

## MODULE THREE – Emotions (used interchangeably with ‘Feelings’ in this module)

Supportive information provided by Judith Hemming, Marianne Franke-Gricksch & Leslie Nipps<sup>1</sup>

### Distinguishing between Different Kinds of Feelings

*“I make distinctions among four different kinds of feelings: primary feelings, secondary feelings, systemic feelings, and meta-feelings.”*

- Bert Hellinger

*“The main difference between primary and secondary feelings is that primary feelings support constructive action, while secondary feelings consume energy that could otherwise support change. Feelings that produce effective action strengthen people, while feelings that hinder effective action, or justify not acting, or substitute for effective action all weaken people. I call those feelings that support constructive action primary feelings, while the others are secondary feelings.”*

- Bert Hellinger

### PRIMARY FEELINGS

A person with primary feelings remains strong and capable of acting effectively. Because primary feelings lead to a definite goal, they're not long lasting. They come, do their job, and then go again. They're resolved by appropriate expression and effective, appropriate action.

Infants have primary feelings and secondary feelings. Primary feelings have to do with wanting to be held and cuddled and attuned to. If these needs are not met well, this is where secondary feelings come from. Jealousy, fear, anger, disappointment, etc. are secondary feelings.

Nov. 19, 2022 Part 2 Systemic Pedagogy - Marianne Franke-Gricksch

Primary feelings have evolutionary primacy. They help the client travel where they want to go. We're born with these. Their function is to enable movement (All life is movement.). These are designed to touch you, to promote movement, to draw strength. Nearly all of these primary feelings call upon the support of others (so we need to

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<sup>1</sup> Supportive information from material presented at the International Systemic and Family Constellations Certification Course 2022/23

appreciate them). They have somewhere they're trying to go. When the primary emotion arises and the movement gets blocked somehow, it diverts itself into a secondary emotion.

Examples of primary emotions:

Guilt - Movement toward reparation

Anger - Movement toward setting appropriate boundaries

Love - Movement toward people in an open way

Grief – Movement from having something to not having something

EXAMPLE OF PRIMARY EMOTION EXPRESSED: I really missed you.

Nov 20, 2022 Developing Fearlessness II Judith Hemming

Primary emotions honor what is. They draw us together. They make us attractive. They help us in co-regulation.

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## SECONDARY FEELINGS

According to Hellinger, the feelings and emotions that clients bring to therapy are most commonly secondary feelings. The function of secondary feelings is to convince others that one can't take effective action, so they need to be dramatic and exaggerated. What secondary feelings essentially communicate to a listener is that the referenced person is weak, and unable to help themselves. When a person habitually experiences and expresses secondary feelings, they come across as 'victims' and rather than compelling friends and acquaintances to help and support them, these expressions have the opposite effect. When a person gets chronically stuck in secondary emotions, they come across to others as manipulative and annoying because they are not clear on what the distress is about or particularly interested in what might actually help. This position is completely understandable when it shows up in an infant or a very young child, who is literally dependent on adults for most everything in life. When it happens in adults, it simply means that they are regressed, and disconnected from a personal sense of agency.

Secondary feelings last longer than primary feelings and get worse, rather than better, through being expressed. Resolution comes only when the movement of the primary feeling underneath the secondary feeling reaches its goal and is completed.

Secondary emotions stem from ancestral trauma. We know them when we see:

- Looping
- They create more of the same
- They diminish our dignity and weight
- They insist on insolvability
- They go in circles, won't be soothed
- Trauma repetition

- They push people away
- They assert our helplessness
- They are very compelling

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Secondary feelings are designed to keep you weak and to manage without support (they feel like 'victim' energy). They resist being touched. *Healing sentences*, used in constellations, can move us quickly from secondary to primary feelings.

Examples of Secondary Emotions

Guilt - Worry

Grief - Never-ending secondary grief—a need to be known as pathetic by others

Anger - Schizoid withdrawal/Spite

EXAMPLE: I hate you!

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## Identifying Secondary, Versus Primary Feelings

**June:** I was deeply touched by what you said about abortion. I feel a lot of pain about my abortion (begins to cry) and a lot of anger.

**Hellinger:** (after a long pause) That kind of anger is a distraction. It's an indication of trying to push responsibility onto someone else. You have to accept your share of the responsibility, because, with an abortion, your share of the responsibility can't be pushed off onto your partner—or anyone else.

**June:** I've been thinking about it, trying to remember when my husband and I started talking about separating. It's been exactly a year and a half—shortly after the abortion. That would have been our third child.

**Hellinger:** [referencing June's family constellation in which she looked in a different direction, away from her husband] You were looking at that child, June (June starts to cry again, this time more sincerely). Let the pain have all the room in you that it deserves. That's a healing pain that honors the child. The pain will help you see what to do, so that your unborn child's sacrifice won't have been in vain.

## SYSTEMIC FEELINGS

The third category of feelings are feelings that have been taken on from the system, that is, when what one feels as one's own feeling is actually someone else's feeling. As strange as it seems, this is often revealed in constellations, and it's usually very easy to recognize. Once you've recognized it there, you begin to see it in other situations as well. Whenever you feel a

feeling that belongs to someone else, then you're caught up in something that's not of your own making. That's why your attempts to change it will usually fail.

Systemic feelings belong to someone else in the system and have not arisen out of the autobiographical experience of the person. Therapists learn to recognize these. They feel funny/distinct. We can learn when to ask:

- Who *did* die?
- Is this a child's sensitivity of one parent's hatred for another?
- What set this off?
- Who in your family was left out?

