



Emotional Clarity: Would Shame by Any Other Name Hide Just as Fiercely?

Why ask a question like, “Would a rose by any other name smell just as sweet?” What could we hope to get from this deliberation that would be of value? Doesn’t everything “flowery” smell good? I remember when I learned that the answer is a definitive no.

Our trash can was beginning to smell. I was sure that I had an ingenious double solution that would win the admiration of my wife: potpourri roach spray. With one thorough application any odor from the trash can would be gone and any potential bug problem would be eliminated. When my wife arrived from the other room, I was informed that a roach spray by any other name smells just as foul. To this day I still think it should have worked.

What about with our emotions? If we mislabel an emotion, does that impact our ability to respond to a situation biblically? The clear answer is yes. This is because emotions are not passive. Emotions are not inconsequential fluctuations in our heart that “just happen to us.” Emotions are (among other things) a call to specific actions. One of the ways that our emotions reveal our hearts is that they call us to do something about the events around us. Consider the following list of examples:

- Guilt is a call to acknowledge wrongdoing, repent, and make restoration.
- Shame is a call to hide or make up for a deficiency.
- Anger is a call to aggressively correct an injustice.
- Joy is a call to celebrate a significant, good event.
- Anxiety is a call to eliminate a threat or to plan for protection.
- Peace is a call to rest.
- Frustration is a call to solve a recurring problem.
- Annoyance is a call to quiet a relatively insignificant interference.
- Depression is a call to give up in the face of hopelessness.
- Offendedness is a call to defend rules of decency and respect.
- Passion is a call to deliver a significant message or carry out an important vision.
- Confusion is a call to look for answers.

What happens if we mislabel confusion (lack of clarity about how to resolve a situation) as guilt (a sense that we should take responsibility and repent)? What happens if we confuse anxiety (a timid, defensive planning to protect) with offendedness (a bold, righteous defense of decency)? What happens if we call hurt (let down from a reasonable expectation) anger (the desire to aggressively defend what should have been mine)?

What happens is we *feel like* we are responding appropriately, but the mislabeling of our emotions is leading us into sincere foolishness!¹ This happens in the lives of many people for at least two reasons.

First, emotions are confused because emotions are subjective. My guilt (irritated sense of failure) may feel different from your guilt (blushing desire to hide). My joy (satisfying sense of accomplishment) may feel different from your joy (cheery celebration with friends). These are natural differences that have to do with personality, temperament, family history, personal values, and a myriad of other factors. The differences we experience at this level are neutral and, therefore, should be sought to be understood rather than debated for uniformity.

Like most parts of life, we will vary in the amount of effort we must put into understanding our own emotions and the emotions of others. Part of our emotional maturity (which has implications for our spiritual maturity) is gaining a self-awareness of how we experience and express particular emotions.

Second, emotions are confused because emotions are easily manipulated. From our earliest days, parenting (to some degree) sought to shape, define, and train our emotions. “You hit your brother. You should feel bad.” “You hit the ball. You should be proud.” “You did not obey Mama. Wait until your father gets home (worry).” In a context where parents exercise this responsibility biblically

¹ This calls our attention to an important cultural shift. We live in a culture where sincerity, genuineness, and authenticity have replaced righteousness, purity, and holiness as the highest virtues. It has become more important to be “true to yourself” than it is to “do the right thing.” We want to know there is grace for any mistake we sincerely make, but we want to process our emotional and relationships in a way that allows us make as few of these mistakes as possible.



(although none do so perfectly), this shaping is a means of God's grace. However, as we go through life, we will undoubtedly get strong mixed messages about our emotions. "You should not feel that way." "Do not let anyone judge your emotions. Just be true to how you feel." "Emotions don't matter." Then there are the mixed evaluations about whether a given action was good, bad, over-the-top, harsh, lenient, rushed, passive, or just right. All of this exists in a normal human life and creates confusion. How should I feel about [blank]?

