

# Emotion In The ‘Here-And-Now’

by Pat Comerford

*This article is dedicated, with gratitude, to the memory of Brendan Connolly, M.I.A.H.I.P., an inspiring human being, teacher and supervisor.*



## Introduction

In all counselling practices time will be spent exploring a client's emotions or feelings. This article will examine what it means for both the psychotherapist and client as they investigate and delve into the experience of emoting. This in turn challenges the professional to have a clear understanding of emotions to effectively engage in this important exploration. This article is an effort to bring greater clarity to both the work and to enrich the way of relating in the professional and personal domains.

## Defining: A phenomenological Challenge.

The fourth edition of 'The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology' states

that in defining the term 'emotion:'

*"Historically this term has proven utterly refractory to definitional efforts...."*

(Reber, Allen, and Reber, 2009, p.256).

In the 'Dictionary of Counselling' the term 'emotion' is defined as "feeling, affect, excitation ...." (Feltham and Dryden, 2004, p.71) albeit the same authors acknowledge that:

*"The term emotion is used imprecisely and usually synonymously with FEELINGS...."*

(Ibid. 2004, p.71)

This article is an invitation to psychotherapists to have greater clarity on what is meant in the use of the term 'emotion' in their work, to understand the functions of

emotions and how these feelings can only be experienced, known, and used in the "here-and-now" (Rank, 1945, Chapter iv; Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951, p.32) of all relationships, whether they are professional or personal.

## Exploration of a definition of emotion

One example of a definitional effort of emotion is:

*"The word "emotion" quite literally means the outward expression ("e" from the Latin "ex") of that which moves us, whether by way of an external stimulus or an internal need"* (Howe, in Pessoa and Crandell, 1991, p.5).

The latter part of this definition

clearly points to a duality about the origin of emotion – the external or the internal. It is this duality which has contributed to the construction of what Miller, Duncan and Hubble (1997, p.1) has called a Babel-like tower of theories and beliefs in the field of counselling and psychotherapy. While this vast and rich source of knowledge is important to developing an understanding of what it means to be human and how to be psychotherapists, it could also be considered that we have become “trapped in Babel” (Ibid. 1997, p.1) which is a complex maze of theory.

Rather than add to this complex maze the goal of this article is to simplify. It is proposed in this article that emotion is the outward expression of only an internal ‘that’ which is unique and personal to each client we meet. It is being posited that emotion is not a response to a set of external stimuli. A more relevant and useful definition of emotion that is consistent with the tenor of this article is:

*“An emotion or an affect can be considered as the felt tendency towards an object judged suitable or away from an object judged unsuitable, reinforced by specific bodily functions.”*

(Arnold and Gasson, 1954, in Gross, 2010, p.145).

To grapple with, understand, and know the internal ‘that’, its associated meanings and judgements, in the above definitions, has been undertaken as an existential or life task by humanity (Russell, 1996). In the context of psychotherapy this

‘that’ is an internal driving force of needs and wants. It is this driving force which influences how we relate to ourselves personally, and with the world. It is crucial for psychotherapists to make sincere efforts to know the client’s ‘that’ and to understand the relationship between their ‘that’ and their experience of emotion in the ‘here-and-now’ as they engage with clients. Irvin Yalom’s (2002) work provides a compelling framework for how psychotherapists can address the particular psychodynamic and existential relationship between the meaning of the ‘that’ and the ‘here-and-now’ experience of emoting by clients. To understand the process of emoting it is first necessary to understand the experience of emotion for human beings.

### **The Four Fundamentals of Experiencing Emotion**

The following four fundamentals could be regarded as common sense for those of us in ‘the trade.’ These fundamentals, however, are central tenets for an integrative, or holistic, approach to psychotherapy.

**One:** All emotions are embodied. We can only know and experience emotion through the bodies we have. We can observe emotion expressed in the behaviours and bodily movements of the individual. Emotions generally find expression, and these expressions can be visible, and if not, can be inferred (“Empathy,” Rogers and Stevens, 1967, p.110) from the tone of voice, changing skin tone, involuntary physiological responses like perspiring, breathing rate, and from a multitude of other

responses, especially if you have the exceptional acuity skills of Milton Erickson (Haley, 1973).

