

EMOTIONAL LITERACY

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This chapter is excerpted from When a Man Loves a Woman (Grove Press, New York, 1986). It was written as a guide to men in relationships with women. The chapter will be revised and updated for this volume, to include new thinking and more recent questions.

The term *literacy* is ordinarily applied to the capacity to read and write. But it can also be applied to the knowledge of other matters, including emotions. Emotional literacy, the capacity to understand and deal with emotions, is a skill that women value highly when it is present in men.

An emotionally illiterate man will not know his own emotions and what causes them. He will have no control over the extent to which his emotions express themselves. He will not be aware of other people's feelings and what causes them. And when other people express themselves emotionally, he will not know what to do. An emotionally illiterate person will not be able to communicate his emotions and will not know what to do when he is overwhelmed by them.

Consider Lucas, a 38-year-old accountant who consulted me with his wife for a mediation of their marital difficulties. His wife, Clara, had just given a tight-lipped, tearful account of her anger and hurt about the way things were between them. I turned to him. He looked stiff and uncomfortable.

“How do you feel, Lucas?”

“Well, I feel that she is being unfair.”

“Okay. We'll talk about that later, when we get your point of view, but how does the way she talks make you feel?”

He hesitates, wriggles in his chair, thinks. Finally, looking embarrassed, he adds:

“I guess I don't feel anything.”

“I doubt it. Let's see, do you have any sensations in your body? Some people feel lumps in their stomach, funny sensations...”

“Well, I feel sort of numb all over. Not now so much but when she was talking.”

“Good, what else?”

“And I also feel a tight band around my forehead.”

“Okay. Do you think that it makes you angry when she talks like that?”

“Yeah, angry, I suppose.”

“How about hurt?”

“I guess so... Yeah, hurt and angry,” he says with emphasis.

Lucas' answers are a fairly typical example of garden-variety emotional illiteracy. He eventually learned a great deal about his emotions and Clara's.

At the other extreme of the literacy scale, an emotionally aware man will be conscious of experiencing a variety of emotions at a variety of intensities. He will know what he feels and why. For instance, when he is afraid, he will know when he is mildly anxious or when he is terrified, and he will know why. He will also know how to make these feelings clear to others, as well as *how* and *when* to express them most productively. If another person is not expressing emotions freely, he will know how to investigate what they are. He will know the effect of the combinations of his and another person's emotions, and be able to avoid those situations in which feelings escalate catastrophically. On the other hand, he will also know how emotions can combine between people in a harmonious and positive manner.

A person who cannot read often becomes afraid and defensive about his incapacity and fakes understanding out of embarrassment. Illiterate persons tend to invalidate the importance of reading and writing and often become anti-literate and discount the value of the written word. People who are illiterate often try to compensate in other ways; they try to live a normal life outside of the realm of letters. However, they are never able to escape the fact that they are unable to understand or communicate through the written word.

Likewise, emotionally illiterate persons are often embarrassed by their incapacity and attempt to compensate for their handicap through logical and rational methods. They discount emotions as being meaningless and useless and are embarrassed and defensive when their incapacity is revealed. Since emotional illiteracy is the rule rather than the exception, the anti-emotional consensus acts as a powerful reinforcement of the illiterate condition.

After some months of work, Lucas, reflecting on his emotional upbringing, said: "I remember as a boy being proud of acting like my father and not like my mother. I even imitated how he sat when my mother hassled him with tears and scenes. Later, in the service, I was proud of being very calm, not ice-cold like some guys but calm. We all had contempt for guys who got excited or upset. I notice, lately, that soldier movies make a big thing out of the sergeant having feelings. Ours didn't, I'll tell you that for sure."

The consequences of emotional illiteracy are many. On one hand, when emotions are not acknowledged but are instead suppressed, human relationships become one-dimensional, cold, and simplified.

Rationality and logic prevail at the overt public level. Interactions seem "civilized" and "grown up." But barely hidden beneath the surface, emotions do continue to exist and create the effects of their presence. When suppressed, pent-up emotions distort thinking and communication, produce erratic behavior, and even create physical symptoms such as head-, back-, and stomach-aches and chronic conditions like arthritis, ulcers, colitis, and hypertension. Heart disease and some forms of cancer may also be the result of inadequately expressed feelings, as can be depression and addiction to drugs.

As emotionally illiterate human beings, many men discount and deny their emotions. When we lose track of what we really want in order to go along with other people's wishes, we eventually become angry and persecute them. When events hurt or sadden us and we cannot cry, that sadness becomes the bedrock of our personality. We become walking dead, forever depressed and joyless. When our impulse to embrace, love, kiss and celebrate our loved ones is denied, our hearts shrink. We become attached to inanimate objects that we can then love, discard, and replace with minimal pain.