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## META FEELINGS

There's also a fourth category of feelings called meta-feelings. These feelings have an entirely different quality. They are feelings or sensations without emotions. They're pure, concentrated energy. Courage, humility (the willingness to accept the world as it is), serenity, remorse, wisdom, and deep satisfaction are examples of meta-feelings. There's also meta-love and meta-aggression.

Authentic remorse is a meta-feeling. When remorse is authentic, people are centered in themselves, and they know what's appropriate for them. What they then do is immediately possible, appropriate, and effective.

The crown of all of the meta-feelings is wisdom. Wisdom is associated with courage, humility, and the energy of life. It helps us to distinguish between what really counts and what doesn't. Wisdom doesn't mean that I know a lot, but rather that I'm able to determine what's appropriate to the immediate situation and what's not. It tells me what my personal integrity requires of me in every situation.

Meta Feelings—almost no emotionality

- Largeness/Purity
- Enormously Strong
- The field secretly gives me these feelings
- They have a spiritual quality
- They have a very impersonal quality

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## Emotional Contenance

**Hellinger:** When suffering is primary, clients endure what needs to be endured, and then they begin to pick up the pieces of their lives and begin again. When suffering is secondary, they start another round of suffering. Complaining about something is usually a secondary distortion of consenting to what is.

My intention is not to change clients' experiences, but to guide their attention toward their primary feelings, which are the prerequisites for finding their own resolutions.

**Hellinger:** Strength is recognized in a certain emotional continence. Do you know what continence is?

**Participant:** Holding tight.

**Hellinger:** Not exactly. You know what incontinence is, so continence is when you don't mess in your pants. It isn't exactly the same as holding; it has a quality of competence and strength. You can watch how I work with feelings that weaken. You can learn to recognize them. They have something manipulative; they're attempts to get someone to do something, as if one couldn't do it oneself. They serve as justifications for not acting and as rationalizations for holding on to the problem.

### Wrapping it Up—Leslie Nipps

- Constellations bring us back to primary emotions—to what is.
- This is possible because the client, in his or her distress, finally feels seen.
- Sometimes, during childhood, the situation is not supportive of a child's getting their primary needs met.
- In times of war, a child will see how scared his or her mother is and sublimate or shut down his or her own fear.
- A mother won't be able to attune to and care for a child in a normal way under such circumstances. The child, in fact, will feel compelled to protect the mother from his or her needs and feelings.
- That is how primary feelings get deferred into secondary feelings, ultimately playing out later in life, when it's not apparent what the emotion is stemming from, or how to effectively address it.
- When the client is reexperiencing the problem without resolution, this can be retraumatizing, and make creative resolution even more difficult.

### What to Do With Secondary Emotions—Leslie Nipps

- Notice and Build Safety—Therapeutic Alliance
- Work with the client to identify the primary emotions underneath the secondary emotions.
- Appreciate their report. *I get it. I get it. What's important underneath of there? Thank you for that. Good. Slow down. Now, what's important about that?*
- Acknowledging *what is* allows some movement.
- Being able to articulate the primary emotion underneath the secondary emotion can

provide great relief. *I'm afraid if I admit responsibility, they will tear me apart.*

- If there is resistance, something hasn't been included yet.
- Secondary emotions are the finger pointing at the moon; primary emotions are the moon.
- Primary emotions honor what is. They draw us together. They make us attractive. They help us in coregulation.
- Secondary emotions stem from ancestral trauma.
- Secondary emotions are there to assert our helplessness. They are very compelling.
- As facilitators we can also get stuck in secondary feelings:
  - Anger
  - Crankiness
  - Performance Anxiety
  - Insecurity

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## On Anger and Dissociation

*Contacting anger is valuable because it takes a person out of a dissociated state and out of feeling helpless, but it is not the real healing. Healing happens when one is able to grow beyond anger and find a deep 'yes' to life and that is true for both clients and therapists.*

- Bert Hellinger

With anger, the decisive feelings in the background are pain and love. Instead of facing pain, I may choose anger. A man in therapy remembered having been beaten as a child and felt angry toward the person who had hurt him. By feeling angry, he avoided experiencing the pain. When he says, "That really hurts," he's on a different level, and is stronger and more collected. Feeling the hurt goes a lot deeper than saying, "I'll get you for that."

Expressing the hate blocks access to love. If the person can say, "I have loved you deeply and this hurts terribly," there's no room left for hate. Reconciliation is still possible following such an expression. It's impossible after spewing out hate. Through hate you lose precisely that which you really wanted.

Anger makes me capable of acting, and gives me strength to defend myself, which is clearly a positive and necessary function. Most anger, however, arises from fantasies, which produce anger without action. Anger can also result when I have justifiable demands, but don't claim them. This anger is also a substitute for action.

## Healthy Aggression Exercise

**With a partner:** Stand opposite each other and put one or both hands against your partner's hand. One partner starts to push while the other resists. Take it easy, not too intense and take a break whenever you have had enough. Take turns with who is pushing and who is resisting. Experiment with (and without) making eye contact.

You can also experiment with making angry faces at each other, but remember not to get serious. Make sure you do not collapse or overdo. Try to discover when you feel a strengthening in your body. It is not about going into emotional catharsis or a competition about who is stronger.

## Legend

Standard Margin Black Ariel 11 pt – Love's Hidden Symmetry: What Makes Love Work in Relationships (Bert Hellinger, unless otherwise stated)

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