

Chapter 5

Emotional Responsibility

One reason it may be more comfortable to focus on what we *think* rather than on how we *feel* is that we don't know how to handle emotions very well. Talking about emotions and needs can feel vulnerable and messy. So most of us try to ignore our feelings and focus on our judgments and opinions, which seem more defined and easier to manage. We maintain a comfortable distance between ourselves and others and keep emotions from arising by talking about ideas. And relationships can go along well this way, as long as we do not get too close.

As we become more familiar with another person, however, our emotions tend to get stirred up, making it more difficult to simply ignore them. Notice how quickly anger or resentment can arise with a partner, family member, or close friend. These significant relationships are the ones we often find most challenging because they bring up strong feelings that we don't know how to handle.

Letting Down Boundaries

When we first meet someone, or know a person only as an acquaintance, there are formal boundaries most of us maintain that keep the relationship polite and civil, as well as emotionally distant. We tend to keep space between us and allow people more room. As a relationship deepens into friendship or family, however, the boundaries that we normally keep with strangers fall away. As we feel more comfortable, we naturally reveal more of ourselves, which can help us feel connected and not so alone. This kind of connection often feels like a big relief because we can finally let down our protective guards. Yet it can also lead to conflict as we let our hurt feelings and negative emotions surface.

When we are upset about something, we naturally want to release our emotions in order to feel better. Without knowing how to do this effectively, however, we tend to dump them on people with whom we feel most safe. We can easily damage our significant relationships through our unconscious efforts to discharge our emotions in this way,

and they quickly become a tangle of old wounds that breed resentment and hostility.

When a relationship begins to feel strained in this way it is often a sign that you have lost the formal boundaries that kept your lives neatly separated. Being close to another person requires that we let go of some social formalities and be more real with each other. However, there are healthy boundaries that are necessary to maintain with *every* relationship that encourage each of us to be responsible for our own emotions and needs.

When Emotions Are Charged

Certain people tend to trigger certain emotions, and the closer you are, the more their behavior is likely to upset you. When this happens, it is easy to think other people are *trying* to hurt you. You may then try to change them or to distance yourself, assuming that they are the cause of the problem.

When you think that someone else is responsible for your feelings, your first impulse may be to get that person to act differently so the emotion does not come up. However, trying to control another person so your emotions are not triggered often causes *more* conflict in your relationships. Most people react defensively when someone tries to get them to change, and this can lead to power struggles that destroy the trust and safety between you. This approach also leads to a feeling of powerlessness and insecurity when you finally realize that you cannot change the other person.

When an interaction with another person brings up strong emotions, you are likely to remember struggles you have gotten into before, and your impulse may be to avoid the situation. Yet these conflicts also present you with the best opportunity to learn more about each other and deepen your understanding and connection. The problem is not the emotions themselves, but that you don't know how to respond effectively.

The skills of Conscious Communication present some new ways to respond when someone is feeling upset. When we react to a person or situation with strong negative feelings such as sadness, hurt, anger, or fear, our whole body becomes charged with emotions. I refer to this as being *emotionally charged*.

We all have emotional charges come up, and there is no way to avoid them. Instead of dumping them on someone else, or trying to deny them, we can learn to respond directly to our emotional charges and those of the people around us in a way that reveals what is *causing* the strong feelings.

Emotional Responsibility is about first separating out each person's emotions in order to respond to them more effectively. Sorting out emotionally charged conflicts works best when we each take responsibility for our own feelings and needs. This first step is essential to all the other relationship skills, however, it is not easy to do because our habit is to deny our feelings or blame someone else for them.

Denial and Addictive Habits

Emotions often appear to be beyond our ability to control or understand. They seem like mysterious energetic states that overwhelm us for no apparent reason and make us do things we do not intend to do. We often think that if we recognize our emotions and speak directly about them, they will grow even larger and more out of control. So, naturally, we struggle to keep them hidden and buried deep in our subconscious where we think they cannot affect us.