Our lives may appear to be orderly, productive, and well-organized, but our emotions are in shambles. Our homes, bedrooms, and kitchens are neat and clean, but our closets are piled high with psychic junk and our basements are cluttered with emotional dung. We understand the trajectory of rockets and bombs. We can compute megadeaths. But we cannot direct our loving energies at home, at the office, or across the negotiating table. We have the most advanced medical system in the world, but we have forgotten how to die with dignity.

Alienated from their emotional nature, people become living dead—alive physically but morally deceased. Emotions are unavailable to the emotionally illiterate, but power isn't. Being unaware and unconcerned with feelings gives people a heartless advantage over others who are restrained by their scruples. And when the living dead acquire power, as they so often do, they subject the rest of us to their control, power plays, and violence. When the emotionally illiterate inhabit the corridors of power and dominate whole governments, they threaten the citizenry with apocalypse—war, death, hunger, and disease.

EVALUATING YOUR EMOTIONAL LITERACY

More concretely, I may love a woman and she may love me. We may be fantastic lovers and make fabulous love, but unless we understand and effectively deal with our emotions, our relationship will deteriorate. It'll either unravel relentlessly until there's nothing but loose ends, or it'll become a trap from which only divorce or death can release us.

You may wonder where you stand on the emotional literacy scale. Here is a questionnaire that may help you find out:

1. Do your feelings sometimes get out of control? Anger? Tears? Depression? Do your feelings puzzle you? Are you unable to understand them?
2. Do you sometimes feel empty inside, or dead—that you are missing something very important in life?
3. Do people complain that you lack feeling, that you are cold? Arrogant? Rejecting?
4. Do you find that most of your relationships with women are like turns at the bat—“Three strikes and you're out!” ? Do you have trouble getting involved with a woman beyond a few dates?
5. Do you experience your feelings of love coming and going inexplicably and uncontrollably?
6. Are you embarrassed asking for what you want or talking about being hurt? Do you have trouble saying, “I love you” ?
7. Do you avoid emotional situations like goodbyes or people who are grieving or sick? Do you have trouble crying? Are you embarrassed when someone shows affection for you in public?

If you answered yes to these questions, you have some of the most common symptoms of emotional illiteracy. The more of these experiences you are familiar with, the more you will be able to profit from this section of the book.

WHAT WE FEEL AND WHY

To be emotionally literate we need not only to feel, but to know. We need to know both what it is that we are feeling and what the causes for our feelings are. It is not sufficient to know that we are angry, guilty, happy, or in love. We also need to know the origin of our anger, what causes our guilt, why we are in love.

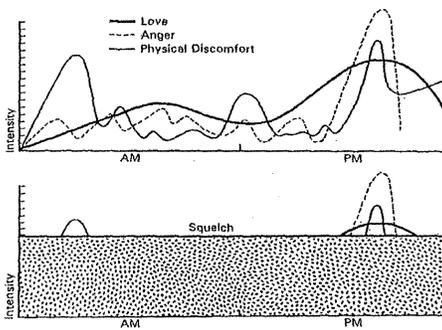
Let's begin by learning to determine *what* we are feeling. There is no convincing final word on precisely how many different emotions there are; an exact taxonomy remains to be developed. But it is fairly clear that there are at most three handfuls of primary emotions—that is to say, emotions that are reasonably distinct from each other—including love, anger, fear, joy, shame, guilt, pride, sadness, hurt, confidence, and hatred.

To begin with, emotions can be divided into positive and negative, depending on whether we seek them or avoid them because they give us pleasure or pain. Every positive emotion seems to have a negative counterpart. For example, love

is the positive counterpart of hatred. Shame is a negative emotion; pride is the positive counterpart. Likewise, guilt and self-righteousness, hurt and well-being, sadness and happiness, fear and confidence—all line up on the positive and negative sides of the same spectrum. When two or more primary emotions occur simultaneously, they combine into secondary emotional hues. Love can occur with shame or with anger or even with its counterpart, hate. When more emotions are added, they can create such a muddy experience that chaos and confusion are the consequence. Jealousy is often such a compost of emotions—anger, fear, shame, love, sexual desire—that it is both incomprehensible and unmanageable.

Emotions can also be strong or weak. Each of the emotions mentioned above has powerful and weak manifestations. For instance, anger can go from minor irritation to blind rage. Shame can go from slight embarrassment to intense blush-provoking humiliation. People who are emotionally illiterate may recognize their emotions only at the very intense end of the spectrum.

Figure 1 The Squelching of Feelings and the Resulting Contents of Consciousness



Men, for instance, are often either completely unaware of mild forms of anger or unable to speak about them. Yet, when they get angry enough, men will express their anger and know that they are feeling it. The same is true of men's awareness of and capacity to express their feelings of love. Men have a tendency to feel love only when it is at the very intense end of the spectrum, and to feel it very intensely but, when the feeling wanes, suddenly find themselves utterly out of love.

