The Counseling Hut

PO Box 50113, Eugene, OR 97401
541-342-8144 (Phone/TTY) 541-342-1724 (Fax)
http://www.thecounselinghut.org/

Communicating Feelings

Jordan J. Shin, MS, LPC
Revised July 1, 2011

Most people understand that it is important to express one's feelings and for everyone to acknowledge one another's feelings. However, expressing feelings is not as easy as you might think. Consider the following scenario:

> A and B live together. B is watching the television in the living room. A walks in.
>
> A: (In a terse voice.) Hey, can you do the dishes?
>
> B: (In a loud voice.) Shit, you always do that. I feel you never care about what I need. (Storms out, throwing the remote at the television.)

How is B feeling? If your answer is "B feels that A never cares", you are on the right track. If your answer is "angry" or "pissed", you may be closer. Loud voice, saying "shit", storming out, and throwing the remote; these are expressions of anger. However, B never used the word "angry". How can we be sure if B is angry?

Sometimes, we think we are communicating how we are feeling with our words, but somehow the message doesn't get across. As a result, we can feel hurt, disappointed, and frustrated. The problem is that we often communicate our feelings along with our thoughts and perceptions, and it's hard for the other person to understand what exactly we are feeling, which makes it hard to acknowledge the feeling.

Feelings vs. Perceptions/Intuitions

"Feelings" refer to our emotional state. Usually, feelings can be expressed in a single adjective: happy, sad, angry, glad, afraid, content, overjoyed, depressed, frustrated, agitated, etc.

"Perceptions" refer to what we believe we are experiencing at the moment; some people call them "intuitions", because perceptions come to us automatically when we hear, see, or otherwise sense something.

You can tell perceptions apart from feelings because perceptions are usually expressed in the form of "I feel like...", whereas feelings are usually expressed in the form of "I feel..." or "I am..." When you have a statement with the phrase "I feel" in it, try replacing it with "I am" and see what happens. In the example above, we would try having B say "I am you never care". The sentence stops making sense! It is obviously not a declaration of B's feeling. Instead, if you substitute "I feel like", you get, "I feel like you never care". It now make sense! We can see that B is responding to A *as if* A never cares; it is a declaration of B's perception. Along with all the body language, B is, in fact, saying, "I am angry because what you just said leads me to believe that you never care". "A never cares" is B's perception, not B's feeling.

Sometimes the distinction is tricky. Adjectives such as "betrayed", which is really a past participle of a verb, are used in expressions like "I feel betrayed." Is this a feeling or a perception? To tell the difference, again try replacing the "I feel..." with "I am..." It becomes "I am betrayed", which means something different from "I feel betrayed". When someone "feels betrayed", it usually really means "I am feeling the feeling I usually feel when I am betrayed" or "I'm feeling something as if I am betrayed". What is this feeling? It could be anger. It could be fear. It could even be a sense of

freedom: "Now that you betrayed me, I don't have to care about you any more". It's hard to tell. So something like "I am angry that you betrayed me" is easier to understand than something like "I feel betrayed".

Now, if it turns out that there was no betrayal at all, just a misunderstanding, the feeling goes away. Perceptions do not automatically lead to a feeling. We usually go through another step to make sure the perception is correct: thinking.

Perceptions vs. Thinking

Perceptions are intuitive; they come automatically from the "quick thinking" parts of our brain that tries to make the best sense of the situation as quickly as possible. Thinking kicks in later, and tries to bring in more information about the present, consider past events, anticipate future events, and arrive at a more thought-out conclusion. Had B in the example above given the situation a little more thought, B could have said something like:

> What you just said reminded me of other situations where you asked me to do something in a terse voice when I needed to take care of myself and rest. Of course, I see that the dishes need to be done, so I will do it after I've rested.

Or,

> Over the past few weeks, you've asked me to do the dishes only when I am trying to rest. I am beginning to believe that you actually do not want me to rest; that makes me very angry.

