

Navigating Feelings or What I wish I'd Learned in Middle School

The Mechanics of Your Response System

We are feeling creatures. What are feelings for? Would understanding what feelings show us and how they work be useful in living a thriving life?

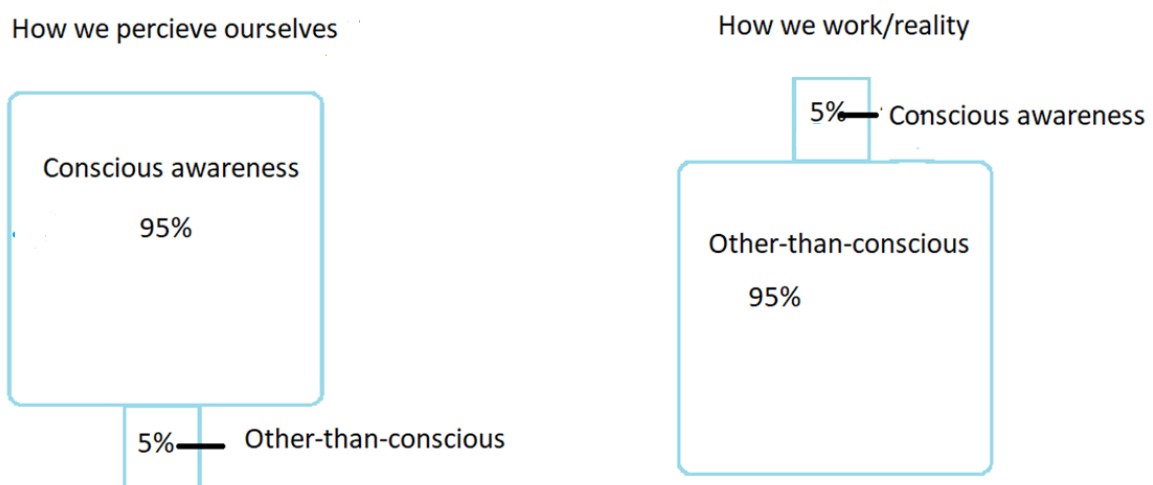
In the Language of Wholeness we identify our feeling system as one aspect of our wholeness. This aspect is our response system. Understanding how this response system works can be a powerful tool for having more choice in our state of being, our well-being and supporting well-being in others.

Underlying the response system

The illustration below is the visual for comparing how we experience consciousness with the accurate proportions of what we are conscious of and what we are not conscious of in the functioning of our whole system. Most of the activity of our system is other-than-conscious, we can't sense it. This is a bit like driving a car, the car is doing lots of work that you aren't controlling. You just need to put it in drive, steer, adjust the gas or brakes. The car's mechanicals are taking care of the details or fuel management, etc.

What is conscious is what we are aware of. It feels like most of us is conscious and just a little bit is unconscious as in the image on the left. But luckily this isn't true. A more accurate understanding of this proportion is the one on the right – most of what is going on in you, is not in your conscious awareness.

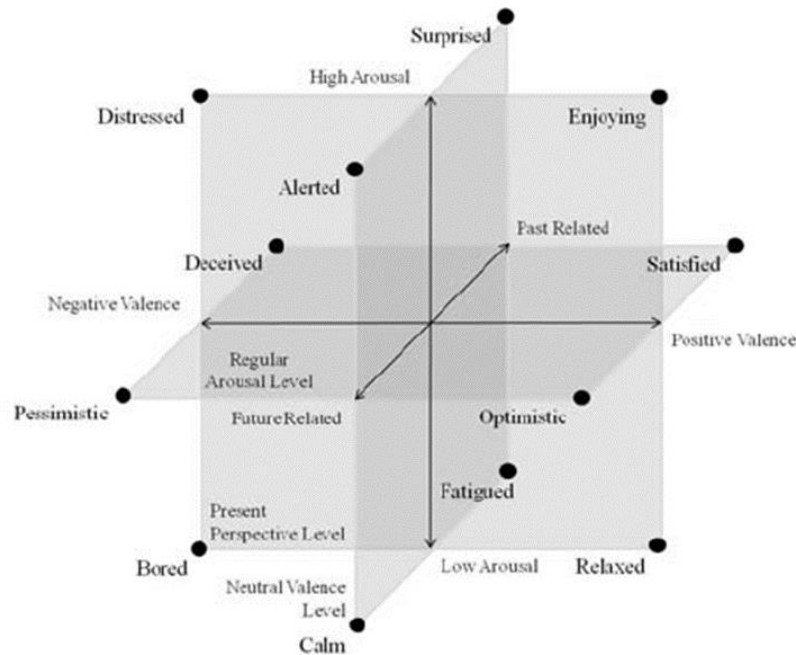
Conscious awareness and other-than-conscious processes



The 95% of you that is other-than-conscious is occupied with keeping you alive. It is occupied with two main activities: Homeostasis and Safety/Thriving.