As in a CB radio, where all signals of a certain intensity or less are completely suppressed and only those that are strong enough will break through and be heard, people with a high level of emotional squelch will experience themselves as having no major feelings for the most part of their waking lives. With the exception of sudden breakthroughs at certain dramatic moments, they experience their lives as rational and emotionally free. They tend to see occasional experiences of irrepressible emotion as unpredictable, highly unwanted disruptions in their everyday lives, and are not aware of the constant interplay of emotions below the level of consciousness that is the cause for the outbursts.

Figure 1 is a graphic example of what I am trying to explain. In a typical day, Lucas may have many emotions taking place in his body, but he is aware of only the tips of his emotional iceberg; one brief experience of love in the morning; another of anger in the afternoon.

Another example: A man who is in love with a woman who is being less than candid about her affections for another man may, after weeks or months, suddenly explode into a jealous rage. The blinding feeling that overcomes him is a combination of strong emotions: of love and anger because of her unfair treatment, of envy and jealousy because he feels that she is giving her love to another, of humiliation because of his powerlessness, and of rage because of her deceit. All of these together will be experienced as an amorphous and overwhelming emotional chaos that he'll likely want to suppress because of its unmanageable nature.

If he had been more emotionally literate, he might have noticed his feelings several weeks before and expressed, rather than hidden, them. He would have known the specific feelings involved and their intensity and how they combined with each other. That is:

1. He is very much in love,
2. He feels needy of her attention,
3. He is suspicious of his beloved's relationship with another, and
4. These three feelings—love, neediness, and suspicion—led to fear, hurt, and anger and combined into jealousy.

Knowing this, he might have been able to express these feelings earlier when they were at a much lower level of intensity. If he had, she might have changed the course of her actions: She might have been more aware that he really loves her. She might have decided to treat him more honestly and clarified her feelings about him. One way or another his expressions of feeling could have made the uncontrollable breakthrough less likely and also could have alerted her to his feelings so that she could do something about them. But how was he to determine these emotional facts when he didn't really know about his feelings in the first place?

LEARNING EMOTIONAL LITERACY

There is a strong tendency in our culture to denigrate the learning of emotional skills, especially for men. A man who wants to learn about these matters is not going to receive a lot of support in his everyday life.

Learning emotional literacy in our unsympathetic environment will be difficult. Expressions or inquiries about emotions will be deflected or discounted, and there won't be many interested in assisting with the task. It's important to remember that in order to learn emotional literacy it is helpful to be in an emotionally nurturing environment in which people applaud and support the learning of these skills. Therefore, a major first step is to find such an environment.

Friends, church groups, men's groups, a human potential workshop, or a supportive therapy group can be the source of backup for men who want to learn emotional literacy. A nurturing lover can be very helpful, of course, but should not be the only support, since emotional learning can be exhausting for the teacher. It's a good idea to take the pressure off the single lover, who can then be helpful without being central to the process. There are also situations in which whole families and groups of people are open to emotional dialogue; such cooperative environments are ideal for learning emotional literacy.

Like any complex skill, it takes time and patience to learn emotional literacy. Ideally, it would be learned during childhood in an emotionally literate environment. When it's not, as is generally the case, several complications emerge. First, when learning does not occur at the developmentally appropriate age, it will be more difficult later. Second, while failing to develop the skill, the child will probably develop poor habits that will need to be unlearned before learning can occur. When people learn to play an instrument or type or read on their own, they often have to go through a difficult period of unlearning counter-productive habits before further effective learning can occur.

This is also true of emotional literacy: it is more difficult to learn later in life and requires unlearning certain bad emotional habits that interfere with it. However, while difficult, the task is far from impossible given the desire and resolve to do so.

UNLEARNING EMOTIONAL POWER ABUSE

Emotions have power. They have an impact that at times can be overwhelming to others. We are aware of the power of emotions when we hold them back so as not to upset their target. We abuse power when we unload them without warning on the unwary, unprepared, or unprotected.

We further abuse our emotions' power when we use them in power plays that are a sort of emotional blackmail, a tactic used to intimidate others into some form of compliance. To give our feelings more power and justification, we couple them with judgments, accusations, exaggerations, and lies, and we wield them like clubs.

For instance, when John is slow in doing the evening's dishes, Mary would do best to say something like: "John, we agreed that if I cooked, you would do the dishes, and you are making me angry the way you are dragging the job out; please do as we agreed and finish the dishes."

But because she is feeling frustrated and powerless, and in order to get him to do as they agreed, she might say: "Goddammit, John, I am getting sick and tired of your dragging your feet. I can't believe how far you'll go not to do your share around here; you are setting a fine example of laziness for the kids, is all I can say..."

Common sense indicates that other people affect us emotionally. Yet, it has been said that it is not possible for one person to make another person feel something. Some pop psychologists argue that only you can make yourself happy, for instance, or that if someone gets you angry, it's only because you allow it. According to this theory, John and Mary are ultimately and completely responsible for how they feel.