Denial of emotions is a common response when something happens that brings up uncomfortable feelings. However, when you try to cover up your emotions in this way, they actually *do* grow more powerful and destructive and can end up damaging you or your relationships. Concealed emotions are what make us lash out at someone we don't mean to hurt, or engage in unhealthy behaviors we know are not good for us.

We each have our own way of trying to dull our painful feelings. Some of these may include compulsive talking, eating, drinking, smoking cigarettes, drug use, sleeping, over-stimulation, sex, or withdrawal. Every day many of us find ourselves doing things that we know may harm us, yet we do them anyway. We know intellectually that these addictive habits are hurting us, but we simply cannot help ourselves.

The motivation behind many such self-destructive habits is to drown out our emotions. We turn to addictive behaviors because they temporarily distract or numb us from our feelings. Yet eventually

we discover that avoiding emotions in this way does not work. They always come back with more intensity, and then we need a stronger substance or distraction to make them go away.

Facing Our Emotions

Many of us are afraid of our emotions because they take us over so completely and leave us feeling helpless to do anything about them. We often try to hide this fear by convincing ourselves that showing emotions is a sign of weakness. We mistake the denial of our emotions for strength and believe that courage means never being vulnerable. We mask our complete lack of ability to handle emotions by acting as though we are in control of them.

However, it is not our strength and power that makes us want to ignore our emotions, but our fear and insecurity. It takes much greater courage and strength to turn toward our emotions and look directly at them than it does to turn away from them. And avoiding our feelings in this way actually gives *them* more power over *us* because they remain hidden and beyond our ability to deal with them directly.

The main reason that facing emotions can be so difficult is simply because no one has ever showed us how to do it.

Few of us have the skills
to work directly with emotions.
So we tend to dismiss them as insignificant,
when actually we tremble
at the thought of facing them.

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When I was a young boy, I played on a local ice hockey team. One day, I was facing another player who was winding up to take a slap shot in my direction. I was afraid of being hit by the hard rubber puck and instinctively turned my back, much like an ostrich puts its head in the sand to avoid seeing danger. I must have thought that if I could not see the puck coming, it would not hurt me.

Later, my coach pointed out that my response to this situation was the most dangerous thing I could have done. He reminded me that I was wearing thick padding and guards on my front side from my waist

to my ankles, which could easily deflect a hard puck without hurting me. The backs of my ankles and legs, however, were covered only by my cloth uniform. If the puck had hit me from behind, it could have done serious damage.

Years later, when I was playing on a high school varsity hockey team, another player wound up to take a slap shot right in front of me. I remembered what my coach had told me, took a deep breath, relaxed my fear of getting hit, and faced this player directly. He slapped the puck hard right at me, and sure enough, it hit my leg pads and bounced off without hurting me at all. I then had the puck on my stick with only this player between me and the goal. I skated around him, and with just the goal tender to face, went on to score an unassisted goal that won the game for my team.

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Many of us do with emotions what I did as a young boy with that hockey puck coming at me. We become afraid and turn our backs, thinking if we cannot see them, they cannot hurt us. When we are not aware of our emotions, however, we cannot deal with them. While avoidance can seem like protection, it actually makes us more vulnerable and likely to be hurt.

Turning to face your feelings is the first step in responding intelligently when something has upset you. Emotions are merely a signal that some basic need of yours is not being met. They are sending you a message to take care of yourself, and when you ignore or deny them, they keep growing stronger, trying to get your attention.

Separating Your Emotions from Other People's Emotions

Just as a hockey player has padding, it can be helpful to have some skills that will enable you to face emotions directly without getting hurt. The first skill is to establish a simple boundary between the feelings that belong to you and the feelings that belong to others.

The first step in handling emotions constructively is to see that your emotional charge is about you, and other people's emotional charge is about them.

