USING GENERAL SEMANTICS TO MANAGE ‘EMOTIONS’

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As Korzybski suggested we do when analyzing a term, my first step in addressing the title topic was to consult a dictionary for definitions of “emotion.” (1)

From Webster’s 9th Collegiate (1987): “Emotion: 1 a : obs : DISTURBANCE b : EXCITEMENT 2 a : Affective aspect of consciousness; FEELING b : a state of feeling c : psychic and physical reaction (as anger or fear) subjectively experienced as strong feeling and physiologically involving changes that prepare the body for immediate vigorous action.”

Okay, how is “affective” defined? “Affect: the conscious subjective aspect of an emotion, considered apart from bodily changes.”

And “feeling” as most directly related to “emotion”? “2 a : an emotional state or reaction b pl : susceptibility to impression…” Under syn we find: “FEELING denotes any partly mental, partly physical response marked by pleasure, pain, attraction, or repulsion . . . .”

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My conclusions: Using old terminology, such as the term “emotion” itself and its concomitant definitions, exposes an elementalistic muddle. (2) Also, as evidenced in the “going around in circles” aspect of the above definitions, we seem to be have reached the unspeakable level of undefined terms. Somehow we know what we’re intending to say, but can’t quite say it.

In Science and Sanity, I found relatively few indexed uses of “emotion.” On page 23, pointing out how to apply non-elementalism (3) when considering psycho-logical reactions, Korzybski advised that “we must … *deliberately ascribe* ‘emotional’ factors to any ‘intellectual’ manifestation, and ‘intellectual’ factors to any ‘emotional’ occurrence.” On page 26, recognizing levels of abstracting, he noted “Empirically, there is a difference between an ‘emotion’ which becomes ‘rationalized’ and ‘emotions’ invoked or produced by ‘ideas.’” On page 481: “Through wrong evaluation [‘is’ of identity] we are using the lower [thalamic] center too much and cannot ‘think’ properly. We are ‘over-emotional’; we get easily confused, worried, terrorized, or discouraged; or else we become absolutists, dogmatists.” Again on page 481, noting the unspeakable aspect I mentioned above: “We teach silence on the objective level *in general*, which is a most impressive ‘emotional’ education …”

So, in considering “Using General Semantics to Manage ‘Emotions,’” we had best not get too concerned with any definition of “emotion,” lest our discussion become confusing and dogmatic. Rather, let’s flag “emotion” as problematic by using the extensional safety device of single quotes: ‘emotion.’ Also the extensional hyphen, as in “thoughts-feelings” and “intellect-emotion.” Further, we can replace these terms with the non-elementalistic term “evaluation,” which includes sensations-feelings-thoughts-behavior-environment, etc.; in other words, an organism-as-a-whole-in-an-environment evaluational reaction (*e.r.*). (4) So, for me, our topic here is better phrased as “Using General Semantics to Manage Evaluations.”

And what does “managing evaluations” refer to? I favor the phrase, “effective self-management,” the details of which are unique for each individual. For our purposes here, I suggest such goals as maintaining a relatively even keel when facing life’s vicissitudes; maintaining meaningful relationships; contributing in positive ways to the larger community; having one or more deep interests to which time and effort is directed (could be work and/or hobbies, family, pets, etc.) — the details to be determined person-by-person.

How to use general semantics to manage evaluations? Apply general semantics principles and techniques moment-to-moment! Study; consult the structural differential you have hanging on a wall (ahem); practice, practice, practice; etc., and again. Below you will find some examples of how you can do
such applying and practicing; ways that I have found helpful both for my psychotherapy clients and myself.

Recognize that any evaluation involves multiple causes associated with multiple effects, associated with multiple causes, etc., in a complex circular way. As biologist Garrett Hardin’s first law of ecology states: You can never merely do one thing. So don’t hold out for the “right” place to begin; wherever you begin will inevitably lead to (be associated with) numerous other ‘somethings’ in your life and in general semantics.

