Ripple Effects from Emotions

Research findings suggest that expressing an emotion can cause other people to experience the same emotion so that the emotion "spreads" from one person to the other (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). For example, our expression of joy may cause others to experience joy as well. Likewise, our expression of anger may trigger anger in others too. Emotions can also induce complementary emotions in other people. For instance, a person who expresses anger may lead the person witnessing the anger to feel fear; a person who expresses gratitude may evoke feelings of pride in the receiver of the gratitude (e.g., Dimberg & Ohman, 1996).

Emotionally intelligent people understand how the expression of their emotions influences other people (Davies, Stankov & Roberts, 1998). This awareness of the social effects of emotions means they are able to express emotions wisely, taking into consideration the consequences of their emotional expression. This tool uses the metaphor of a ripple effect to increase clients' awareness of the impact of their emotions on other people.

Author

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Goal

The goal of this tool is to increase awareness of the consequences of expressing emotions on others. By increasing awareness of the social effects of emotional expression, one can learn to express emotions wisely. Wise expression of emotion means that one takes into consideration both the short-term and long-term consequences on others when expressing emotions.

Advice

- This exercise is particularly useful for clients who frequently experience regret after an emotional encounter with others. Often, these clients get carried away by (negative) emotions and are unable to regulate them properly. Consequently, their interaction with others is heavily influenced by the emotion at hand, often leading to strong emotions in the other person as well. By increasing awareness of the effects of emotional expression, these clients can learn to recognize when a potential negative "ripple effect" of their emotions may occur. Early detection makes it possible for clients to either choose a different way of expressing their emotions or to abandon the social encounter.
- This exercise is also useful for clients who underestimate the impact of emotional expression. Some clients believe that expressing emotions is a "one-time thing" and has minimal effects. Sometimes, these beliefs serve the client by making him or her believe

- Using emotions to facilitate performance
- Exercise
- (15 min.
- Client
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- that the action is not harmful to others. In other words, these beliefs reduce the client's perception of personal responsibility. This exercise can counter this belief and may help clients to take more responsibility for the consequences of their emotional expression.
- Speculating about the ripple effect of emotional expression requires clients to step into the shoes of another person. How would you feel when you were approached in this way? What would you be most inclined to do when someone expressed his or her emotion to you in this way?
- A powerful follow-up exercise for clients is to watch closely how their emotional expression impacts other people immediately. This information can be used as a guide for how the client's emotions are bound to affect a wider circle long after they unleash the emotion.
- Clients may also spend some time reflecting on their behavior on a daily basis. For example, at the end of the day, clients may reflect on the emotional encounters of that they and the potential ripple effects, both positive and negative, that might have taken place.
- Another powerful, though confronting, follow-up exercise is for the client to ask other people how they are/were affected by the client's emotional expression. The more clients understand how their emotions ripple outward, the better equipped they become to choose the type of ripples they want to create.
- Typically, clients visit a practitioner because of problems. Consequently, when doing this exercise, clients may be inclined to focus on the expression of negative emotions. Note that it can also be very useful for clients to consider the impact of expressing positive emotions. Just like expressing negative emotions may result in long-term negative consequences, expressing positive emotion can result in long-term positive outcomes.



Suggested Readings

Davies, M., Stankov, L., & Roberts, R. D. (1998). Emotional intelligence: In search of an elusive construct. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 75*, 989-1015.

Dimberg, U., & Öhman, A. (1996). Behold the wrath: Psychophysiological responses to facial stimuli. *Motivation and Emotion*, *20*, 149-182.

Hatfield, E., Cacioppo, J., & Rapson, R. L. (1994). *Emotional contagion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tool Description

Instructions

Step 1: Introducing the exercise

For a moment, consider what happens when you drop a stone into still water. After the stone hits the water, ripples are sent in all directions. Expressing an emotion is like dropping a stone into water, sending ripples through the people in your life. The way you express your emotions has a short-term and long-term effect on others.