**Two:** Emotions are experienced only in the ‘here-and-now’ of the present moment. Otto Rank (op. cit.) believed that all emotional life is rooted in the present. We cannot experience emotions in the past tense since emotions are only experienced in the ‘here-and-now.’ Similarly, we cannot experience emotions that are future-based as emotions can only be known in the ‘here-and-now.’ What mediates emotions in the present are the meanings (Yalom, 1980), or interpretations, created about the past, and future; but these meanings, in turn, can only be known and created in the present moment of the ‘here-and-now.’ Meanings may also include the cognitive legacies from the past of ideas, beliefs and a frame of reference held on to since childhood, but still used as a basis for living in the ‘here-and-now.’

**Three:** Because emotions are embodied, it is the body then in which all emotions have their origins. No external agent is the cause of emotion; rather the individual is the first and last cause of emotion – it is their unique and personal outward expression. It is the person who generates all emotion. No outside agent can put emotion into the person. This is both a physical and technical impossibility.

**Four:** Our bodies are always in a state of flux. Therefore, in varying degrees, emotions involve movement internally, and in terms of behavioural and bodily responses. It is reasonable then to conclude that none of the emotions we generate remain static or are permanent.

Evolution has clearly shown survival to be the primary goal of any species and it is this primary urge, the personal 'that,' which underpins the experience of emotion (Dugatkin, 2006). This survival, like our coming into existence, is dependent upon connection and relationship with another. During gestation, survival in the womb is predominantly physiologically based, and emotions, in terms of physiological feedback, are generally an excellent source of feedback for this purpose (Blott, 2009). From the time of birthing, however, it is not a sufficient source of survival feedback. With birth we must now deal with an external world of personal, individualised wants as well as the wants of others. We have entered a world of external relationships, a world Martin Buber calls the "I and Thou" (1958, p.20). This new world of relationships requires us to urgently develop the skills of sense-making and relating. Emotion provides the necessary feedback in developing the skills required for relating to others and for continued survival.

### The Importance of Emotion in Human Survival

What is the primary purpose of emotion for humans? I suggest that emotions are primarily a source of survival feedback for:

**One:** Our existence in the world from the moment of our conception.

**Two:** Originally it is a source of information about our connection with another, and our place in the womb. With birthing we are

required to begin to make sense of and understand a new place or environment, and of being separated and separate (Rank, 1999). This separation is a loss of the first connection and our first home.

**Three:** Supplying us with information as to whether or not we are getting what we want in our lives, particularly in the new world of relationships.

**Four:** Providing us with information about both the effectiveness of behaviours that we employ in the pursuit of our personal wants, and of those wants we have in personal relationships.

All of this feedback is experienced by the person in the present-time context of the 'here-and-now.' Consequently, the 'here-and-now' context of the therapeutic relationship becomes the primary vehicle through which the particular 'that' of clients can be explored in full.

### The 'Here and Now'

A clear meaning of the term 'here-and-now' has been presented in 'The Gift of Therapy':

*"The here-and-now refers to the immediate events of the therapeutic hour, to what is happening here (in this office, in this relationship, in the in-betweenness – the space between me and you) and now, in this immediate hour."*

(Yalom, 2002, p.47).

What is emotionally known and experienced is only possible in the 'here-and-now.' There are theories about the past and

future and that is what they are and will remain: theories. The past has already passed and emotionally can only be experienced in the present moment of the 'here-and-now' through our memories and the constructed meanings about personal life events created in the 'here-and-now' (Yalom, 1980). From the psychotherapy perspective what matters most is what is being done in the present moment, the now, and not what has been done in the past or can be done in the future. It is important to understand the meanings and judgements the client has created about their past and how these, in turn, have been allowed, or used, to impact and influence the 'here-and-now' of their living and lifestyle – this is understanding the client's personal 'that' or driving force. And, for clients, to learn the skill of evaluating the usefulness of these created meanings and judgements lived in the 'here-and-now' is essential in order to survive and to live a useful and worthwhile life.

Viktor Frankl (2011) advocates a viewpoint of 'that' in his account of the time he spent in Auschwitz. He believed that we choose our attitude(s) in each moment of our lives and this influences how we will decide to live and relate in the 'here-and-now.' Equally, in the present moment, we cannot emotionally experience and know the future, but we may have theories about it. In any book about world religions you will find an array of beliefs about the future and what is in store for the human race (Matthews, 2011). Eckhart Tolle

has made his view explicit with his challenge to us to focus on the “Now” (1999, p.5) Similarly Anthony de Mello’s invitation is to “wake up” (1990, p.20) in order to achieve awareness in the present. Carl Jung once said: “who looks outside dreams, who looks inside awakens,” (Owen, 2002, p. 84) and this too requires a sense of the present.