When you think about this, however, it seems obvious that one person's actions can create emotions in another. If Mary suddenly starts yelling about the dishes in the middle of a pleasant conversation with John, he is very likely to react emotionally. Perhaps after being scared, he will feel hurt, and after feeling hurt, he will be angry. Meanwhile

John's feelings are affecting Mary, who might respond with guilt, anger, or hopelessness. All these reactions will be the consequence of Mary's outburst. Emotions have real energy that sets up a powerful field of influence and affects people in its physical vicinity.

John, for example, has practically no choice but to feel scared when Mary suddenly shouts at him about the dishes. The hurt and later anger may be optional, but all three feelings are the consequence, to some extent, of her behavior.

A common response of an emotionally illiterate person to another person's feelings is to disclaim responsibility. If John is scared, hurt, or angry, Mary's reaction may be "That is your problem," or "You are choosing to be angry," because she feels no duty to respond or react to them. This discounts the whole realm of emotional responsibility and flies in the face of the obvious interconnections between people. Women often complain of such responses coming from men and feel them to be major obstacles to emotional dialogue.

The truth is that we are able to cause feelings in other people, and they can cause feelings in us. That capacity can be abused when we assault each other with anger, or try to create guilt with our hurt. Only when this is acknowledged can an emotionally literate dialogue occur. To deny this fact is a form of emotional illiteracy.

People are intimately affected by each other's emotions, whether or not these emotions are fully acknowledged. In fact, it is probably true that the less the emotions are discussed, the more they are discounted and the more they affect their hosts.

The discounting of emotions can take several forms. On one hand we can discount our own. We may know that we are feeling something, but we purposely brush it aside. Doing this can lead to the gradual loss of awareness that we are feeling at all. On the other hand, we can discount other people's feelings. Here again we may be aware that another person is having a strong emotion and decide to ignore it, or we may have lost the capacity of being aware of other people's feelings altogether.

Even when discounted, however, the emotions continue. People think they interact rationally, but at the same time, at a very real but unacknowledged level, the emotional dialogue proceeds on another channel with its own puzzling consequences. One major consequence of discounting emotions is that they can stimulate each other and snowball and eventually rage out of control. Some people feel that emotional outbursts of this sort are a healthy blowout that cleans the system of emotional trash. In a way, it is true that such outbursts release some of the tension of discounted feelings, but usually somebody gets hurt in the process, often women or children, leaving behind emotional wounds and scars that sometimes never heal.

It takes emotional literacy to understand and direct the emotional dialogue, the feeling content of a relationship. Consider the following statement:

"You have been *absolutely impossible* today. I'm ready to *throw in the towel*."

This sentence, said in anger, contains an exaggeration ("absolutely"), a judgment ("impossible"), and a metaphor ("throw in the towel"). Clearly, the person is angry and probably has reason enough, but the power plays with which the anger is expressed are an example of emotional illiteracy.

The above statement is unlikely to communicate what the person is really feeling, how intensely, or why. It is even less likely to bring about a solution to the problem that evidently exists between the two people. It is more likely to invite a response in kind. For example:

"Oh, yeah? Well have you looked at yourself in the mirror lately? You have been such a bitch that you're lucky I'm still around. Go ahead, leave, see if I care, but do it soon because I may be gone by the time you do..." etc.

Again, this response contains no clear message of what the person is feeling, how strongly, or why. Instead, it is an escalation of chaotic emotions (hurt and anger, self-righteousness, power plays, blaming, insults, name-calling, exaggeration, threats, and judgments). Much better would be to say: “Now wait a minute. I want to say something. When you talk like that, when you say that I have been absolutely impossible and talk about throwing in the towel, that makes me really angry, you hurt my feelings, and you scare me. What is your point? What is bothering you?”

This last statement may seem clumsy but it is an emotionally literate response that will produce positive problem-solving responses. It avoids three major errors by doing the following.

1. It *warns* the recipient that something is about to be said, and therefore, it is more likely to fall on sympathetic ears. (“Now wait a minute. I want to say something.”)
2. It *describes* the *emotions* being experienced without judgments, accusations, exaggerations, or power plays. (Angry, hurt, scared.)
3. It *describes* the *actions* that are the cause of the emotions being felt, thus leaving little doubt about the reasons for the feelings. (“When you talk like that, when you say that I have been absolutely impossible and talk about throwing in the towel.”)

By doing all of the above without judgments, or power abuse, this way of talking creates an optimal climate for emotionally literate, problem-solving dialogue.

DEALING WITH EVERYDAY EMOTIONAL TRANSACTIONS

To deal with some of the major emotional issues ordinarily not attended to in people's everyday social transactions, it is necessary to know:

1. What and how strongly we feel.
2. What other people are doing to contribute to how we feel.
3. Our intuitive suspicions and explanations about what causes other people's actions.
4. What it is that we want and don't want from people.
5. How to listen to and assimilate all of the above when we are the recipient.