Homeostasis is the job of maintaining a stable internal equilibrium. This includes activities like controlling blood pressure, blood sugar, hormonal balance, temperature, digestion, elimination, and so much more.

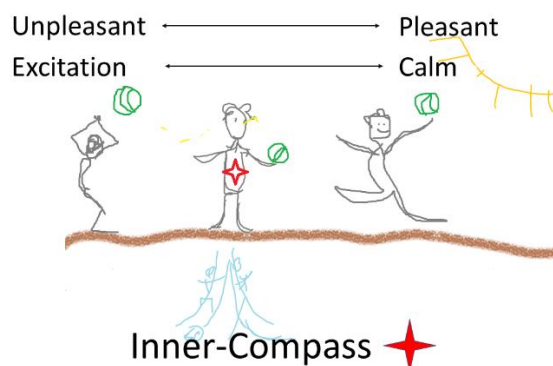
The safety/thriving system is about alerting you to threat and bringing you calm in safety. This safety/thriving system is your response system. The language of the response system gives you sensations of pleasant and unpleasant and excitation and calm. The combination of these sensations gives you your rich range of feelings.



(The above diagram was found on the web and I can no longer find the source. I am using without permission and with gratitude. I can't find a better one. If you recognize the source please let me know so I can ask permission to include here)

In the schematic of feeling diagram above Positive and Negative Valance is what we call Pleasant and Unpleasant.

This range of feelings is our Inner- Compass.



The two aspects of your other-than-conscious processes work together. Feelings affect your homeostasis. If you are constantly stressed there are effects like high blood pressure and inflammation. If you are thriving then you have a stronger immune system and the homeostasis system can work better. It works the other way

around too. If you have something awry in your homeostasis, internal chemistry, your feelings are affected like being 'hangry' or emotions related to hormonal changes and brain chemistry.

Understanding the Response System can help you be safe, healthy and happy when well-being is threatened. In essence if your response system is like a compass you can use it to navigate your life.

One of the most powerful feelings we experience is fear. Fear is crucial for survival. It is well practiced by the time you are born.



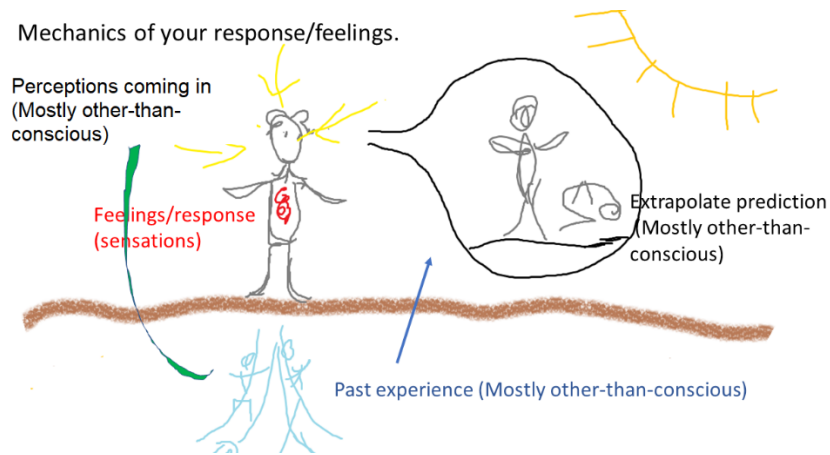
The basic expressions of fear are fighting, fleeing and freezing.

The pausing/planning part of your system takes twenty-four years or so to develop. This makes sense for survival in that you need to detect threat quickly or you will die. If you find yourself caught in fight/flight/freeze fear and you are safe then slow predictable movement, long slow exhales and shaking or jiggling can help bring the pause/plan/ calming part of your system on board. This will give you access to more choices in a scary time.