We have a habit of assuming responsibility for other people's feelings and likewise blaming other people for ours. This confusion

causes much of the damage we associate with emotionally charged situations. We can only deal effectively with *our own* emotions, and when they get mixed up with those of another person, the situation becomes impossible to resolve. You can break this habit by simply acknowledging who has the emotional charge in the present moment. This will encourage both of you to take responsibility for your own emotions and begin the process of taking care of yourselves.

Feeling Emotion in Your Body

To become aware of your own emotional condition, you can ask yourself:

“How am I feeling right now?”

or

“Am I emotionally charged or neutral?”

Answering these questions can be difficult. Most of us have learned to pretend to be neutral when we do have strong emotions, hoping to avoid appearing weak. So it can be helpful to begin by recognizing what emotions feel like in your body. You might have a red-hot face, tight fists, a knot in your stomach, or a pounding heart. Or you might get your first indication of an emotional charge through your behavior. Irregular breathing, crying, yelling, withdrawing, talking fast, moving quickly, or turning to an addictive habit – all of these can be signals that you are feeling strong emotions.

In later chapters, we will explore what these strong emotions indicate and how to release them effectively. For now, we are concerned only with knowing when we have an emotional charge and accepting that it belongs to us, not someone else.

Recognizing the Other Person’s Emotions

After checking your own emotional condition, the next question is:

“How is the other person feeling?”

You cannot know for sure how other people are feeling until they directly express their emotion. Yet we can often sense from their behavior, words, or body language whether they are emotionally charged or neutral. Most of us don’t know how to talk about our strong feelings

constructively, so we tend to either hide them or explode. This question will help you determine if another person is upset, or if they are feeling alright. Once you know them fairly well, it is usually easy to tell.

Staying Neutral in Order to Help

When someone we are close to has an emotional charge, often our first impulse is to assume that we are responsible. We easily blur the boundary between us and get involved in other people's business. We may get defensive or think it is our job to fix the situation, and then we become too caught up in their emotional charge to be able to effectively help them.

If you want to help other people or connect with them when they have a strong emotion, it helps to remain neutral. To be able to do this, you can learn to recognize when other people have an emotional charge and acknowledge that it belongs to them. It can be helpful to say to yourself, "***That person appears to be upset,***" and recognize that you are *not* upset at that moment. It is important to remember also that you *don't know* yet why the person is upset. This reality check will enable you to listen and find out more about the problem.

Staying separate
from another person's emotional charge
allows you to take care of yourself
and offer them real support.

Think of a situation in your life recently when someone you are close to was upset. Remember how you reacted and whether you became defensive or tried to fix the problem. Now try to identify the emotion the person seemed to be expressing, without coming to any conclusions. See what it feels like to simply allow other people to have their feelings without doing anything about it. Try filling in this sentence with a situation, the name of the other person, and an emotion:

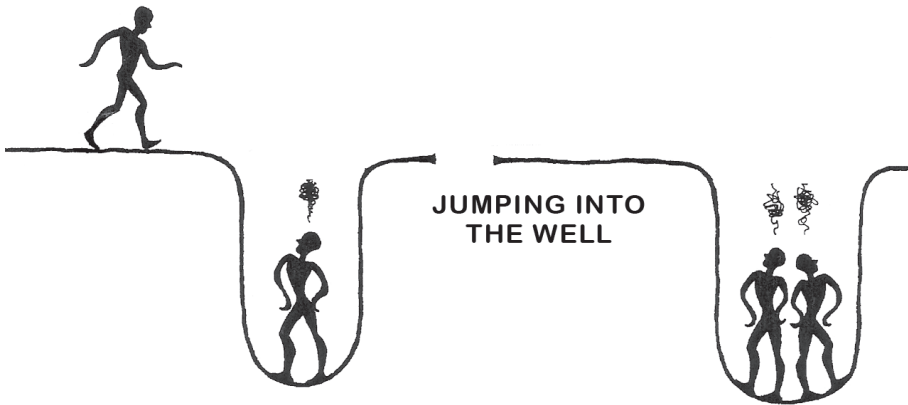
When _____

happened, _____ seemed to be feeling _____

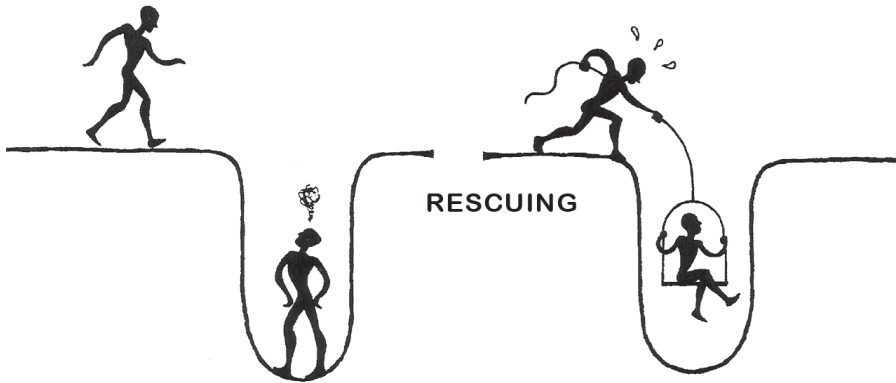
(hurt, sad, angry, scared, frustrated, etc.)

The Emotional Well

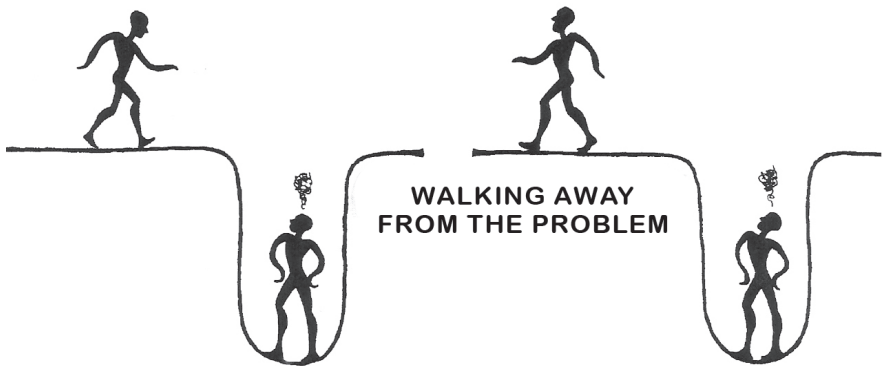
When someone is having a strong emotional reaction, it is as if they have fallen into a deep, dry well and don't know how to get themselves out. If you assume responsibility for their emotions, or immediately get lost in your own emotional reaction, it is like climbing into the well with them. Joining them in the well can feel like you are supporting them, yet if you are both in the well, it is more difficult for either of you to get out. We often jump into another person's predicament without ever stopping to ask whose problem it is, and who is the best person to solve it.



Another option when you notice that someone is having an emotional charge is to try to save them by pulling them up out of the well yourself. It is very tempting to try to pull other people out, especially if you care about them. Yet rescue operations can have negative side effects. This seemingly heroic act often creates an unhealthy dependency in the long run because they never learn that they can do it themselves.

