

Why Feelings Matter & What To Do With Them, Part 2

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The IAAA Steps

IAAA may sound like a retirement fund, but it is not. IAAA stands for:

Identify, Accept, Attribute, Act. These steps are a culmination of the three rules above. They are the four steps to maximizing the value of our emotions and gaining energy and guidance from them.

First, **Identify the feeling**

Second, **Accept it.** Do not judge it as bad or good.

Third, try to discern the reasons you are having a feeling, or **Attribute it to a cause.**

Fourth, identify whether **there is an Action that the emotion calls for**, and if so, take it appropriately.

What are you feeling right now? Close your eyes and ask yourself that question. If the answer is “overwhelmed,” don’t despair. The process of making friends with your emotions may seem, complicated, or even insurmountable, but you can do it. Yes, it will take time. But if you keep working at it, you will start to notice small changes in yourself.

The changes may be subtle and may at first seem unimportant. But each time that you have an emotional realization that’s new to you, it’s a sign that you are growing and learning.

If you find yourself struggling too much, or on the verge of giving up, I encourage you to look for a therapist to help you. A skilled therapist will be able to help you build these skills, so that you can become fully connected, present and alive.

Question(s)

1. *What part of IAAA are most challenging for you?*

5. Learning to Express Your Feelings Effectively

Remember, emotions themselves are not bad; it's what we do with them that matters. A very effective way to **harness and use the power of our emotions is to express them appropriately**. That means not passively, not aggressively, but assertively and with compassion.

The word “assertive” is thrown around a lot in business trainings and seminars. But the word does have a specific meaning. When you express something assertively, you are expressing it in a such a way that the other person can take it in.

In order to be truly assertive, you must have compassion and empathy, meaning an awareness of how what you are about to say may affect the other person.

Let's say that you're working hard on all of the steps in the Identifying & Naming Exercise, and you're becoming more aware of when you are angry.

One day, you're waiting in line at the movies and a sleazy guy cuts the line right in front of you. To handle this situation assertively, you would not keep your anger to yourself; you wouldn't just whisper it to your friend; you wouldn't yell at the guy or call him a jerk (although you may want to).

You would tap him on the shoulder, mindful (with compassion) of the possibility of embarrassing him, and say quietly but firmly, “Excuse me sir, but the end of the line is back there.” Hopefully he will look sheepish and go to his proper place. But of course it is possible that he will not.

Express

The point here is that you express yourself instead of bottling up your feelings so that they may eat away at you from the inside. Although you can't control another person's response, if you are assertive, you will likely, no matter what he does or does not do, feel better for having taken the appropriate action. And your anger will not be bottled up, only to cause a headache or backache later.

Let's look at another example. Let's say that it's Friday, and you're looking forward to going out with your friend Betsy tonight. Right before you leave work your boss calls you into her office and tells you that she's disappointed with your work on the Chris P. Bacon account. She tells you that you must step it up or she will have to remove you from the account.

After laying all this negative feedback on you, she sends you a text to “enjoy” your weekend. Your mood has plummeted due to the unexpected verbal thrashing you've just received. You head off to meet Betsy in a black mood.

In this situation, you have a choice to make. Choice #1: You can choose not to tell Betsy about the incident due to embarrassment, or because you just want to put it behind you and enjoy the evening. Choice #2: You can tell Betsy what has just happened.

If you make Choice #1, chances are it will backfire. You will not be able to hide your upset feelings from Betsy, and she probably will spend much of the evening wondering why you're not your usual fun self tonight. You may end up drinking too much, appearing sullen, or taking it out on her somehow.

If you make Choice #2, here's a description of how it might go:

"Betsy, I'm so glad we're going out tonight because I really need a distraction. I am so upset. You won't believe what happened at work today. I feel misunderstood, underappreciated and angry."

Tell Betsy the story and how you feel about it. Let her offer some possible interpretation, give you some solace, or just listen. After you've had this conversation, Betsy will feel closer to you as a friend. You will feel closer to Betsy. You will have gotten it off your chest, and you will have a far better chance of putting aside and having a better evening.