The mechanics of your responses/feelings.

In any given moment, including right this moment your response system is doing four basic activities. These happen almost simultaneously but we need to describe them in an order.

1. Current Perceptions: Your system is perceiving lots of information about the present moment. Most of that information is sifted out as unimportant and does not get to your conscious awareness.
2. Past Experience: Your system combines this current information with what it knows from your past experiences.
3. Prediction/interpretation: Then it extrapolates or predicts the future based on the combination of current perceptions and past experience.
4. Feelings/responses: That prediction arrives to your awareness as feelings/sensations or put another way as a response.



The extrapolation or prediction about the future your system is making creates an interpretation of the current situation. It is the meaning you make of your current experience. This response/interpretation/meaning is information for YOU! It is true and useful for you, not for others. It is your compass speaking to you for your safety and benefit.



Understanding that everyone has their own compass giving them information about their life is a key part of the Language of Wholeness. A fundamental role of a teacher or parent is to support the student or child to understand and develop their own compass and not impose yours. As an artist, your job is to discover and listen to your own compass, your own responses. Identifying your compass, your criteria, your values, is a foundation for making artistic choices.

When you know what matters to you, what you want to say, you set yourself up for expressive freedom and clarity. You have agency.

A quick route to fear and struggle is to try to use another’s compass: “What do they think is right for me?”

If you are wondering if you are right, good, bad ask yourself:

“Right for whom and by what criteria?”

If you answer ‘is right for another person’, notice that most often you don’t have the information about what another person thinks is right/good. If you don’t have that information then it is impossible to do. If you do

have the information and it isn't right for you, by your criteria, then doing the other person's right way can be soul killing. If the other person's 'right' is the same as your 'right' then just do your 'right', for you, by your criteria. Using your compass is easier and more effective than using another's.

There are many layers to this subject but on a simple level being able to discern what is your compass gives you crucial information to make healthy decisions in any particular moment.

What do responses tell you?

As we saw above responses tell you what you are predicting. They don't tell you about the present moment or current situation. They tell you about how your past experience influences how you see the next moments. You are essentially a predictive creature. This is why you can be in the same situation with other people and everyone has a different reaction.

Three people could be asked to sing a song to the group. One person feels excited, "I can't wait to sing this song." One person is neutral and annoyed, "Oh come on, I don't want to sing anything right now." Another will feel anxious, "Oh NO, I can't sing, please, don't make me."

Here is the same situation and three totally different responses. Let's plug in our mechanics of the response system. When we see that:

- each person is feeling the meaning they have made of the request to sing
- based on their past experience
- then different responses make total sense.

Past Experience:

The first person has had fun sharing songs with others. Loves to do it.

The second person hasn't enjoyed singing. Would rather doing other things than sing and doesn't like singing.

The third person has had embarrassing experiences singing and being judged badly for singing.

The prediction of:

The first person is "Singing in front of the group will be fun."

The second person is "Singing in front of the group isn't what I want to do. I wish they hadn't asked me to sing."

The third person is "It could be dangerous for me to sing in front of others"

Below is a chart of this set-up.

Situation is the same	Past Experience	Prediction	Feeling
Asked to Sing	Joy sharing songs	Singing will be fun	Excitement
Asked to Sing	No pleasure singing	I will end up singing when I don't want to sing.	Annoyance/frustration
Asked to Sing	Embarrassed and judged badly when singing	Singing puts me in danger of being embarrassed and badly judged.	Anxiety

Can you see the feelings of excitement, frustration and anxiety are not the feelings of being asked to sing. They are not the feelings of the situation. They are the feelings of the predictions.

Misattributing Feelings

In life we usually don't have this clear. We attribute what we are feeling to the situation. Singing for a group makes me happy. Singing for a group makes me frustrated. Singing for a group makes me anxious.

This misattribution of the feeling to the situation makes sense on a survival level. When in danger you want to attribute the feeling to what you are sensing so you act fast.

This makes sense for survival. When in danger you don't want to contemplate the danger, (the cave area) you want to act, (get out of the area where the Tiger ate your family.



It is useful to attribute the danger to the cave.

Most of the time it doesn't matter that you attribute your feelings to the situation. But when your response interferes with what you want to do in the world, then the fact that you aren't feeling the situation but, are feeling the interpretation of the situation, is a wonderful fact. Interpretations/predictions can be changed. This mechanism for response is another example of how amazing our system is. It serves our survival but when the response isn't useful to modern times, it can change and learn. You can override or update a survival mechanism to adjust to the current reality.