For instance, after a hard day's work, Anthony comes home and finds that Sandy, instead of being home as he hoped, is working late with a new account. Anthony is disappointed, hurt, frustrated. He wants to strangle Sandy, her boss, and the new account. Realizing that he is irrationally angry, he suppresses his fury. He suspects that the boss is keeping Sandy at the office because he is turned on to her and that she reciprocates his attraction. He assumes that the two of them and the new account are having a rip-roaring dinner party at his favorite new restaurant.

When she finally comes home, he is calm but sullen and lifeless. He responds with irritation to her enthusiasm about the new account and does not acknowledge her apology for leaving him stranded.

The essentials of an emotionally literate dialogue require that he:

1. Tell her how he felt when he got home—hurt, angry, humiliated.

2. What she did that caused his feelings—stay out late with the boss on short notice.
3. What he suspects is going on with the boss—carrying on a flirtation.
4. What he wants her to do next time—call him at work and give him some warning.

If, in turn, she responds in an emotionally literate way, she will:

5. Listen sympathetically without defensiveness, acknowledge how he feels, and validate whatever truth there may be in his suspicions.

If all these steps are taken, the likelihood is that this difficult situation will be dealt with in a positive way, and that Anthony and Sandy will be able to continue their relationship in harmony. If not, and emotional chaos is allowed to take place, this incident could be the beginning of the disintegration of their relationship.

And now for the basics of emotional literacy.

Here are some simple exercises that break down the process of learning emotional literacy, step by step. They are like training wheels on a child's bicycle that make the complicated task easier to master.

The seven basic steps are:

1. Asking for permission to deliver an emotionally laden statement.
2. Making a statement without judgment or accusation in which we inform another person of how we felt in connection with what he or she did.
3. Accepting without defensiveness another person's statement about how our actions felt.
4. Telling another person of an intuition, theory, or suspicion about what he is doing or why he is doing it.
5. Validating another person's intuition, theory, or suspicion by searching for its truth rather than denying it.
6. Apologizing for committing an error.
7. Accepting an apology.

1. Asking for Permission: Whenever you are planning to say anything relating to your emotions, whether positive or negative, always prepare the person, preferably by specifying what you are about to say.

Example: “Can I tell you something I like about you?” or, “I have been feeling something that upsets me lately. Can I tell you?” or, “There is something going on between us that I don't like. Are you interested in hearing about it?”

When asking a person's permission to speak in this manner, we are: a) giving him a warning that something difficult is coming; b) giving him a choice as to whether he wants to deal with it at this time, and; c) giving him a chance to prepare himself and be ready to listen. When we follow this approach, we are ensuring that our statements will fall on fertile soil and will have a chance to generate productive responses. There has to be a genuine choice. We need to be willing to accept that the timing of our statement might not be particularly good and to wait for a better moment. Also, we are avoiding, as far as possible, guilt, defensiveness, and anger in the other person.

2. Making an Action/Feeling Statement: An action/feeling statement describes in one simple, understandable sentence what emotion occurred in connection with another person's action. "When you [*action*], I felt [*emotion*]." This statement is designed to inform the person of an emotion or emotions you had in association with his or her behavior. It is designed not to provoke guilt or defensiveness because it contains no judgment, accusation, or reproach.

An action/feeling statement simply states that a verifiable action resulted in an undeniable feeling.

For instance:

John: "When you wanted to stop talking on the phone last night, I felt hurt at first, and then angry."

Assuming that Mary can agree she hung up the phone yesterday, and that she understands how John felt (hurt and angry), this statement will have been successful in its purpose: to provide Mary with information about how John felt last night when she hung up. It is a way for John to be heard, and to express his feelings in a way that doesn't hurt or abuse Mary.

In the expression of an action/feeling statement, a number of errors can be made.

Error A: Confusing Action and Motivation. When attempting to describe an action, it is possible to go beyond a simple statement, such as, "When you hung up the telephone," or "When you arrived late," or "When you interrupted me," and add to it a judgment, such as: "When you so *rudely* hung up on me," or "When you *humiliated* me by being late," or "When you *showed your disregard for my opinion* by interrupting me." One thus includes information of a completely different nature than the description of an action. These judgments constitute a theory about the other person's motivation and a judgment about those reasons. These elaborations are likely to get you into trouble because they may be incorrect and because they judge and blame and will create guilt, anger, and other complications that it is the purpose of this exercise to avoid. Step No. 4, outlined below, is designed to express these intuitions, fears about other people's motivation, and paranoid fantasies. But these should not be included with the action/feeling statement so as not to cloud the emotional landscape.

Error B: Confusion of Feeling and Thought. In trying to express a feeling, we often name a thought instead.

For instance: "When you interrupted our conversation, *I felt that you were angry*," or, "When you interrupted our conversation, *I felt that you weren't interested in what I had to say*."

These aren't feelings at all; they're again thoughts, theories about what was going on with the other person at the time. A proper feeling would be anger, fear, or shame, in varying degrees.

A more subtle version of this confusion is a statement such as: "When you interrupted our conversation, *I felt rejected*," which is an error as well.

