

The Relationship Institute

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Self Intimacy: the Developmental map to adult expression

Utilizing your emotions instead of being controlled by them

The Expression of Feelings: The child, adolescent, and adult versions

Not all of us are raised and taught how to express our feelings in age-appropriate ways. We can be chronological adults who express our feelings like a child would or as an adolescent would. The good news is that expressing feelings as an emotional adult is readily learned, and when we are adults and express our feelings, needs and values from an adult voice, we are more effective, act with integrity, act in ways consistent with our values, emotions and best interests and are able to keep ourselves on the path that is most healthy and righteous for each of us.

The Child Self's Voice

The child in us generally is implicitly asking to be taken care of, feels impotent to effect change, or exert meaningful influence, and depends on and believes the responses of others are necessary to feel better. The child can only see the situation from his/her perspective. The child self expresses emotions as a reaction and without any reflection or choice.

The Adolescent Self's Voice

The adolescent in us generally is explicitly blaming the other and retaliating for the “harm” caused to us. This self feels self-righteous in his/her complaint/accusation and believes they are due a repair and apology from the other to forgive the harm. The adolescent sees the situation from his/her perspective and defines the other person as responsible for the problem. That being the case, the adolescent self has trouble taking responsibility for mistakes or for pain inflicted on self or others. The adolescent self expresses emotions in a defensive, reactive way.

The Adult Self's Voice

The adult in us expresses emotions to both define our self and to continue the connection with the other person. It is an attempt to repair or strengthen the relationship, or, if necessary, to stand up for him or herself. A vital component of this version of mature emotional expression is the ability in the moment to identify what one is feeling, what caused the feeling, and how the individual can take of him/herself and the relationship. The adult self can hold his/her perspective while simultaneously holding and respecting the perspective of the other person. The adult self expresses emotions after reflecting on what emotions s/he is feeling and then expresses these as a response rather than as a reaction or defense.

How each of the three versions of ourselves might sound expressing hurt and then anger.

The expression of hurt:

- The child self might say, “You hurt my feelings and I’m mad at you.” The speaker attempts to evoke from the listener a solution to take care of him/herself, and feels impotent to effect change. This thing happened to you and you don’t know why. Usually the action the child self takes is to attempt to hurt the other back for having hurt him or her.
- The adolescent self might say, “It’s your fault that my feelings are hurt. You did X and now I’m mad at you. You did this.” This sentence asserts no role in the interaction that might contribute to the interaction, a sense of being the victim, and the conversion of hurt to anger; that is, converting a vulnerable feeling to an offensive emotion.
- The adult self might say, “When you said that you see me as helpless, I felt hurt by your words and the way you see me. I don’t understand what I have done to give you that impression of me. Please, help me to understand.” The adult self is describing what specifically hurt and why, and then is curious about his/her role in the interaction.

The expression of anger:

- The child self: “I am mad at you. You were mean to me.” Again, this was done to me; I have no role in it and only you can repair it.
- The adolescent self: “You’ve pissed me off. You are rude and have a warped sense of your own importance. I don’t care what you think or do.” Basically I am saying, it’s your fault completely and because you did this I can attack your character and attribute negative qualities to you, and then claim that despite my strong feelings of anger, I don’t care about what you said because you have no importance or value to me.

- The adult self: “I am angry with you because your words felt disrespectful towards me. It sounded like you assume things about me that may not be true. I want to understand why you spoke to me like that.” A statement about self and how the interaction was experienced by the person. The adult addresses what s/he interpreted the other to say or imply and is curious about why/how this happened. The adult self wants to learn more about what motivated the other speaker.

Homework: using the two emotions of sad and happy, write the statements likely made from each of the three voices.