What about the person who spends an extended period of time in an abusive, neglectful, or otherwise unhealthy environment? Responsibility, fairness, appropriateness, decency, proportionality, and care (foundational variables in identifying appropriate emotions) all become distorted. One may learn to take responsibility and fix whatever goes wrong (guilt) because no one else will. Unpredictable events automatically may become labeled as threats (anxiety) because it takes so little to get a large reaction. Minor shortcomings may become major points of emphasis (shame) because you might not get spoken to for days. It does not matter what I do (apathy or callousness) because my actions are not going to change the negativity of my environment.

As you read these misfiring calls to action above, it can seem like there is no hope. How do we get back on track when our emotions get mislabeled? If emotions are relatively subjective, how do you evaluate them objectively enough to ever rightly label them again? The solution lies not in the experience of the emotion, but in the call to action of the emotion.² Initially we are not able to change the experience of the emotion (heart rate, feeling in our stomach, blushing, tense muscle, racing and random thoughts etc.). What we can evaluate and change in light of God's character (the true and accurate standard from which all emotions emerge and take their definition) is the call to action.

What follows is a step-by-step plan for understanding, evaluating, and changing (if necessary) how you feel about or in the midst of an event. Because this article is not working through a particular emotion (shame, anxiety, depression, etc...) or a particular experience (conflict, rape, failure, etc...), there will not be a large number of biblical references. The goal of this article is not to give you the right answers, but to help you to ask the right questions. Until we ask good questions we will not get good answers. The goal is to help you understand emotional confusion within a biblical world-view so that the relevance of biblical teaching in your area of struggle will be clearer and, thereby, your motivation for implementing God's Word higher. It is highly recommended that you work through this material with a pastor, counselor, or mature Christian friend.

At the end of the article a diagram and journaling tool will be provided to assist you in walking through these steps with the various emotional situations you face.

STEP 1: Identify What You Naturally Feel

For this step, consider the following questions.

- What words do you naturally use to describe what you are feeling?
- Before anyone else responded to what happened, how did you complete the sentence, "Because of what happened, I felt [blank]?"

Your goal here is not to guess at what the "right answer" will be. We will not be able to make progress towards a healthy response until we know where we are starting. At this point, the goal is not a destination, but progress. Your goal is just to get an accurate read on what your first response was so that we can use that information to determine what type of changes (if any) need to occur in a given circumstance.

STEP 2: Identify the Natural Call to Action

As you take this step, ask yourself:

- What did your emotions cause you to want to do?
- What are the things that you would normally do after a situation like this?
- What would your friends who know you well expect of you in a similar circumstance?

² While we can find situations that parallel many of our experiences, the Bible is not meant to be a catalog or encyclopedia. Furthermore, just because we find a similar experience to our own in the Bible, this does not mean that the biblical character's response (unless it is Jesus) is normative for how we should respond. The breadth of experiences found in the Bible should comfort us that God is not caught off guard or unprepared for our circumstance. Rather the Bible—through instruction, example, encouragement, and poetry—teaches us how to respond to life. It is in this framework (the story of redemption) that we work backwards from appropriate response to appropriate emotion(s).



The goal at this step is to identify where your emotions take you. You will not be able to directly change your emotions, even if you determine that they were mislabeled in step one. What you can do is change the actions that you currently believe are “natural” in these types of situations. As you discipline yourself to act in accord with biblical wisdom (step 5), then healthier emotions – those that are situationally-fitting and represent God’s agenda for the setting – will emerge.³

STEP 3: Evaluate the Situation

The first two steps are purely experiential. There is no standard being applied. Step three now provides the raw material needed to begin to move towards a redemptive response. Consider the following questions. Not every question will be relevant for every situation. But if you are used to responding primarily on the basis of your emotions, these questions should give you the tools to begin to evaluate situations differently.

- What happened?
- Who was involved?
- In what order did the events happen?
- What led into the events?
- At what points were biblical commands or priorities violated?
- What commands or priorities were violated?
- Who violated them?
- What was done during the event to try to steer it in a better direction?
- In the midst of the situation, what did you think about most?
- What was most important to you?
- What was your desired outcome?
- What was the desired outcome of the other person(s)?
- How effective was the resolution, reconciliation, or problem solving afterwards?

STEP 4: Identify Themes of the Situation

There is one more assessment you need to do in order to best equip yourself to understand and train your emotions. You need to identify the aspects of the situation that triggered a confused or unbiblical response and call to action.