"Feeling rejected" is not really a statement of a feeling and does not give an idea of what you were feeling. Were you angry? Were you sad? Were you embarrassed? Were you ashamed? When you say that you *felt* rejected, you are saying that the other person rejected you, and you are stating a theory about the other person's motivation: a desire to reject you. This is a thought rather than an emotion. No one can argue with you if you say that you experienced a certain feeling, assuming that you are being truthful. But a theory about why the other person is doing something may be incorrect.

3. Accepting an Action/Feeling Statement: For an emotionally literate communication to be effective, it has to be received as well as sent. You might ask yourself why Mary should care about John's feeling. You might tell yourself that this kind of disclosure is self-indulgent and immature. But that would be discounting John's feelings, and we

already know the kind of trouble ignoring people's feelings can cause. An emotionally literate recipient of such an expression will take careful note of the emotion and when it happened. Mary may already know that John was angry and hurt, or she might be surprised. She may understand why he feels this way, or she may be puzzled by it. In any case, all she needs is to have the information and to acknowledge it. Then she can start the process of emotional dialogue in which feelings are given proper recognition. By doing this, Mary learns about John's responses to the situation, and she gives him an opportunity to let go of his bad feeling.

In the above case of Mary and John, it will suffice for Mary to acknowledge that, yes, she understands that when she wanted to stop talking, John felt hurt and angry. This acknowledgment can be in the form of a nod or by saying, "I hear you," or "I understand that when I ended the conversation, you felt hurt, and then angry."

But let's say John says, "When you so rudely hung up yesterday, I felt that you didn't care even a little bit for me."

In order to extract an action/feeling statement from the above, Mary will have to ignore the judgments and accusation.

She might respond, "Now wait, let me get this straight. You are saying that when I stopped our conversation yesterday, which I remember doing, you felt something, but I don't know what. Were you angry?"

"No, I felt you were being rude."

"Okay, your opinion is that I was being rude, but would you be willing to tell me how you felt? I'm interested in how you felt at the time."

"I don't know. I felt that you didn't like me."

"Well, you still haven't told me how you felt."

"Hurt, and then angry."

"Okay, now I know what I wanted to know; you felt hurt and angry."

By now, you, dear reader, may say: "People don't talk like that in the real world, maybe in California, but not anywhere I know. I'm not willing to talk like that. I'd be embarrassed to death."

That's a fine action/feeling statement: "When speaking in an emotionally literate way, I feel embarrassment." I recognize the problem and can only agree with you: People don't usually talk that way and it is embarrassing and difficult at times. What can I say beyond *that it works*?

What does it do? It creates a favorable climate for emotional expression coupled with rationality. It cools down unruly emotions, gives people an opportunity to express those emotions in a way least likely to result in further hurt, and lays the groundwork for further safe, productive, emotional dialogue. It informs people of each other's emotional topography—the lay of the land in the world of their feeling—so that they can more easily find their way around in it in the future.

Error C: Defensiveness and Guilt. The ever-present danger in being the recipient of another's feeling/action statements, especially if imperfectly formulated, is guilt and defensiveness.

"I thought you were done talking; that's why I wanted to stop;" or, "Rude? What's so rude about ending a conversation? You were being rude by talking on and on about your troubles with Anne;" or, "Angry? You have a lot of nerve being angry. I should be angry about the waste of my time;" or, "Hurt? Don't be so self-indulgent;" and so on.

These responses are beside the point. First things first. If Mary feels misunderstood, guilty, or angry, she can talk about that later. Right now what matters are John's feelings, not Mary's. It is just a matter of taking turns. First, it is important that Mary acknowledge what John felt when she wanted to stop talking. Then, she can talk about how she felt.

Sometimes not being defensive is very difficult. It requires biting one's tongue and talking oneself into patience and forbearance. But it is worth doing for the sake of a continuing orderly dialogue. It cools down the potential escalation of emotionally laden conversations and gives empathy an opportunity to come to the surface. But more importantly, it is the only fair thing to do when a friend or loved one is in emotional distress.

4. Expressing your intuitions: The above conversational suggestions are designed to express action/feeling statements to the exclusion of all other potentially confusing material. But surely, we can't speak very long without dealing with our suspicions about other people's motivations and intentions. The next step in emotionally literate dialogue is designed to deal with them.

In our daily lives we are constantly trying to make sense of other people's behavior. When we are not in good communication with them, we are forced to make up theories and guess what they are up to by using our intuition and whatever information is available. We don't normally go to the people in question and investigate why they are doing whatever they are doing. We don't because we don't know how and don't trust that we'll get an honest answer if we do.

Behind John's hurt and anger about Mary ending their phone conversation, there is a fear, perhaps an assumption, that Mary doesn't like him. Having once stated how he felt and when, he could now (after asking for permission) express these fears as follows:

“I have a fear that you don't like me, that you are angry at me.”

