all. But the metaphor helped us to see the road like a ribbon. And as we did, we could imagine the whole moonlit landscape just as the highwayman saw it. We could be there with him, hearing his horse's hoof beats, feeling the night wind, experiencing his fateful ride.

The metaphors we use when we talk about our feelings do the same thing. We can use metaphors to convey our emotional perspectives more clearly. We can listen for metaphors when people talk about their feelings in order to experience matters from their points of view.

When people use metaphors as simple figures of speech, the imagery they choose can provide little windows into their emotional reality. And when people use metaphors to draw parallels between their current lives and what happened in the past, their metaphors can open entire doors into their emotional heritage.

Either way, metaphors become one more tool as we bid and respond to others' bids for emotional connection.

Common Metaphorical Figures of Speech can be Revealing

Here are just a few examples of familiar metaphors you might hear in conversation, as well as the emotional meaning you can guess from their usage. Keep in mind that the meanings you draw from metaphors are just that—guesses. But they often provide a great springboard for conversation

as you seek to learn more about another person's feelings. And once you understand that person's metaphors, you can then use them yourself in making bids for emotional connection.

"Our marriage was a train wreck."

The speaker feels that his marriage was broken and irreparable in a very chaotic and destructive way. It's likely that people got hurt. And because he characterizes it as an accident, he probably didn't expect this outcome. It wasn't supposed to happen this way.

"I want to stay afloat financially."

The speaker believes that her finances could reach a crisis state where she'd be "over her head" in debt and "drowning." She fears that her financial survival may be in doubt.

"My father likes to play God."

The speaker feels that her father is autocratic and controlling, like a benevolent dictator. She also feels that his attempts at benevolence lack integrity and commitment. He's not "being God," he's only "playing" at it. Therefore, she not only resents his interference, she mistrusts it.

As psychologist Richard Kopp writes in *Metaphor Therapy* (Brunner/Mazel, 1995), such figures of speech do more than provide us with colorful language. They help us create a framework upon which to consider significant matters. They influence how we perceive, think, and feel about issues, and what actions we take.

Kopp uses the example, "Time is money." Once you accept this metaphor as true, you start acting it out. You become more conscious of how you "spend" your time. You stop "giving" your time to others without expecting something in return. Instead, you try to "save" time so that you can "invest" it in worthwhile activity.

Imagine how you might act differently, however, if you accepted the metaphor that "time is a river." It "flows" continually so you don't have to worry about giving it away; there's always more time coming down the channel. Time "carries" you along whether you want to go or not, so you might as well relax and enjoy the ride.

Now imagine the conflicts that might arise in a partnership between two people who each construct their reality around these contradictory metaphors. Working together on a project, one person might constantly be struggling to "save time" as the other attempts to "let go" of time constraints. But by listening to one another's metaphors, the pair may be able to come to a better understanding of their differences.

Kopp speculates that one reason metaphors are so powerful is that they activate the same mechanisms in the brain that we used in infancy to think about the world. As babies, we could not think of abstract concepts such as "security," "nourishment," or "nurturing." But we did think about

the concrete objects associated with such concepts. There was the blanket, the bottle of milk, the mother, and so on. Even though we didn't have words for these things, we had the images of how they looked in reality, and how they looked in our minds. The blanket was security. The milk was nourishment. The mother was nurturing.

Because concrete images were so important as our brains formed and our thinking processes developed, we continue throughout our lives to find such images useful for learning and communicating abstract concepts. Now, if we want to think about an abstract concept in a new way, comparing it to something tangible can help. (Time is a runaway train; there's no stopping it. Time is a furnace; it's burning our resources. Time is a carousel; we'll get another chance the next time around.) And from that new image, we build a new conceptual framework, a new way to think about the concept, a new way to communicate with one another about it.

Memories can be Metaphorically Revealing as Well

Metaphors involving significant events or relationships from your past—particularly early childhood—can also help you understand your emotions. They can help you examine matters of emotional heritage, such as the long-lasting effects of your parents' emotional philosophy or your enduring vulnerabilities.

If you're struggling with a problem, and a certain memory keeps cropping up, you might explore whether this memory has some kind of metaphorical significance in your life. Could that past event, or past relationship, hold a current insight?

Let me give you an example. Anthony and Teresa, a couple I was seeing for marital therapy, had a conflict over a career move Teresa was about to make. To Teresa, the move seemed essential to her feelings of fulfillment. She believed everything she had done in her life had led her to this tremendous opportunity. If she didn't make her move now, she would always regret it. But Anthony saw the change as an extremely risky maneuver that would threaten their family's financial security. And because he and Teresa shared financial decisions, she would not change jobs without his approval.

The couple grappled with the decision over a period of several weeks. During these discussions, Anthony brought up two characters from his childhood. One was his mother—a good-hearted, but long-suffering woman who always subjugated her own needs to her husband's demands. Anthony felt his father often took advantage of his mother's submissiveness. *"She was constantly being blindsided by him. He made a fool of her."* And Anthony feared that someday he would be just like his mother—dominated, ineffectual, and foolish.