Please note a very important factor here. Betsy did not help you solve the problem. She simply listened. **The magic of feeling better and coping better lies in putting words to your feelings and sharing them.** If you have never experienced this magic, it is extremely important that you try it. If it's too hard to do it with a friend or family, contact a professional therapist or counselor. They are virtually all trained to help you learn this process.

All of the principles described above apply to all emotions, like diffidence, discontentment, or betrayal. Once you have Identified, Accepted and Attributed, then you can Act. You can apply words to the feeling and express it appropriately.

Sometimes, in certain situations, it is enough, or best, to express it just within yourself; sometimes it will be best to talk to a third party who's not directly involved; and sometimes, you'll need to express your feelings directly to the person involved. This is where assertiveness comes in.

Question(s)

- 2. Are you naturally inclined to express feelings and act on them?*
- 3. Have you ever experienced the problems of remaining silent with a friend, as with Choice #1 in the example above?*

6. Recognizing, Understanding and Valuing Emotions in Relationships

People who grew up emotionally neglected tend to carry some false beliefs about emotions in relationships. Here's a good, but not exhaustive, sampling:

1. Sharing your feelings or troubles with others will make them feel burdened.
2. Sharing your feelings or troubles with others will chase them away.
3. If you let other people see how you feel, they will use it against you.
4. Sharing your feelings with others will you look weak.
5. Letting others see your weaknesses puts you at a disadvantage.
6. It's best not to fight if you want to have a good relationship.
7. Talking about a problem is not helpful. Only action solves a problem.

Fortunately, not one of these beliefs is true. In fact, they are each and every one dead wrong. (The only exception is if you share your feelings with another emotionally neglected person, who may not have any idea how to respond). When you grow up receiving consistent direct or indirect messages that you should keep your feelings to yourself, it is natural to assume that those feelings are burdensome and undesirable to others. This section is about overcoming these assumptions. If you cannot let them go, they will hold you back in every area of your life, but especially in your relationships with others.

Question(s)

1. Which if any of these "false beliefs" do you suspect are really true?

First, let's talk about:

Friendships

When you were reading the story above about the boss's criticism and the night out with Betsy, were you finding it hard to accept the premise that talking with Betsy would be a positive thing? If you were actually in that situation, would you keep your troubles to yourself due to some of the seven beliefs listed above (or some of your own beliefs that aren't listed)?

If so, there is only one way to learn the real truth, and that is to try what I call: The George Costanza Experiment.

In the 1990s Seinfeld was probably the most popular sitcom on TV. In one episode, the character George Costanza, who was the quintessential loser, decided to go for an entire week doing the opposite of what he would naturally do.

When an attractive young woman asked him where he lived, instead of his usual half-truths and convoluted efforts to imply that he was successful, he said, “I’m unemployed and living with my parents in Queens.” This was hilarious, of course, but it also opened up a whole new world for George. He found himself with dates galore and a number of other positive gains.

For our purposes, the George Costanza Experiment would mean doing the opposite of what you would normally do when it comes to sharing your feelings. For example, it would mean telling Betsy your problem to see if it does help you manage your feelings; to see if she uses it against you; to see if she runs away; to see if she is so burdened by it that it ruins her night; to see if it gives her a new view of you as “weak.”

It would mean letting others see and hear what you’re feeling, and watching to see if it brings you harm or help. It would mean daring to fight out a problem with your friend instead of pushing it aside, to see if it is destructive to your friendship.

Nothing is always 100% foolproof in every situation. It is true that some friendships may not be capable of surviving the challenge of building emotional depth, but one could argue that those friendships may not be of high quality anyway.

So by and large, if you stick with the George Costanza Experiment, I am very confident that you will find your relationships growing stronger and deeper, yourself feeling calmer and more grounded, and others seeing you as a stronger person, not weaker.