Any evaluation involves multiple levels of abstracting. In reaction to whatever is going on, we have silent-level evaluations (sensations-feelings-thinking, assumptions), labels for these, inferences and conclusions about them, etc., leading to further silent level evaluations. Maintaining clarity as to level of abstracting contributes to managing our evaluations well. So when faced with a troubling situation, consult a structural differential and, pointing to it, tease out what observable ‘facts’ you have; your inferences about those facts; your — preferably tentative — conclusions; and how these inferences and conclusions influence your views on the ‘facts’ and apply to your dilemma. What might you do differently based on your findings?

A major factor in this kind of analysis is determining where you are on the ‘fact’\textright inference continuum. (5) In other words, how close to ‘certainty’ are you about aspects of your dilemma; what is the degree of probability of your conclusions; where are you on a scale of observation\textright wild guess? If you’re in low-probability territory, how can you get more information to increase that probability?

Use of absolute terms generally leads to troubling evaluations. Given that no ‘map’ (including words) is the ‘territory’ it represents, can we ever reach absolute certainty about anything? Practice “English Minus Absolutisms” (EMA), as formulated by Allen Walker Read. When you’re tempted to feel-think-say that anything ‘is’ the ‘best,’ ‘worst,’ ‘most,’ ‘least,’ ‘certain,’ etc., pause and modify the absolutism with, for example, “excellent,” “not very good,” “almost,” “in my experience,” “for the moment,” etc.

Also modify by using the extensional devices of,

- **dating** — how might this person, at this time, be different from this person at another time;

- **indexing** — how might this person be different from another person in a similar (never exactly the same in all respects) situation;

- **etc., or et cetera** — there’s much I don’t know about the person and situation;
• *quotes* and *hyphens* — when considering how someone ‘feels’ and ‘thinks’ (feels-thinks) indicate the extensional devices as I have done.

Other useful qualifiers include such phrases as, “as far as I know,” “under these circumstances,” “to me,” etc.

You may wonder about my apparent absoluteness about avoiding absolutisms, which brings us to multiordinal terms-reactions; those that occur and can be used at different levels of abstracting. When we’re absolute about the value of avoiding absolutisms, we’re reversing the first-level absolutism; in other words, we’re recommending non-absolutism.

This applies also to what we call anxiety, anger, love, hate, etc. We can increase ‘anxiety’ by evaluating it as dangerous; decrease it by accepting it as a passing, unharmed event. When we take this approach, we can recognize, for example, that the sensations commonly labeled ‘anxiety’ are very similar to those associated with ‘excitement.’ Keeping this in awareness can ease apprehensions when approaching difficult-for-you-now situations. (Another person, or you at another time might not experience the situation as difficult.)

Also, since sensations are fleeting and ever-changing, focusing on them at the silent level, without labels, allows us to notice moment-to-moment changes. For example, a leg cramp can be made worse by the tensing that comes with worrying about it, potential loss of sleep, etc. Focus on the sensations themselves and — “wow,” “how amazing” — you might surprisingly find that the cramp eases and disappears.

I will end where things often begin — our assumptions. As indicated in Korzybski’s formulation of logical fate, our assumptions lead to certain conclusions and associated behaviors; to change conclusions, change assumptions. So, if you’re not satisfied with a conclusion-behavior, for any reason, consider what assumptions may have led you to where you find yourself, and experiment with changing them. Alternately, you can challengingly practice a new behavior and, based on the results, find how your assumptions can change.

*Et cetera* and onward to changing your evaluations for more effective self-management.
REFERENCES


2. In the glossary of *Drive Yourself Sane*, we define elementalism as “unconsciously dividing up with words what we don’t find so divided in the non-verbal process world; such language use may suggest false-to-‘fact,’ static, isolated structures.” (p.209)

3. “Non-Elementalism: recognizing and remedying elementalisms, i.e., false-to-‘fact,’ static, isolated structures, in our evaluating.” (*Drive Yourself Sane*, p.212)

4. Evaluation and evaluational reaction (e.r.) seems to me preferable to the equivalent term “semantic reaction (s.r.)” in order to avoid the persistent confusion of “s.r.” with exclusively verbal ‘meanings.’ In his later writings, Korzybski appeared to have come to this conclusion as well. See, for example, his emphasis on the term “evaluation(al)” throughout his last paper, “The Role of Language In The Perceptual Processes.” (*Collected Writings*)

5. Kodish and Kodish, pp.116-117

BIBLIOGRAPHY