If person three actually wanted to sing for others because they have something to share but are afraid to share it, then figuring out how to change the interpretation can be the means to do this.

There are many approaches designed to help people change this meaning.

Here is a basic format based on understanding the mechanics of your response system.

1. Meet the facts of the moment.
 - a. Acknowledge and feel the feeling: "I feel afraid. My chest is tight"
 - b. Remind yourself: "This feeling make sense to my life at this moment. It is my system trying to keep me safe."
(If in fight/flight/freeze do slow movements, long slow exhales and shake out or jiggle. Of course get help if you are panicking.)
2. Make sense of the facts.
 - a. At this moment am I safe? "Yes"
 - b. What am I believing about this moment? "If I sing everyone will judge me as terrible."
 - c. What am I afraid of specifically? "People will hate me and I will be rejected."

- d. Is this true? “Probably not. I sing well when I am by myself. I love this song.” (If the prediction is true then it is smart not to sing. We ask questions rather than override the fear. There are times it is accurate.)
 - e. How likely is my predicted outcome to happen in this circumstance? “10 % - Very unlikely since this is a loving group of people.”
(Tools from LearningMethods™ can help one to do this step.)
3. Update the interpretation to currently reality.
 - a. Am I safe at this exact moment?
 - b. Can I feel the ground under me, the air? What do I see, hear?
 - c. What is a more accurate prediction of what is likely to happen if I sing now?
 - d. How can I understand the situation in a way that my prediction set me up for feeling ok to sing?
 4. Apply the new interpretation. This is training your system to update your experience.
 - a. Locate yourself in the moment. “Here I am, as I am”.
 - b. Expect baby steps – each time is a little easier if you take the time to reinterpret the experience or reframe it all together. One person said he spends the moments before performing naming and feeling all the things he appreciates about the current situation like the people, the room, the music etc. It can be useful to connect to your ‘lofty goal’, why you sing, “I sing to bring beauty into the world and tell this story.” It is a goal bigger than ego.
 - c. Over and over ask “Am I safe at this exact moment and will I be safe in the next?”
 - d. Locate yourself in your sensations by feeling the feelings of the world around you like the ground, the air, your breath, your skin, the sounds in the room – whatever helps you pull back from the scary future prediction to your present safety and your lofty goal.
 - e. Create locating practices that remind you of present reality, (see Meta-patterns/perspectives of health in Wholeness in Motion)..

This is just one example of a prediction or interpretation that can get in the way of you being able to do and be how you want to be in the world. These inaccurate predictions for your current reality make sense based on your past but are interfering with your future. We call these interferences misinterpretations of current reality. Luckily, misinterpretations can be updated.

If you want to live a life with more ease, clarity, joy and freedom it is useful to understand the mechanics of the response system and the common interferences embedded in our culture to living a thriving life. These interferences effect areas of life like: communication, judgement, blame, jealousy, performance anxiety and so much more.

As educators we can inadvertently teach people interferences that set them up for fear and struggle. Below are examples of the kind of statements that we make with all the best intentions that can actually set a person up for struggle and alternative statements based on more accurate understanding of how things work:

Well Intentioned Statement	Possible future struggle	Useful alternative statement
Good. Now make sure you do that again.	Tension of trying to ensure an outcome before it has happened, which is impossible	Give it another go and see out it goes? (You can't ensure an outcome in advance, you can up your chances of success.)

Great job. Wow wonderful.	Fear of another's opinion. Performance anxiety. This is teaching another to look outside themselves for assessment. Imposing your compass on them (praise and criticism are two side of the same coin.)	How did that go for you? I loved that, but that is my opinion, what did you think and why? (My job is to support the student to access their own compass, develop their agency.)
Stand up tall and bring your shoulders back.	Physical tension. Imposing your idea on to another person.	Are you ready to bounce a ball, move in any direction? (Based on the Suspension System model)
You are irritating me. You made me mad.	Blame and shame. Misattributing your feelings to another.	When you do that I feel hurt. Is it possible to see my point of view in this moment? (Response system info)
He is a jerk	Misattributing your feeling/annoyance on to another.	When someone cuts in front of me I hate it. That person is just rushing to the hospital and didn't see me. (Response system info)
She's a bad dog.	Misattributing your judgement on to the dog.	It is bad for me when the dog pees on the rug. Maybe I should let her out more often. She's just peeing on the rug because she needs to pee. (Response system info)