Imagine you are a team manager. During a meeting with your team members, you are frustrated and lash out against one of your colleagues. You may think that you are the only one who is affected by the frustration, but the ripple effect from your emotional explosion affects all the team members present at the meeting. When the team members go back to their desks after the meeting, they feel your wrath too. They go back to work with a pit in their stomachs, perhaps wondering when they will become the target of your frustration. Perhaps you think that your emotional explosion was good for productivity because you showed your team member the urgency of the matter.

Perhaps, however, the fear you induced soon translates to caution. To perform at their best, your team members need to take risks, move beyond their comfort zone, and make mistakes along the way. Because the team members are afraid to become your next target of frustration, they play it safe and do only as you tell them. After a year or so, you may notice that your team is not functioning well; they are severely lacking initiative and autonomy. You wonder what is wrong with them.

As this example illustrates, the way we express our emotions can have a direct impact on others. Expressing emotions can have both positive and negative effects on other people. When you are aware of these effects, you can use your emotions wisely. The aim of this exercise is to help you to express your emotions wisely, by taking into consideration the immediate and long term effects of your emotional expression.

Step 2: Choosing an emotion

In this exercise, we are going to analyze the short-term and long-term effects of emotional expression. To do so, please select one emotion to work with. For example, you may choose an emotion:

- that you often tend to share with others
- that you are afraid of expressing
- that you do not know how to express
- that you would like to express more often

Take a look at the picture displayed in the Appendix. Write down the name of this emotion in the center of the circle.

Step 3: Choose a context

Think of a social context where you are likely to express this emotion. It may be a fictional context or an actual context that you have encountered in the past. Choose one or more other people who are involved, a setting and the trigger of the emotion.

For example, if you have chosen the emotion "anger" in step 2, you may choose the person "my spouse", the setting "at home", and the trigger "when he is late again from work".

Write down these details about the context in the Appendix under "context".

Step 4: Choose the first ripple

Now consider the emotion and the context you chose in step 2. Think of a way in which you can express this emotion. You may choose the way in which you typically express this emotion in this context or a possible way in which you could express this emotion. For example, you may choose "shouting and accusing".

The way the emotion is expressed is the first "ripple". Write down this particular expression in the figure in the Appendix under "number 1".

Step 5: Analyse the second ripple

Think of how the emotional expression you chose in step 4 may affect the other person(s) involved. What do you think the other person(s) may feel when you express the emotion in this way? What emotion(s) may get triggered within the other person(s)?

The emotions that are triggered in others in response to your emotional expression is the second "ripple". Write down your ideas about these emotions in others in the figure in the Appendix under "number 2".

Step 6: Analyse the third ripple

What might be the consequence of the emotion that is triggered in the other person(s)? What may this person say, think, and/or do? How will the other person most likely respond as the result of the emotion?

The way others respond as the result of your emotional expression is the third "ripple". Write down your ideas about the other person's response in the figure in the Appendix under "number 3".

Step 7: Analyse the fourth ripple

Consider what you identified in the previous step (step #5). How would you be affected by the other person's response? How would you feel? What would you be inclined to do or say?

The way that you respond to the other person's emotional response is the fourth "ripple". Write down your ideas about your response in the figure in the Appendix under "number 4".

Step 8: Analyse the 10th ripple

Now let's move ahead in time. Imagine the ripple effect would continue to develop as you described. What would be the long-term consequences for you? How would it make you feel? How would it affect the relationship with the other person(s) involved?

Write down your answers in the figure in the Appendix under "number 10".

Step 9: Reflection

- How was it to do this exercise?
- What did you learn?
- Note that the goal of this exercise is not to prevent you from expressing your emotions. Informing others how you feel can be very helpful and important. What matters is the way in which you do this. We can express our anger by shouting and hitting another person, or by calmly informing him or her that we are angry because we feel that they did not deliver on what they promised. The ripple effect that is created by our emotions is the direct consequence of how we express our emotions, not of the emotions themselves. Now consider the way you express certain emotions, is there anything you think you could do differently? If so, what?

Appendix A: Ripple Effects from Emotions

| Context: | |
|---------------------|------------------------|
| Person(s) involved: | |
| Setting: | |
| Trigger: | |
| • 1st ripple | 2nd ripple 3rd ripple |
| 10nd ripple | 4th ripple |
| | |
| | |