This states what I call a paranoid fantasy. It puts in an objective manner an intuition about what the other person is thinking or feeling. It is stated tentatively, not as a fact, but as an intuition that may in fact be mistaken or ill-conceived. The intuition may be incorrect, but it is real because it exists in the speaker's mind. Its reality has to be acknowledged, and its truth should be evaluated. Since people's intuitions are rarely completely mistaken, it gives the recipient the opportunity to search his or her own consciousness to see if there is some truth in it.

Paranoia is considered a form of madness. When it presents itself in the full-blown form of a persistent delusion of persecution (for example, the F.B.I., C.I.A., and K.G.B. are trying to poison me because of my political ideas), it is clearly associated with insanity.

In my opinion, paranoia has its origin in heightened awareness. Our intuition is a powerful reality-sensing tool. We are aware of many things that are never spoken of, or are discounted and denied by others. When we sense something and it is denied, we have two options. Either we forget whatever it is our intuition brought to our attention, or if we are stubborn and don't give up so easily, we persist in our idea. Perhaps we try to find our own answers. If we continue to get denials and dismissals of our intuitions, our efforts to figure out what's going on may lead us far off the mark, especially if we have an active imagination. As an example, John's simple intuition becomes elaborated from:

“Mary is unhappy,” to

“Mary is unhappy with me,” to

“Mary is angry with me,” to

“Mary hates me.”

Now John needs a reason for which Mary hates him. He talks to Nancy, Mary's best friend, who offhandedly guesses that Mary is bothered by John's sexy manner. That's it! John concludes:

“Mary hates me because she thinks I'm a chauvinist pig.”

Meanwhile, Mary hasn't got a clue about what is going on. In fact, she was short with John, but it had to do with being tired, anxious about another phone call she was expecting, and slightly annoyed with John because he kept talking about his troubles with Anne.

So John's intuition was somewhat correct (as intuitions almost always are). Consequently, when he checks it out with Mary, she will be able to validate his experience to a certain extent. But suppose she does the usual in these circumstances. Suppose when he asks if she's angry, she answers, “Angry? Not at all. I feel fine. I like you, John.”

Error D: Discounting an Intuition. This response, well-meaning as it may be, leaves John confused. Mary likes him (maybe), but what about his sense that there is something wrong? He'll have to forget about it.

Emotionally, this is a catastrophic event. Is he happy because Mary likes him (or so she says), or is he angry because she is denying that something is wrong? Does he trust her? Does he like her? It's enough to make his head spin. His mind is messed up and his emotions confused.

Confusion and heightened paranoia are the usual result of such a discount. On the other hand the discovery and acknowledgment of a grain of truth in the intuition has a clarifying effect.

5. Responding to an Intuition: Mary's correct, emotionally literate response would be to search for the grain of truth in John's intuition. What I mean by grain of truth is that part of the intuition that is correct, as opposed to the part that is off the mark. Hearing the grain of truth in his intuition will provide an explanation that will help John let go of the part that is truly paranoid. It will help him reconcile with reality by validating the portion of his experience that is valid.

In any event, Mary's above response to John's intuition does not validate his experience. He insists:

“Somehow I thought something was amiss. Am I wrong?”

After thinking about it, Mary suggests:

“Actually, John, I was angry after you called, not at you, but at Nancy—maybe that's it.”

John may still not feel that this explains what he's thinking about the conversation. He goes on:

“Well, that doesn't deal with my intuition that you were angry with me when we talked, *before* you spoke with Nancy. Was there something wrong while we were talking?”

This causes Mary to reconsider. Her annoyance with John was minor, but he does have a habit of going on and on over the phone. Since he seems willing to hear her criticism, maybe she can tell him without a lot of complications.

“Actually, no, I am not really angry at you. But when you called, I was tired and expecting another call, and slightly irritated with what you wanted to talk about. I thought I was giving you hints that I didn't want to talk about Anne, but you didn't seem to catch on. Does that make sense?”

John's reaction to this is one of relief. He was right; something was wrong. Mary is not angry at him, however, and he now knows what the problem was. He understands his and her feelings at the time and where they came from. He realizes he has tried her patience going on and on about Anne. He can now believe that she truly likes him. The facts of the situation and his feelings fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. He feels OK; he has been validated.

Sometimes the entire intuition will be correct.

“Yes, John, I am angry with you; in fact, I haven't liked you very much since I met you.”

Harsh words indeed, but better for John to hear them clearly expressed than to have to live in a confusing and potentially hurtful climate.

They may go on to a discussion about why she doesn't like him, or about their relationship; his tendency to talk on and on and her inability to be clear when she doesn't want to talk. Or they may drop the matter. Either way, they are several steps ahead in the process of understanding each other, and have avoided the potential proliferation of paranoia and suspicion.

To recapitulate, in an emotionally literate dialogue, a person who has an intuition of something amiss, after asking permission, states it as an unconfirmed intuition seeking to be validated. The emotionally literate response to such an intuition is a search for and production of a validating grain of truth.

