



FOLLOW UP NOTES

Emotion is a wonderful topic and endlessly complicated. We barely scratched the surface in class but I wanted to underscore some of the main lessons and also to offer some suggested reading for those who are interested in a deeper dive. And here I would also like to remind you of the idea that, in my opinion, positive psychology is best used on yourself before you try to use it on clients. Positive psychology research ought to inform our coaching presence and our self-knowledge long before we think we ought to start tinkering with our clients. With that in mind:

A) People vary in their relationship to emotion:

Lay people form all sorts of attitudes about psychological phenomena. Trauma is held in your cells. Sadness is “underneath” anger. Emotions can lead us astray and make us act out in ways we would not otherwise. Being happiness is beneficial (i.e. there is no downside). Emotions are a choice. It is fine to believe any of these and you can point to some evidence for each. There is, however, more to the story, and emotions in real life often are more complicated than these pithy statements suggest. Your beliefs about emotions will influence:

- How comfortable you are with your client’s displays of emotion
- The degree to which you feel the urge to rescue, reassure, or engineer a new emotional experience for your client
- The relative amount of time you spend exploring the client’s emotion

I think it can be helpful for you to understand your own emotional leanings and biases as well as understanding your client’s tendencies and worldviews. To this end, I introduced you to the famous affect circumplex, [originally published](#) by Russell and colleagues in 1980. If you want a tiny bit of little-known positive psychology history, I was speaking with Alex Linley and explained this system as a more sophisticated approach to measurement because it placed a person on a multidimensional grid. It was this conversation that inspired Alex to come up with the Strengths Profile format. Mind you, I am not taking credit—Alex did the hard work—I was just there the moment the idea happened.



B) Emotions are not clinical. There are good reasons for coaches to be wary of encroaching on the territory of psychotherapy. Discussing emotions, however, is not a major problem. You talk about emotions all the time—with children, with partners, with best friends. In coaching, when we address emotions we are NOT trying to get clients to process them, we are not trying to engineer new emotions, and we are not trying to remedy the distress associated with negative emotions. Instead, we are simply trying to label, understand, and use emotions. Those three verbs are not so different than the 3 that Paul Z Jackson offers in understanding what coaches do (clarify, discover, and decide).

C) Mood is information

Even though we use the labels “positive” and “negative” we can accept the fundamental usefulness of emotions. Emotions can be thought of as channels of information about your circumstances. Rather than something to avoid, it may be more fruitful to pay attention to them and see what they are telling us. If you want to read about this topic, here is [a link](#) to an article by Norbert Schwartz and Gerald “Jerry” Clore—the two researchers who pioneered this work. What I like best about the article is that they discuss the various methods they used for studying this. I grew up with Jerry—he was a faculty member at University of Illinois—and he used a sound-proof room in the basement of the psych department to convince undergrads that he could dampen their emotions when they were inside it. He and Norbert were very clever with their designs.

D) Should we, as coaches, be intervening in mood?

On the one hand, the data are clear that people who enjoy frequent positive emotions benefit from this experience. Such emotions are *causally* related to better health, sociability, helping behavior, and other benefits. On the other hand, rushing to fix, reframe, or change negative emotional states can be both dismissive and a missed opportunity. Some considerations for mood intervention include:

- A) *Is the mood appropriate to the context?* If a client is sad, or irritated, or frustrated, that is not a problem. As a coach, you might be better able to appreciate these states if you consider how appropriate they are to the circumstances that your client describes.



B) *Is the emotion interfering with the coaching process?* Here, I tend to use emotion differentiation as a technique rather than venting or reframing. The difference is that emotion differentiation seeks to help people settle into their emotional experience rather than to change their emotional experience (maybe we could think of it as changing the person, not the problem?)