These examples are provided to give a flavor of how understanding our response system can help us navigate life and be a skilled leader. They aren't precise and universal. There are nuances to all. The key here is to see the flavor of the possibly inadvertent misunderstandings that can arise or be perpetuated by these statements and perspectives? Even more crucial, can you sense the possible clarity and power of being clearer on these perspective to support agency, clarity and healthy communication and assessment? The Language of Wholeness is based on aligning our teaching to more accurate understandings of how things work. The content of the Language of Wholeness is all about understanding in more depth the subject of the chart above.

Blame, judgment, misunderstandings.

Gracie isn't a 'bad' dog.
She's just napping on the plants.

My attribution on her that she is bad,
just shows me what matters to me.
I don't want squished plants.

I feel the 'badness', not her.



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People act based on their own compass.

The people who littered my road with these cans aren't 'idiots'.
They were just doing what they do, not caring about litter and enjoying their beer while driving.
My fury just shows me what I care about: beautiful roads, sober driving.
With that information I can now take action.



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If you don't agree with another person's actions ask yourself or better yet the person why that action makes sense to them. What would they have to be believing for this to be good or true for them? (This is a fabulous tool for understanding a character. What would this character have had to have lived through up to this moment to be saying these words, singing these words, this way?)

Sometimes we just make things up when we don't understand a situation. Our system wants a story or to make meaning of our experience. For example:

Situation: I walk by Joe and he doesn't say "hi".

My Response: I felt ignored, hurt and mad.

Conclusion: Joe is a jerk. He ignored me. Or worse yet, he hates me. I suck.

Now with all that bad feeling as a wake-up call, I can bring in the response system information.

I Stop and ask:

- Do I like this feeling?
- Do I have the information to draw these conclusions?
- Do I really know what Joe was doing, thinking and feeling?
- Who has the information about what Joe was up to when we passed?
- Can I see I am making up a story here?
- Is it true?
- How do I know it is true or not?
- What are at least three other explanation for why Joe didn't say 'Hi' to me.
- How can I find out what was up for Joe?

When it comes to stories or conclusions we make about what other people are feeling or thinking it is important to recognize:

1, Your system is trying to make sense of something. It is in the act of making up meaning based on your life, not the other person's life.

2, You don't actually have the information.

I have seen people suffer years of isolation because they erroneously made a conclusion about what someone else was thinking about them because of an innocent action on the part of another. Do you recall someone concluding something about what you were thinking or feeling that had nothing to do with your reality?

The sooner we can ask: WHO HAS THIS INFORMATION, the sooner we can get useful information.

When it comes to assigning blame, feeling shame, jealousy, embarrassment and the whole host of feelings that have to do with guessing or assuming what another is thinking or feeling my favorite bumper sticker is wisdom:

Don't believe everything you think!

On a survival level it makes sense that we try to guess what other people are thinking about us. We are social animals. Evolutionarily, if we were left alone in the wilderness we were more likely to die than when we were part of a group. Social signals and assumptions and guessing others' signals is essential for survival and social engagement. Ask anyone who has trouble reading social signals. You or I aren't bad because we guess, make assumptions. What is important in this work is recognizing this tendency and then putting it to question when it is interfering with healthy communication and community. Oddly the story-making ability can work against the very survival feature it is designed to serve.

As educators we naturally make assumptions about what is going on in our students. In this work when we notice the assumption we stop and ask "Do I have that information?" I recognize that I have a hunch based on all my years of teaching. If I can stop and ask the student a few questions it is surprising how often the hunch wasn't accurate. It saves so much confusion to ask the student information about what is up for them rather than constantly offering suggestions based on a hunch. Instead of saying "Trust yourself," when we have a hunch the student isn't confident, we ask the student "How are you doing with this work right now?" Who knows what they might say? It could be anything from "I am out of it today, I haven't slept" to "I am nervous about this section". We might be confirmed in our hunch but with the questions our suggestion is now rooted in something the student has recognized and acknowledge.

Understanding our sensitive, flexible, brilliant response system is a powerful tool for thriving and supporting thriving.

Change your perspective, your interpretation, change your life.