- What were the aspects that you identified in step three that were most rattling, confusing, hurtful, or anger provoking?
- How would you summarize the theme of those events in a single sentence?
- In what similar situations do those same themes emerge?

Taking the time to make these evaluations prepares you to know when to expect to apply what you are learning about yourself and God’s character. You will know what type of situations to pray about and the type of preparations you need to make. You will not always be able to prepare for these circumstances, but even in your spontaneous temptations, you will be able to recognize them earlier and more clearly identify the characteristic patterns of the temptation.

STEP 5: Identify the Biblical Calls to Action

Now that you have defined the situation, you can ask better response questions. As you seek to answer the questions listed below you may have to consult with a trusted friend, pastor, or counselor. It is better to be humbly confused than blindly confident. Pausing to ask a new question is often the first step towards wise living.

- What would a biblical call to action to this situation look like?
- What would most reflect God’s character and purpose in the beginning, middle, and end of this situation?
- How would these changes have been implemented?

³ Often this type of statement can be very frustrating for people. “How right do I have to act before I get some emotional relief?” we think. This is a fair question. There is no promised time table for the relief. But God is faithful. The challenge at this stage is to desire God’s character as much as (eventually more than) you desire God’s blessing (peace). The temptation to center our efforts on our reward is a common pitfall that discourages us into giving up. When that temptation arises cling to the truth that “God is faithful.”



- Now that the situation has ended, what would most reflect God’s character and purpose in your life and the life of the others involved?

A right evaluation of a situation precedes a right emotional response to that situation. Unfortunately, our hearts often feel before they evaluate. This is why we identified our natural response in step one. Now your responsibility is to biblically evaluate your response to the situation so that whether you responded righteously or sinfully (probably a mixture) that you will learn from the situation. This is what it means to be a good steward of the events of our lives.

STEP 6: Identify the Corresponding Emotions

Look at the biblical calls to action you listed in step five.

- What emotions are required to motivate those actions?

If this is difficult for you, use the list of emotions below.

- Ask yourself, “Would this emotion aid or detract from my efforts to do what I identified that I need to do?”

The list that you are creating should become one tangible way to measure how your spiritual maturity is penetrating your emotional/relational life. How much are your emotions in these types of situations (step 4) calling you to wise, biblical actions (step 5) instead of the actions that were previously natural to you (step 2)?

STEP 7: Walk Through this Process with Mature Christian Friends

If emotional clarity is a struggle for you, I am sure you have already asked yourself the question, “How am I supposed to be able to answer these questions accurately if I am this confused?” It is a very fair and good question. By God’s grace and the illumination of His Word it is possible, but there is another key resource God provides for this area of growth – His people.

Walking through this type of evaluative process with our brothers and sisters in Christ should be a regular part of every believer’s life. This is what it means to carry one another’s burdens (Gal 6:2). It is through this process that we (both the confused and the clarifier) become more convinced and encouraged that God’s Word is living and active, able to penetrate the complexities of life (Heb. 4:12-13). This is what it means to be an active part of one another’s lives as the New Testament calls us to (Heb 3:13-14).

List of Common Emotions

abandoned	bored	dejected	distracted	fearful
accused	burdened	depressed	distraught	frantic
aggressive	callous	despairing	distressed	frightened
alienated	cautious	despondent	downtrodden	frustrated
agonized	cheerful	deserted	elated	furious
aloof	cheated	disappointed	embarrassed	gloomy
angry	compassion	disapproving	enthusiastic	grieving
annoyed	confident	disbelieving	ecstatic	guarded
apathetic	confused	disconcerted	enraged	guilty
apologetic	content	discouraged	envious	happy
arrogant	crushed	disgusted	evasive	hateful
ashamed	curious	dishonest	excited	helpless
baffled	deceived	dismayed	excluded	hopeless
belittled	defiant	disoriented	exuberant	hopeful
bewildered	deficient	distant	flustered	horrified
bitter	deflated	distasteful		hostile