In the first example, B has talked oneself out of feeling angry by thinking over the situation. In the second example, B's well-thought-out conclusion in fact allows B to feel quite angry. Thinking things through does not get rid of feelings; it makes the feelings clearer, stronger, more understandable.

By contrast, feelings that follow directly from perceptions—no matter how correct the perceptions are—are hard to understand. This is because one person's perceptions are usually very difficult for others to understand. Everybody has had different experiences, and therefore have different perceptions of any given situation. The kind of betrayals I have experienced are different from the kind of betrayals you have experienced. My perceptions associated with betrayals are therefore different from yours. If I say "I feel betrayed", you would imagine I feel the same way you felt when you experienced the kind of betrayals you have had. It would take a lot of clarification before we realize that we are talking about two different kinds of betrayals, and therefore two different kinds of perceptions associated with betrayals, and two entirely different feelings.

Communicating only the perceptions leads to confusing miscommunication. Thoughts and feelings, by contrast, are usually easier to understand.

Rational vs. Irrational Thoughts

Some thoughts are irrational; that is, they do not quite follow from the information, or they come from incorrect or exaggerated information. For instance, it is unlikely that A "always does that"; perhaps something like 5 out of the last 7 times B tried to watch the television, which isn't as bad as "always", but worse than "never". So perhaps B could instead come to see that A "sometimes doesn't care" rather than "never cares", and therefore be a little less angry. Rational thoughts do not get rid of feelings. They lead to more manageable, understandable emotions.

Even irrational thoughts, of course, are easier to understand than perceptions, because they usually follow from some information that can at least be understood, whether it is correct or not. Still, rational

thoughts ensure that you feelings are appropriate for the situation, and therefore more explainable and understandable.

In general, any time you find yourself using words like "never", "always", "should", "oughta", "must", "cannot possibly", "I just have to", "I gotta know why", etc., it is likely that something is being exaggerated. Exaggerated thoughts lead to disproportionate feelings. It may very well be that these thoughts are absolutely correct; still, it is best to make sure. Exaggerated thoughts and disproportionate feelings have a tendency to stick around longer than they need to. It may be more helpful to let go of them as soon as they stop being appropriate and therefore become useless.

Obviously, what is rational to one person may not be to another. Different people use different information to make up one's own mind. What is important, then, is whether a thought is useful for *you*, and whether your feeling is right for *you*.

Note that perceptions, too, can be rational or irrational. It's just that perceptions arise from the littlest possible amount of information; it's all about quickness. Thinking, by contrast, require a wider range of information, much of which can be easily explained to others and checked against "reality".

So what?

Remember that perceptions, thoughts, and feelings are all "valid". In the example above, given B's experience with A, B's perception that what A said means A never cares may be perfectly sensible. Given this perception, B's anger is also perfectly sensible, and, however much B thinks it over, B may still feel angry.

The thing is, in expressing our feelings, thoughts, and perceptions, what we are ultimately asking for is some kind of understanding. Why else would we bother to communicate our feelings, thoughts, or perceptions? So it is important to communicate in a way that is easy to understand. Sometimes, with this understanding comes change; A may in fact care about B's needs, and may be perfectly willing to ask B to do the dishes at a different time, if only B could explain all this to A.

By learning to distinguish between feelings and perceptions, we can learn to express our thoughts and feelings in ways the other person can more easily understand. When B communicates the thoughts and feelings, A may disagree with B's thoughts, but A can probably still see how the B's feelings follow from the thoughts. A can then 1) be persuaded that B is right, 2) try to persuade B by providing evidences for B to consider, or 3) decide that there is nothing that can be done to change B's feelings.

Perceptions, on the other hand, cannot be agreed with or disagreed with; perceptions can't be changed by arguing. Even irrational thoughts can be corrected with more information; perceptions cannot be changed with information alone. Perceptions can change only with repeated experience. To change B's perception that A doesn't care, A needs to keep treating B in a way that shows care. Over time, these new experiences become the basis for a new perception. Alternatively, A could simply avoid doing things that make B feel like A doesn't care; after a while, even if A slips up, B may react with a different perception.