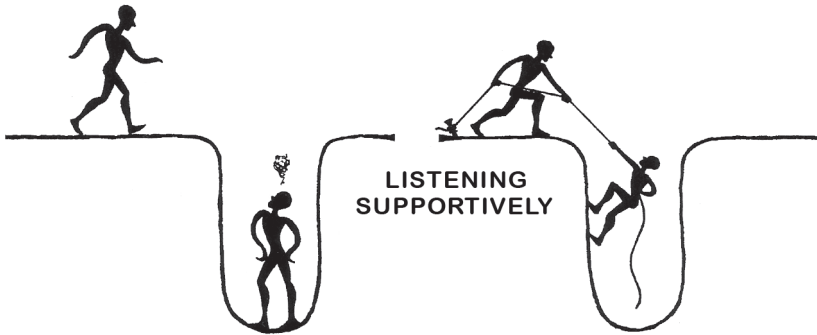


A third common response is to walk away when someone we know is in emotional turmoil. Sometimes we just cannot deal with another person's emotions or we feel overwhelmed with the thought of trying to rescue them. If we think we are responsible for someone else's problem, we often avoid situations that bring up strong feelings or simply deny that they are happening.



None of these responses help the person with the emotional charge to deal with their situation constructively. Another possibility is to stay neutral when someone you know is caught in an emotional well. Staying emotionally neutral when other people are upset is like standing on the ground above the well. It can be challenging because you may feel as though you are abandoning the person below, especially if your habit has been to jump into the well with them.

However, from your position on solid ground above the well, you can throw down a rope and encourage the other person to climb out. This provides support, but leaves the problem solving to them. And, it gives you a way to be helpful without exhausting yourself. Imagine the difference between physically pulling a person up and out of a well and holding a rope for them to climb out themselves. Holding the rope requires presence, patience, and strength, but it is not nearly as much work as pulling them out.



Climbing the Rope

A thick rope with knots hung from the ceiling in my elementary school gym, and every year we were asked to climb it. The first few years I tried, I could not do it. The ceiling looked extremely high and the task seemed impossible. My friends were stronger and lighter than I was and could easily climb the rope. Year after year, I gave up in despair, thinking I would never be able to do it.

Then, one year, I managed to climb the rope all the way to touch the ceiling. I was ecstatic and full of self-confidence after that experience. Every time I looked at the rope from then on, I knew I could climb it. If someone had pulled me up on that rope instead of encouraging me to struggle to climb it on my own, I never would have gained the inner strength and confidence of mastering a skill.

When you rescue people, you often undermine their ability to care for themselves, which weakens them, as the following Butterfly Story illustrates. In contrast, when people with an emotional charge learn how to care for themselves, it strengthens them. The skills of

Supportive Listening, which we will learn in the next few chapters, show us how to stand on the ground above the emotional well, hold a rope, and encourage the person with the charge to climb out on their own. This is the most effective way to care about other people because it supports their strength and independence rather than their weakness and dependency.

The Butterfly Story *(Author Unknown)*

I was jogging one evening in the park and came to rest, as was my custom, by a large rock. There I noticed a cocoon on the tree close by, and at that very moment, a butterfly was emerging from the cocoon. As I watched the butterfly struggle, I got the idea, “Gee, this is a tremendous symbol for what I do as a minister and counselor: help people out of their bonds. I help them fly.”

So I reached up and very, very carefully began helping the butterfly to escape the small hole he had eaten in the cocoon, laid it on the rock close by and watched as the butterfly started to stretch its wings. I felt very happy about stumbling upon this miraculous scene and decided to use this story as the subject for my next sermon. I was greatly excited by this thought and before the day was out I had completed the sermon.

That same evening when I was running again I stopped by the same rock and saw the cocoon and, sure enough, the butterfly was off the rock and had fallen to the ground. I was stunned. I thought perhaps a bird or another insect had attacked it; but I examined it and there didn't seem to be anything damaged on the butterfly; it was just dead.

I was very upset about this, and I went home to look in my encyclopedias to try and determine what had happened. What I found out was that it is

the struggle that the butterfly makes by forcing its way out of its cocoon and eating its way through its own bounds that enables it to gain enough strength to emerge whole and strong. The very action of fighting its way through the cocoon is what gives it the strength to fly.