Whether John gets complete validation or not, he will feel better than when he started, if only because he tried. Future interactions with Mary may or may not improve matters. Most likely, if carried on in this emotionally literate way, they will. At any rate, the correct response to an intuition is an earnest and truthful search and statement of whatever may be going on in the recipient's emotional life that could possibly account for the intuition expressed. It will help John let go of those parts that aren't true and will replace confusion with knowledge and information.

Being able to discuss each other's feelings can bring spectacular results when trouble develops between two people. When both people are committed to frank cooperative communication without power plays or lies, most emotionally difficult situations can be dealt with quickly and effectively.

6. Making an Apology: The next step concerns the fine art of acknowledging one's mistakes and begging for forgiveness for whatever harm we may have caused.

The thought of making a heartfelt apology strikes terror in the average man. Losing face, backing off, eating crow—all bring back memories of schoolyard struggles that tested and prepared us for our manhood. We have learned that standing one's ground is manly, that backing down is weak and humiliating. Yet, a truly emotionally literate man will admit his mistakes and apologize if he caused any harm. Being emotionally literate definitely goes against the old-fashioned stereotype of “being a man.” Whenever you behave in an emotionally literate way you are choosing to change yourself into a different kind of a man, a man who acknowledges and deals with his emotions.

To go back to John and Mary's phone conversation, emotionally illiterate behavior does not occur in isolated transactions but in patterns. Two ways we engage in these patterns are to either: a) do something we don't want to do; or b) do more than our share in a given situation. We Rescue. We do these things for people whom we see as being Victims unable to take responsibility for themselves. Sometimes we even Rescue people who don't expect or want to be Rescued.

In the situation between Mary and John, Mary could have Rescued John by continuing the original phone conversation for another fifteen minutes, which, in addition to being something she did not want to do, might have caused her to

miss Nancy's call. If she did Rescue John, it would be because she assumed that he would be hurt or upset if she cut him short. She may have rescued John without John knowing it or particularly wanting to be rescued. The fact that he didn't like to be cut short does not imply that he would want her to continue a conversation she was not interested in.

The inevitable outcome of Rescuing people is anger : Anger in the Rescuer who gets fed up with doing things she doesn't want to do or with doing more than her share; and anger in the Victim for being condescended to as someone who can't take care of himself. Inevitably, the Rescuer will eventually Persecute the Victim, or the Victim will Persecute the Rescuer. Anger will spill freely in all directions.

The best way of interrupting this cycle is to stop Rescuing and apologize. But stopping Rescuing is difficult. One has to know what one wants and doesn't want to do and what is a fair distribution of a relationship's responsibilities.

“Do I want to continue this conversation?”

“Do I want to have sex?”

“Do I want to help John fix the car?”

“Do I want to go to the ball game?”

“Do I want to eat out tonight?”

“Is it fair for me to do the dishes if Mary cooks, or should I also sweep the floor?”

“Is it fair that I always have to initiate sex?”

“Do I always pay for dinner when we go out? Do I want to?”

The correct thing to do when we discover that we have been Rescuing is one of self-criticism rather than anger, an apology rather than an accusation. In addition, when we have Rescued and want to stop, it is important to do so with a gentle, nurturing explanation rather than an abrupt withdrawal or sulk.

There are many times when we discover that we have made a mistake. At those times, the emotionally literate transaction is to acknowledge one's error and apologize by saying something, such as the following:

“When I [*action*] I made a mistake. I apologize.”

Mary:

“When I talked to you on the phone last night, after a few minutes I really didn't want to go on talking, so I started getting angry with you, even though it was my responsibility to let you know that I wanted to stop. I am sorry I let it go. I should have let you know earlier.”

Error E: *Blaming the Victim.* Mary could have said:

“Listen, John. I'm sorry that I let you go on and on about Anne because I am sick of hearing about it, so I apologize, okay?”

Obviously, this is an example of a statement that falls very short of a heartfelt apology. Mary is actually blaming John for her mistake. It is an example of emotional illiteracy that is worse than no apology at all.

7. Accepting the Apology: Again, the correct response to such a statement, as is the case with the response to an action/feeling statement, is to acknowledge the facts that are being stated.

Error F: Bashing the Righteous. John could use this opportunity to take out his anger and hurt feelings on Mary.

“Well, it's about time you apologize for patronizing me. I resent it, and I hate you for it.”

This won't do. If John is angry or hurt, he can use an action/feeling statement to deal with his reaction:

“It makes me angry that you have let me go on and on about Anne when you didn't want to. I am also hurt. Thanks for the apology, though.”

The seven steps presented in this chapter will go a long way toward providing a positive emotional environment for emotions to be expressed, whether it be between friends, lovers, or co-workers or within a family. As people become skilled in the use of these techniques, they become second nature, and people lose their initial awkwardness. The techniques simply become part of everyday routine, similar to brushing one's teeth, raking the leaves, or walking the dog. Once assimilated, they contribute to a well-ordered life in which emotions are acknowledged and integrated into our lives.