The second character was Anthony's grandfather, a man whom he adored for his great wisdom and generosity of spirit.

"My grandfather always saw right through people,"

Anthony said.

"You could never fool him because he had his eyes wide open. He knew all your faults. Despite that, however, he would do whatever he could for you. He gave and he gave. That's just the way he was."

When the time came for Anthony and Teresa to make their decision, something surprising happened. Although he still felt apprehensive about it, Anthony decided to support his wife's dream.

"I can still see the potential for disaster," he explained in session that followed. *"But I also know how important it is for her to try this. And suddenly that seems more significant than anything else."*

"That's an extremely generous thing to do,"

I told him. Then I asked,

"Who does this remind you of?"

A smile spread across his face as he looked at Teresa.

"This isn't like my mother, is it?"

"No."

Teresa said, smiling as well.

"It's not like your mother at all. It's more like your grandfather."

"You don't know what the future holds,"

I added.

"But you're not about to be blindsided. You know exactly what Teresa needs and you've got your eyes wide open."

"But I never thought I could be like my grandfather,"

Anthony said.

"I never thought I could be that giving."

Then, after a long silence, he added,

"I've been very worried about this decision for a long time. Seeing it this way gives me a better handle on it. Now I know why I'm moving in this direction. I can see that there was a model for this in my life. I think everything is going to be OK."

The model—or framework—that Anthony refers to is what makes metaphors so valuable. In fact, therapists who want to help people to solve problems or to change their perspectives often start by helping them to change the metaphors they currently use to frame their lives.



Kopp tells of a patient who used the image of a “basket full of whips” to describe his habit of putting himself down. The patient’s therapist suggested that he start imagining that he carried a “basket full of teddy bears” instead. Perhaps that could help him to be gentler with himself when he’s under stress. A patient who felt his anger was a “teapot ready to explode” was advised to “lift the lid a little” and then his anger would not seem so dangerous.

Putting Metaphors to Work

You can enhance your emotional communication simply by listening and responding to the metaphors you hear in conversations—especially conversations about feelings. Certain metaphors may prompt you to ask questions that elicit more information about the feelings behind them. In this way, the metaphor is a bid for understanding while your question is a way of turning toward that bid with interest and concern. When you hear a metaphor, try to ask open-ended questions if you can, or just reflect back the information you’re hearing. Doing so can help your conversation partner relax, knowing that you simply want to understand what’s being said.

Here are a few examples:

“In this job, I’m just a rat in maze.”

“A maze, huh? What kind of a maze?”

“A very confusing one. All I can see are dead ends.”

“Sounds kind of frustrating. Like you need some help finding the right path.”

“You’re right. I need some guidance here.”

“You always put me on stage in front of your friends.”

“What do you mean by a stage? There’s no stage here.”

“But it’s like I’ve got to perform all the time. Say all the right things.”

“I didn’t know you felt that way. I’m just so proud of you. I want my friends to know how great you are.”

“But I feel like you’re always feeding me lines. I feel so pressured!”

“After Sherry left, I lost my spark.”

“Do you mean ‘spark’ like the energy you need to get started?”

“Yeah. I don’t do anything all day. I just sit around and watch TV.”

“Sounds kind of dull.”

“It’s worse than dull. Some days, I don’t even go to work.”

To explore matters of emotional heritage, ask questions that elicit memories of childhood events or past relationships. Obviously, such questions work best in trusting relationships where people are used to sharing memories and being introspective. These questions don’t need to

be particularly probing or “psychological,” however. You can simply ask,

“Did anything like this ever happen when you were a kid?”

“Who does your boss (your brother, your wife, etc.) remind you of when he acts like that?”

“Is there anybody else you’re thinking of right now?” The answers you get may be good for all sorts of insightful conversation.

Once you hear somebody use a metaphor, it may be helpful to use that same figure of speech or a comparable one when addressing a similar concept later on. I once counseled an electrical engineer, for example, whose language about emotions was filled with allusions to wiring, charges, and circuitry. I soon realized that if I really wanted to connect with this man, the best way to do that might be to use the same lexicon.

You can take the same approach with friends and family. If your son is interested in the natural world for example, talk to him about his cleaning his room in terms of maintaining a healthy “ecosystem.” If your boss loves baseball, let him know that you’re ready to “step up to the plate” on the next project; and that you really hope he’ll “go to bat” for your next raise. If your brother loves to go to Reno, tell him that his “odds” of inheriting much from Dad are poor unless he does his part to keep the old man out of a nursing home. Noticing and then adopting another person’s metaphor helps you to build a smooth, intimate connection. Metaphorically speaking, you’re both “on the same page.”

Here are some questions to consider and write about as you listen for the metaphors people use to express their feelings:

- What metaphors have you noticed yourself using recently?
- What do these metaphors tell you about the way you’re feeling?
- Did you use them to express specific emotions?
- How did others react to your metaphors?
- What metaphors have you noticed others using?
- Think about a person with whom you’ve been in conflict with lately. What metaphors does this person use?
- What do these metaphors tell you about the way this person has been feeling?

