

Emotional Honesty

Lynn Lott

Emotional honesty is a skill. It can be learned. First, is the emotional part. That means feelings. Feelings are those things that happen inside of us. There are words for feelings, usually one word long. Feeling words sound like "happy," "comfortable," "hungry," "sleepy," "angry," "sad," "hopeless," "irritated," "joyful," etc. They are not words such as "like," "as if," "you," "that," etc. Feelings describe something that is going on inside of us and is information about us. Feelings aren't judgments about others and are different from thoughts. Feelings aren't good or bad, right or wrong, proper or improper. Feelings aren't logical. Feelings aren't actions or behaviors. The feeling of anger or hunger or tired or happy is very different from a display of anger, hunger, tired, or happy. We cannot tell how a person is feeling just from observing his/her behavior. People can smile when they feel angry, eat when they're not hungry, sleep when they're bored and cry from happiness. To really know someone's feelings we must ask him/her tell us. Or we can make guesses out loud about how a person is feeling and he or she can confirm or deny it.

The second part of emotional honesty is the word honesty. Once we know there are feelings, that they are inside of us and that there are words for the feeling, we need to communicate the feeling to those around us. This can be very frightening to do. When we communicate feelings, we are vulnerable, and people around us are not always well-trained and sensitive to listen to feelings without taking them personally or explaining them away or correcting them. It's still worth the risk, for without emotional honesty, there is very little self-acceptance, acceptance of others or growth.

Emotional honesty works two ways. We are emotionally honest when we communicate our feelings and we are emotionally honest when we hear another's feelings without judging, criticizing, fixing, or defending. A family meeting without emotional honesty can be like a grenade ready to go off if someone accidentally steps on it. When I'm emotionally honest, I'm always worried about hurting someone else's feelings, but what I notice is that it usually has the opposite effect. It opens communication and invites closeness.

My emotional honesty takes the stress and tension out of a situation instead of putting them into one. For instance, at one of our family meetings I shared how torn I felt about parenting. On the one hand, I enjoyed not having kids living with us and felt relaxed and comfortable with my physical setting when I could count on it to be neat and clean. I liked coming home from an out-of-town trip and not having to deal with anyone's needs other than my own. I was angry about missing tapes and CD's, spots on the carpet, broken items, and dirty dishes. I liked being a "Disneyland" parent who could be with the kids on vacations and special occasions and come home to a childless house most of the time. I was done raising kids on a day-to-day basis. On the other hand I loved my stepson. I had invited him to live with us and wanted him to be part of our family. I felt good being together much of the time and took great pleasure watching his relationship with his dad blossom. I appreciated all his help and his good-natured attitude. I wasn't thinking of asking him to leave, but I was feeling stuck in my own mixed feelings. I was worried that after sharing all this, my stepson would feel unwanted, that my husband would feel torn and think he had to choose between us, and that they both would think I was petty and selfish. What happened was what almost always happens. They both were grinning and thanking me for telling them how I really felt. My stepson said, "I had no idea you felt that way and I really care about how you feel about things." There was a release of tension in the house for weeks after this meeting. What I've noticed is that quite often when one of us is emotionally honest we don't have to move into a problem solving mode because the problem takes care of itself when the issues are out on the table.