The fact that I had tried to help by assisting the butterfly out of its cocoon had only made matters worse; I had, in fact, limited the butterfly's ability and strength and the butterfly was unable to fly on its own. By helping too much I had enabled the butterfly out of its bounds, yes, but in the process, I had killed it. The sense of my sermon changed. I began to realize how it is that people must not only be willing but also must do the work themselves to become more whole and complete.

Taking Responsibility for Our Emotional Charge

The Butterfly Story demonstrates how we can disable someone when we think we are helping them. It shows us how important it is to allow another person to handle their own difficulties, and underscores the significance of maintaining clear boundaries between our personal challenges and those of someone else. As much as we care about another person or want to shield them from pain, it is not our business to handle their dilemmas for them. And if we take responsibility for their well-being, we may unintentionally be defeating them.

Maintaining a clear boundary between us and remaining neutral when other people have an emotional charge does not mean we don't care about them or want to help them with their struggle. The point is that only by staying separate from their feelings *can* we genuinely help them. In the pictures of the emotional well, this is illustrated by the figure standing above the well holding a rope so the person in the well can climb out on their own. Just as the emerging butterfly had to struggle out of its cocoon, each one of us has to wrestle with our own emotional charges in order to become a whole and complete person.

The main idea of Emotional Responsibility is that the person with the strong emotions is the one responsible for them. This means simply that your feelings have more to do with you than with anyone else, and you are the one who can respond most effectively when you are upset. The chart of Emotional Responsibility below will help you to visualize who is responsible for the emotions in a charged situation, and introduce the primary skills of Conscious Communication that may be useful in responding. Each of these skills will be the focus of later chapters in this book.

Model of Emotional Responsibility

This Model of Emotional Responsibility illustrates four situations that are common in an interaction between two people. (See chart on the next page.) Three of the boxes in the chart represent situations where one or both people are upset. Each of these boxes identifies a specific set of skills that will be introduced later. This chart simply helps us orient ourselves to which situations require which skills.

No Problem Zone

The first situation is when both people are neutral. When there is no emotional charge, relationships tend to be more relaxed, easy, fun, and productive. However, it does not work to fake being neutral. If one of you has an emotional charge that is affecting the relationship, it will diminish your capacity for connection. If you choose to hide it, it will likely strain your ability to care about each other and undermine the trust and safety between you.

When the Other Person Owns the Emotion

Another situation occurs when the other person has an emotional charge and you are neutral. In this case, an effective response is to remain neutral and allow the other to feel their emotion without minimizing it or trying to fix it. You can then help them, if you choose, using Supportive Listening. (Chapters 7 – 12)

