

FOCUS ON FEELING Not JUST CONTENT!

Prepared By Jim Messina, Ph.D., CCMHC, NCC, DCMHS

Assistant Professor, Troy University Tampa Bay Site

This topic available on www.coping.us

FOCUS ON FEELINGS RATHER THAN ON CONTENT

- Effective communication can result if individuals follow this simple principle
- An effective communicator should be able to avoid getting caught up in the Content of another's message and get to the FEELINGS behind the message

What is Content?

- Content is the “thing” behind the message
- Content is the “what” of a message
- It is the issue or subject of a message
- Winning or losing is the outcome of content–focused communication
- It is frequently value laden
- It can conjure up positive or negative opinions
- Winning or losing is the outcome of content–focused communication

More on content:

- Disagreements and arguments frequently are centered around the CONTENT of messages
- It can elicit strong or weak emotional reactions
- Hurt or bad feelings can arise as a result of content-oriented communication
- Content is important because it involves work, finances, sex, children, jobs, homes, cars, religion, time, politics, school, fashion, etc.
- Over-concentration on content can lead to interpersonal stagnation and stress-related illness
- Ignoring CONTENT, however, can lead to confusion and a lack of problem-solving goals with the appropriate corrective action being taken. Clearly a balance is needed

What are Feelings?

- FEELINGS are the lifeline to communication
- They are the “process” behind the message
- They are “how” the message is being communicated
- FEELINGS are value-free
- There are no right or wrong feelings
- There is no “winning” or “losing” by focusing on feelings
- Having one's feelings understood and respected by another leads to a sense of being respected and cared for by that person
- Trust can evolve when we sense that others know how we are feeling

Focusing on Content in Communication has three pitfalls

- 1. Parallel Listening:** Parallel listening occurs when a listener ignores the feelings of a speaker, concentrating solely on content. Parallel listening is a “discounting” of the speaker by ignoring feelings being expressed and adding only to the flow of content, even when it is relevant to the subject being discussed. Parallel listening typically results in a listener ignoring the feelings behind what is being discussed by a speaker, leading to the speaker's discouraging impression of being turned off.
- 2. Jumping to Assumptions** The second pitfall of concentrating on content to the exclusion of feelings is jumping to the assumption that you know what the other is talking about and feeling. Discussing “things” with no effort to clarify “feelings” can lead to disastrous results. For example, two people can be talking objectively about getting pregnant with the result that the wife gets pregnant. Unfortunately, the one who did not want to get pregnant had feelings ignored because they were never openly expressed. The ignored person can build up resentment and hurt, which someday could blow up into a communication crisis.
- 3. Competition for the Control of Thinking:** The third pitfall of focusing on content is the competition for who is smarter, more intelligent, has more common sense, and knows more facts. People who communicate only at the content level can fall into the “who is best” and “who is right” trap. One-upmanship in communication is often the result of being content oriented. This discounting of the other's intelligence, knowledge, and common sense can result in alienation, isolation, lack of trust, and lack of respect between people

Benefits of Effective Communications

1. Effective Listening

People who focus on the feelings of messages being sent provide others with nonjudgmental acceptance. This helps the others feel listened to, cared about, and understood. In order to “hear” the feelings of others, a person must listen not only with the head, but also with the heart. Feelings are the tools by which people communicate with one another. Having one's feelings listened to makes a person feel respected, accepted, and draws people closer together.

2. Effective Responding

A second positive outcome of "feelings focus" is facilitative responses shared by a person who encourages others to continue communicating openly and trustingly. Responses that attempt to reflect back to the speakers “the feelings behind the message” provide a mirror for the speakers to look at in order to clarify how they feel about an issue. This clarification of feelings concerning the message can lead to mutual understanding and respect, resulting in improved communication.

3. Productive Problem Solving with Effective Communication

Effective listening and facilitative responses result in a third benefit of focusing on feelings: productive problem solving. Conflicts and immobilization often result not just from disagreement over CONTENT but more importantly, because one or both parties sense that their FEELINGS are being ignored or discounted. Productive problem solving is not purely content focused, rather it includes and values the feelings of both parties concerning the issue at hand. By valuing their feelings, both parties feel cared for, understood and accepted. This provides the energy for creative problem solving and attaining mutually beneficial solutions.