Emotionally neglected people tend to be good listeners. But they are not good at talking, especially about themselves. This cuts them off from a vital source of sustenance in life. After all, emotional connection is the stuff of life, making it worth living. It’s the sugar in the beautiful cake. It is the heartbeat of humanity.

Now let’s talk about:

Marriage

In my office I have seen couple after couple in which one member expresses grave dissatisfaction with the relationship but cannot explain the reasons. Think back to Trish and Tim, the Achievement/Perfection Focused partners in Chapter 2. Trish said, “When I try to talk to him, he shuts me down. I know he’s miserable and I want to help but I can’t.”

Often the unhappy spouse will say, “He’s not abusive, he doesn’t drink, he makes a good living. But I’m just not happy with him. Something is missing.” Some people are able to say that they need more intimacy than their spouse is giving them. But when the spouse asks what that means, they typically have no answer.

What they are actually asking for is a feeling of emotional connection, a feeling that their spouse can read them and that they can read their spouse, that they and their spouse naturally feel each other’s feelings.

Since emotional connection is the stuff of life, it is both the glue that holds a relationship together and the fuel that keeps it burning. A relationship in which there are no fights is a relationship that will fizzle and die out. Couples who are truly emotionally connected let each other know when they are hurt, get angry and fight things out when needed. This willingness to be vulnerable keeps passion alive and prevents visits to the therapist’s office or the divorce court.

Everything you read above about friendships also applies to romantic relationships except more so. Friendships can be maintained by common interests alone, at least for a while. A romantic relationship doesn’t just require emotional connection; it rests upon it. Feelings are the foundation of romance, love, and a lasting relationship.

Here are my suggestions for building emotional connection in your marriage:

1. Practice the Identifying and Naming exercise daily.
2. Follow the IAAA Steps
3. Work on using Assertiveness with compassion with your spouse.
4. Ask questions! [Take a curious stance.] Ask your spouse questions, listen to his or her answer, and ask more questions. See below.

Horizontal and Vertical Questioning*

Not all questions are the same. Some questions have more power than others. People who are emotionally tuned in seem to naturally know how to ask powerful questions. They know what to ask in order to get to the heart of a matter or of a person. Emotionally neglected people, for reasons we have talked about, do not typically have this skill unless they cultivate it for themselves.

One way to get to the real heart of a matter or of a person is to practice vertical questioning in addition to horizontal questioning. Horizontal questions are those aimed at getting information. Vertical questions are aimed at understanding.

Q: You seem glum. Was everything OK with your mom?

A: Do I? Yeah, she's fine.

Q: You always seem down after seeing her lately. What's going on?

A: (Pause, appearing thoughtful) Do I? I didn't realize that.

Q: Did she say anything that upset you?

A: No, I don't think so.

Q: What do you think it is about going to see her that makes you glum?

A: (Pause, appearing thoughtful again) I dunno, maybe it's just seeing her looking so old. I'm not sure how much longer she'll be around. She just seems so weak. I worry about her living alone.

Presto. Vertical Questioning has helped your husband see himself through your eyes, think more deeply into himself and his feelings, put his feelings into words and share them with you. Now that his feelings are out on the table, you can listen, help him process them and use them. Maybe his emotions are telling him that it's time to start taking more steps to care for her. Maybe they're telling him that he should start preparing himself to lose her.

In true Vertical Questioning, it is vital to listen to the other person's answer. Your next question should be geared toward pushing their attention inward and driving them deeper into their emotions. It must always be done with care and compassion. If you do it right, it will help you get to the heart of the matter and of the person.

The steps I've outlined in this section may make it seem that recognizing, understanding and valuing emotions in relationships should be easy. But it is not. It's very difficult, even for people who have not been emotionally neglected. If you or your partner has been emotionally neglected, you will have to work much harder, and you may need assistance through various steps.

Question(s)

- 2. Do you think emotional connection is important in marriage or friendships? Why or why not?*
- 3. What do you think of the suggestions to deepen relationships? What would you like to try?*