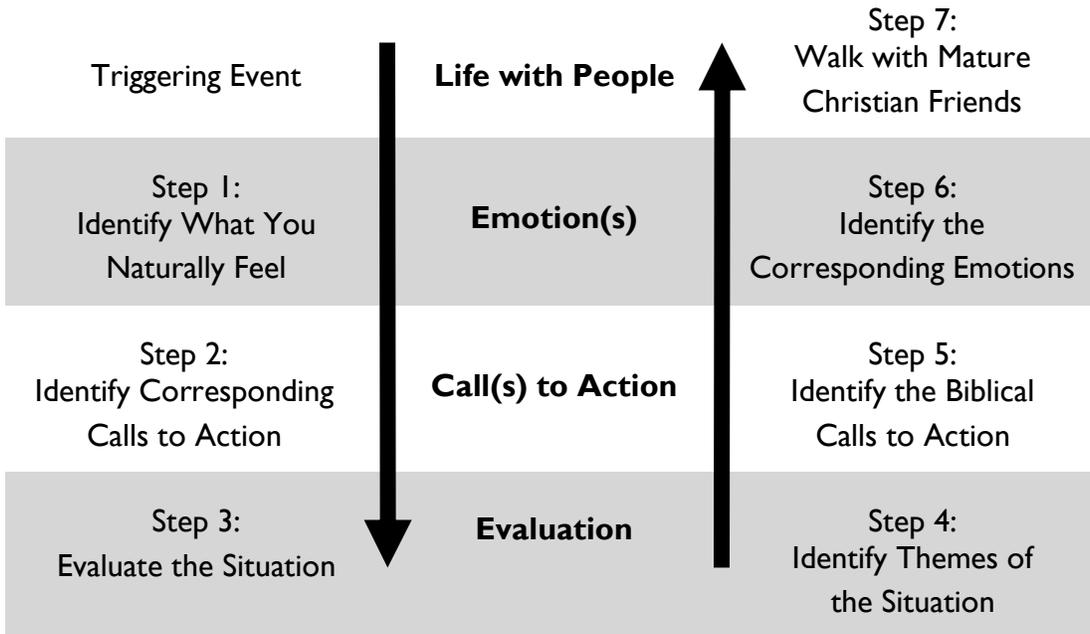
Similar resources are available at www.bradhambrick.com

humiliated	jubilant	peaceful	satisfied	thankful
hurt	livid	perplexed	self-pitying	thoughtful
hysterical	lonely	pessimistic	sheepish	thrilled
ignored	loved	pleased	shocked	tranquil
inadequate	mean	protective	shy	trapped
indifferent	melancholy	proud	silly	uncomposed
indignant	mischievous	provoked	smug	undecided
innocent	miserable	puzzled	spiteful	underestimated
insecure	mournful	regretful	stubborn	uneasy
isolated	negligent	relieved	sure	unwanted
insulted	optimistic	remorseful	surprised	upset
intense	outraged	resentful	sympathetic	uplifted
jealous	paranoid	sad	suspicious	weak

In concluding this article, I want to provide you with two tools to assist you in implementing what you have been taught. One is a diagram that illustrates the process you will be going through each time you walk through these seven steps. The second is a journaling tool that is designed to help you record, reflect on, and compare your notes on the various incidences of emotional confusion you may face.

*Natural Response of
Emotional Confusion*

*Sanctified Response of
Clarity & Wisdom*





Emotional Clarity Journaling Tool

STEP 1: Identify What You Naturally Feel

What words do you use to naturally describe how you feel in this situation? In parentheses beside each emotion rank on a scale of 1 to 10 how intensely you feel that emotion.

STEP 2: Identify the Call to Action

To what responses or solutions do these emotions naturally lead you? What is it that you naturally wanted to do in this situation?

STEP 3: Evaluate the Situation

Summarize what happened in this situation. Use the back if necessary.

STEP 4: Identify Themes of the Situation

What were the key aspects of this situation that triggered your natural responses listed in step two?

STEP 5: Identify the Biblical Calls to Action

What responses would have most reflected God's character and purpose in this situation?

STEP 6: Identify the Corresponding Emotions

What emotions would motivate the type of actions you listed in step 5?

STEP 7: Walk Through this Process with Mature Christian Friends

What mature Christian friends or mentors would be most helpful to you in this situation?