Developing different psychotherapy models and theories is useful if it helps professionals and clients to live in the ‘here-and-now.’ As psychotherapists we can only engage with clients in the therapeutic alliance in the ‘here-and-now.’ It is essential to empathically know the emotions the client is generating in the ‘here-and-now’ so as to better understand what it is they want now from their lives and relationships and even from their relationship with the therapist. To know the client’s wants is to understand their personal driving force and how this informs them in the way they choose to behave and to relate in their lives. For the therapist to know what they are wanting in their lives and to be aware of the behavioural choices they make to achieve their wants is fundamental to an effective therapeutic alliance. Babette Rothschild’s (2000, 2003) work with trauma and post traumatic stress disorder, a past experience, is an excellent example of working with clients in the ‘here-and-now.’ It is because of her focus on the ‘here-and-now’ that she successfully prevents re-traumatisation of clients.

### **More Simply: The Twofold Purpose of Emotion**

After thirty four years of clinical practice, during which I purposefully listened to and observed my experience of emoting and the emotings of others, I have come to believe that as we are aging, and especially since puberty, in addition to the need for survival, emoting eventually comes to have only two purposes.

First, emotions provide people with feedback on their wants being satisfied or not in the ‘here-and-now.’

Second, emotions are a source of feedback on the relative success or failure of the behaviours employed to get what is wanted in the ‘here-and-now.’

It needs to be reiterated that the feedback of emotions is critical to survival, even in the context of satisfying wants. Failure to understand and effectively deal with emotions as feedback at a personal level will lead to the physical demise of the individual, and failure at a collective level will lead to the demise of our species.

### **A Simple Definition of Emotion:**

Following from the above review I propose a simple definition of emotion:

*Emotion is the outward of expression of our wants being or not being satisfied and equally a measure of the success or failure of the behaviours we have chosen to satisfy those wants.*

### **An Example: Alfred Adler’s Existential Understanding of the Client’s ‘that’ in the ‘here-and-now’**

Alfred Adler, as an example, has provided us with a theory and clinical framework to understand how individuals go about scripting their ‘that’ by personally making sense of their world through the development of what is called “Private Logic” (Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1964, p.102). Private Logic is a set of ideas, beliefs, or conclusions created during childhood about the world and relationships based on personal contact with that world and those relationships encountered. This experience-based knowledge may be used to form and inform how to relate to the ‘I’ and others. It can also be the framework that is employed by the clients to satisfy their wants in their lives. For example, if the client has many memories of being pampered in childhood they may believe that life, and relationships, is about receiving and taking, and consequently relate in this fashion to satisfy their wants. If the client reports repeated memories of unreliable and inconsistent contact with the world, they may conclude or believe that living and relating in their world are not safe and therefore one has to be always guarded in pursuing wants. This example of exploring childhood memories, or “early recollections” (Clark, 2002, p.7) is one useful approach to understanding the unique meanings, or the ‘that,’ clients employ as they conduct their ‘here-and-now’ lives.

## Concluding and Inviting

It behoves us as psychotherapists to work and relate with clients in the 'here-and-now' and in this context to understand how they experience emotion and their 'that' because this is what we can only know with some degree of certainty. It is essential that we fully understand the client's wants and how these are directly linked to their 'here-and-now' emotings and behaviours. To relate in any other way, one might as well start interpreting rune stones, practicing clairvoyance, and reading horoscopes. It is a necessary and essential part of our professional practice to know the simple and sublime ways of relating to the client that are not only client-centred but also present-moment centred, and thus be facilitative of emotional and behavioural responsibility. (Rogers, 1961, Yalom, 1992, 1996)

Jiddu Krishnamurti (1969) advocated that we cultivate a freedom from a rigid adherence to established theories of knowledge and to instead live in the 'here-and-now.' We may listen to client's theories about their pasts and futures, and we may ourselves theorise along with them, but this will be a fruitless exercise if it is not anchored in the 'here-and-now' reality of emoting and the personal living experience of the therapist-client relationship. ☺

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