



Unhealthy ways to express emotion

Think of four animals for a moment - a turtle, a shark, a fox and an owl...

The turtle withdraws into its shell when the heat is on, not reappearing until the situation is safe. The shark will circle a couple of times and go in for the kill. The fox has a natural ability to strategise, taking its time to stalk its prey and waiting for the right moment to attack. The owl is perceived as wise, weighing up the situation from all sides

The qualities of these animals can be perceived as styles people use to deal with conflict. Let's start with the turtle. Whenever something happens to threaten the turtle's sense of security, it withdraws and is seen to be sulking and uncommunicative. Turtles are often afraid of the power of their emotions. They will deny that they are feeling a certain way, doubt themselves, and intellectualise (convince themselves that the situation is better than it is). Or they may not believe they have the right to feel a certain way.

Turtles

Turtles are slow-burning people who often become withdrawn or depressed. Becoming depressed and withdrawn can be a powerful way to retain power in a situation. Turtles often express negative emotions in subtle ways such as quiet criticism, emotional withdrawal, put-downs, and subtle intimidation. They may do all of these things with a smile on their face. Turtles often reach exploding point, leaving people quite confused. Comments such as 'That's totally out of character' and 'He must be having a hard time at the moment' excuse and mask the pattern that exists.

Joan (27) told me what it was like living with Trevor (26). Joan felt continually on edge. If something that she knew would upset Trevor happened, he would appear to cope well at the time, saying that everything was fine, and that it wasn't a problem. A few days or weeks later when she thought he had forgotten all about it, some minor incident would trigger Trevor's self-righteous anger and she would find herself in the middle of a full-scale attack that could be traced back to the past incident over which he had not reacted.

This behaviour was emotionally abusive because Joan had to somehow continually guess what was happening for Trevor, and try to prevent it. In this way Trevor was shifting the responsibility for his unwillingness to deal with issues in a constructive way onto Joan.

The hallmark of turtles is that others are left unsure and wondering what is going on. They are invited into a destructive dance where they pay the price. One woman described this as like 'living on the edge of a volcano'.

Sharks

If living with a turtle is like living on the edge of a volcano, living with sharks is like being inside the volcano. Sharks are those people who openly shift responsibility onto others by blaming them for the situation. They often start sentences with “You ...”

- *You made me angry!*
- *If it wasn't for you I wouldn't need to get abusive*
- *It's your fault I'm like this!*

What sharks do is shift responsibility for the problem onto the other person and make the other person responsible for how they feel. What can start as a reasonable discussion can become more and more heated and very abusive. For sharks, winning is the end goal. Sharks will use any tactic if it helps them win. And once they get the scent of a win they won't stop until they have achieved their goal.

Look at the following list of unhelpful communication tactics:

- The use of put-downs to make another person feel bad about themselves. Examples of these are statements such as ‘You are stupid/dumb’, or, ‘How could you think like that?’
- Threatening, intimidating, ordering and demanding that a person act in certain ways or comply with one set of ideas or perception of a situation.
- Dredging up the past, which has the effect of shifting the focus off the issue at hand.
- Closing off conversation by ignoring or not responding to the issue.
- Only hearing what you want to hear and blocking out what the other person is saying.
- Point scoring, or winning at the expense of someone else. This often involves public put-downs or ridicule of the other person.
- Laying on the guilt so that the other person feels bad about themselves and something they have or have not done. Examples are criticising parenting skills or jobs done, making the person feel guilty for not being a certain way, and statements such as ‘If you loved me then you'd know I don't like being with your family.’
- Exaggerating what has happened and blowing things out of all proportion.

If you are a shark, which of these tactics do you use? Living with sharks has a profound effect on the emotional, physical and mental health of those on the receiving end of such behaviour.

Trish said that when her partner was angry he would walk into the room and tell her ‘It's all your fault’, and she wouldn't even know what he was talking about. She said he would yell and scream about something every single day. Trish was living in an atmosphere of continual tension, waiting for the next outburst.

Foxes

Foxes are interesting creatures. They are more careful in their approach to a situation. They still want to win at all costs but they are more strategic and cunning. They try to take control of the situation in less obviously abusive ways than sharks, and are certainly more active than the turtle. Foxes are game players. They will set traps for people, slowly tightening their grip on the other person. They may taunt, letting people know they are around. They may surprise by turning up unexpectedly in order to catch the other person out. At the beginning of relationships they may put on sheep's clothing.

June (45) lived with a fox. She desperately wanted to go to an evening class to improve her sewing skills. Her children were at an age where they were fairly independent and could take care of themselves.

Her fox-like partner began his campaign to stop her by talking about the cost, also laying on the guilt about what he would do the two nights a week she was out. (He generally watched television and didn't interact a great deal anyway.)

He tried to further undermine her by talking about how he couldn't predict when he would need the car. When June explored alternative methods of transport, he resorted to breaking her sewing machine so that it would be a waste of time for her to attend the class.

Owls

The model that the owl presents is the exception here. Owls, perched high up in the trees, see the wider picture. Being a night bird, owls can see situations in a different light. That is the challenge of relating to another person, being able to see clearly what is going on for yourself and what is happening for others.