When You Own the Emotion

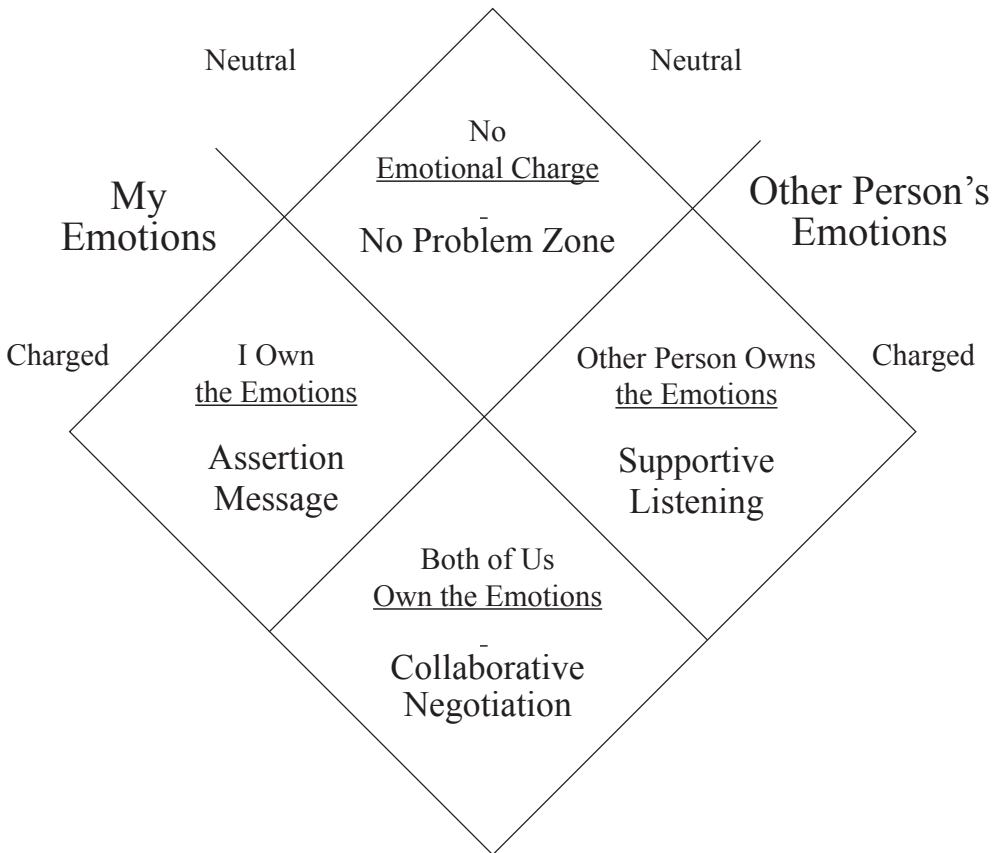
A third situation occurs when you have a strong emotion and the other person is neutral. In this circumstance, it is most effective for you to recognize and “own” your emotion before you do anything else. You may then choose to express it without blame or attack, using an Assertion Message. (Chapters 13 – 16)

When Both of You Are Emotionally Charged

The final possibility occurs when both of you have an emotional charge. These situations are often the most difficult to handle and usually require some combination of Supportive Listening, Assertion, and Collaborative Negotiation. (Chapters 17 and 18)

The purpose of learning Conscious Communication skills is to increase the amount of time a relationship spends in the “no-problem zone.”

Model of Emotional Responsibility



This chart will help you determine who has the emotional charge, and think about which skills to use. When the other person has an emotional charge, an effective response is Supportive Listening. When you are the one emotionally charged, Assertion may be useful. And when both of you are emotionally charged, a combination of Assertion, Supportive Listening, and Collaborative Negotiation may work to maintain the relationship, while you also take care of yourself. Each of these skills will be described in later chapters.

Who Owns the Feelings?

Below is a list of scenarios in which someone may have an emotional charge. See if you can identify who is most likely to have the strong feelings in each situation.

1. Your spouse comes home from work and is upset because dinner isn't ready.
2. You are frustrated with the mailman for driving over your roses.
3. Your son brings home three friends after school, and they eat all the cake you were planning to serve for dinner.
4. Your neighbor comes over very angry because your dog has just bitten his child.
5. Your children are throwing food in the living room.
6. Your friend says that you are never there when she needs you.
7. Your boss is upset because you arrived late to work.
8. You come home and your daughter is really upset because you forgot her piano lesson. She has been waiting for you to take her, and now it is too late.
9. Your six-year-old trips on his shoe lace, falls down, cuts his leg, and starts screaming at you that you should have tied his shoe better.
10. Your work partner forgets to fill out an important document and it means that your paycheck cannot go through this week.
11. A customer tells you that you did not do what he thought you agreed to do, and he wants his money back.

12. A delivery person is consistently late in delivering an important item that your business needs, and it means your product is delayed to your customers.
13. Your son wants to go over to a friend's house for the weekend, and you have already made other plans which mean that he cannot go.
14. Your teacher does not tell you about a pre-assignment, and you arrive for class unprepared.
15. Your employee does not complete a task you gave him on time, and it means you have to stay late to be sure it is done.
16. Your mother feeds your children candy when they go to visit her, and the children come home with too much energy and don't want to eat dinner or go to bed.