Conflict Prevention and Resolution:

The Psychology of Communication and Difficult Conversations

Michael Wiederman,

PhD

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Michael Wiederman, PhD, was a tenured clinical psychology professor for 20 years, teaching a wide range of courses and publishing more than 250 articles, chapters, and books. From 2015 to 2022, Michael served as director of professional development at two medical schools, after which he began offering workshops and coaching independently through his site MindfulPD.com. He also blogs for *Psychology Today* about how to apply psychology for work success.

Overview

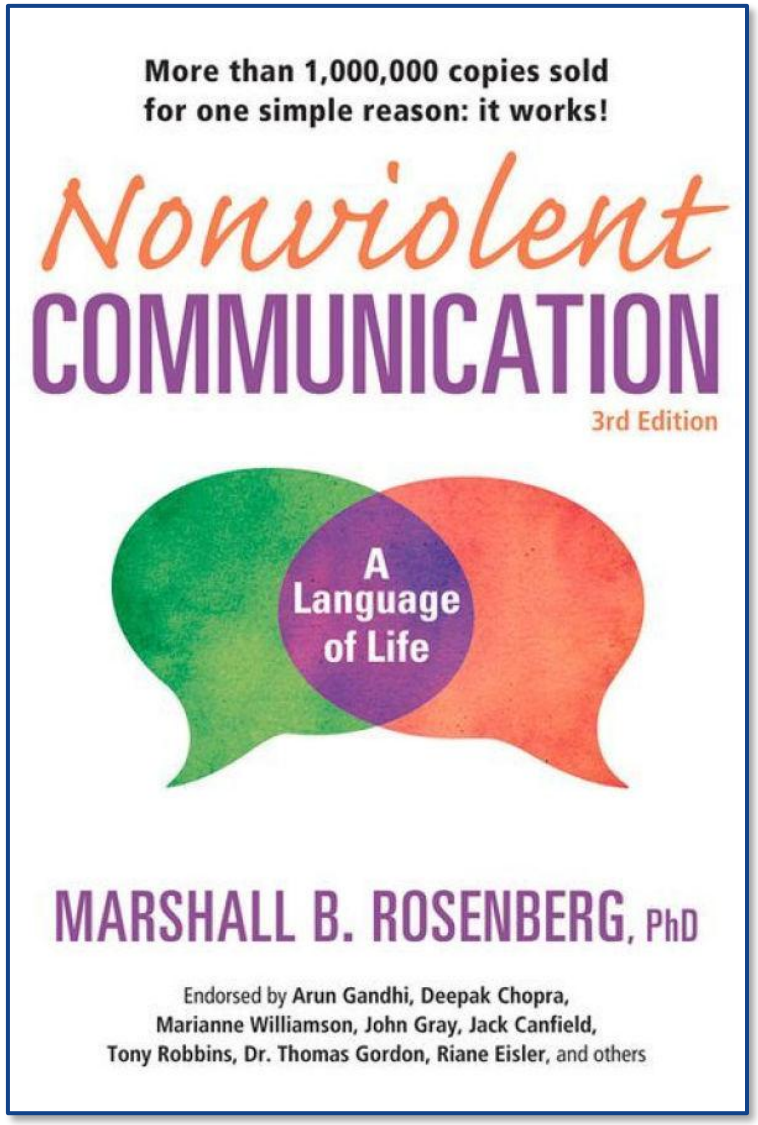
- Communication to Prevent Conflict
- Contributors to Misunderstanding & Conflict
- Models for Having Difficult Conversations

Communication to Prevent Conflict

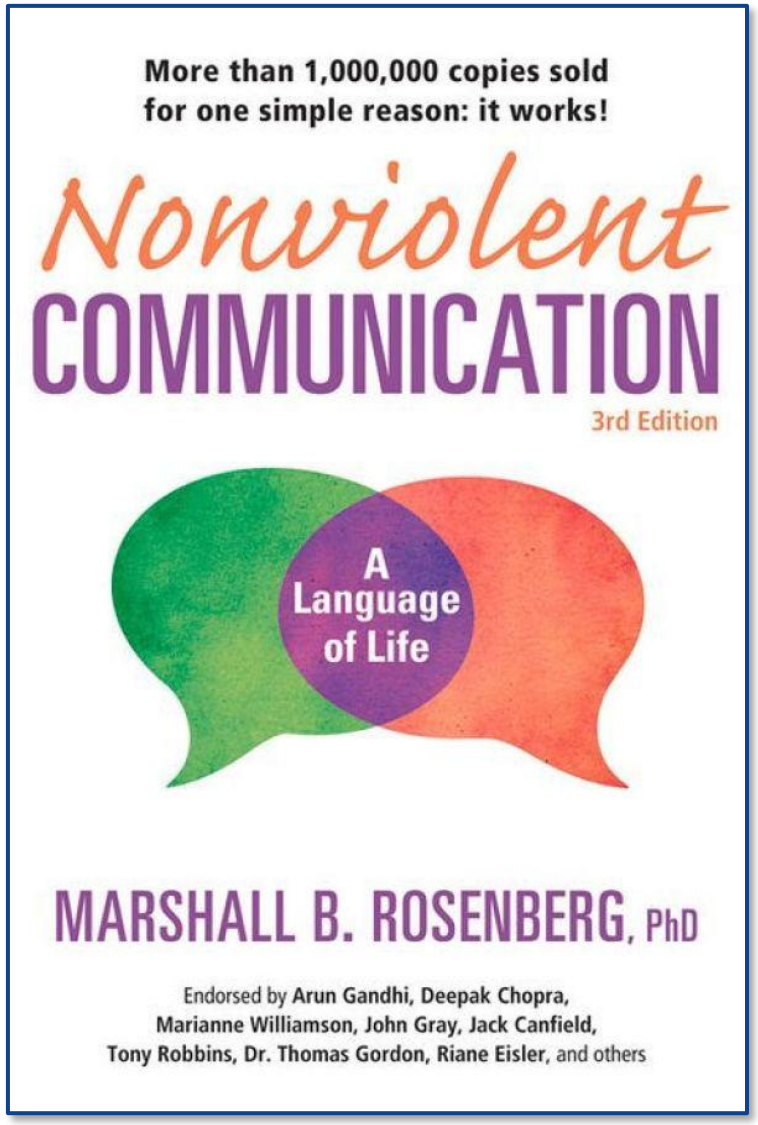


(Image courtesy of pngtree.com)

A Useful Framework for Communication



A Useful Framework for Communication



We Communicate in Attempt to Meet Needs

What keeps us from being effective in communicating about needs?

Childhood Socialization

What keeps us from being effective in communicating about needs?

- **Rarely taught to identify own needs (“needy” is bad)**

What keeps us from being effective in communicating about needs?

- **Rarely taught to identify own needs (“needy” is bad)**

- **Taught that others cause our feelings.**
  - *“I was angry because he . . .”*
  - *“She disappointed me.”*
  - *“You made me so happy.”*

What's the problem with assuming our feelings are caused by others' actions rather than our stories?

Instead of identifying the feelings, which could serve as clues to what we need . . .

What's the problem with assuming our feelings are caused by others' actions rather than our stories?

Instead of identifying the feelings, which could serve as clues to what we need . . .

. . . we externalize our negative emotions onto others as judgments of them (after all, they "caused" our feelings).

So, when needs are unmet . . .

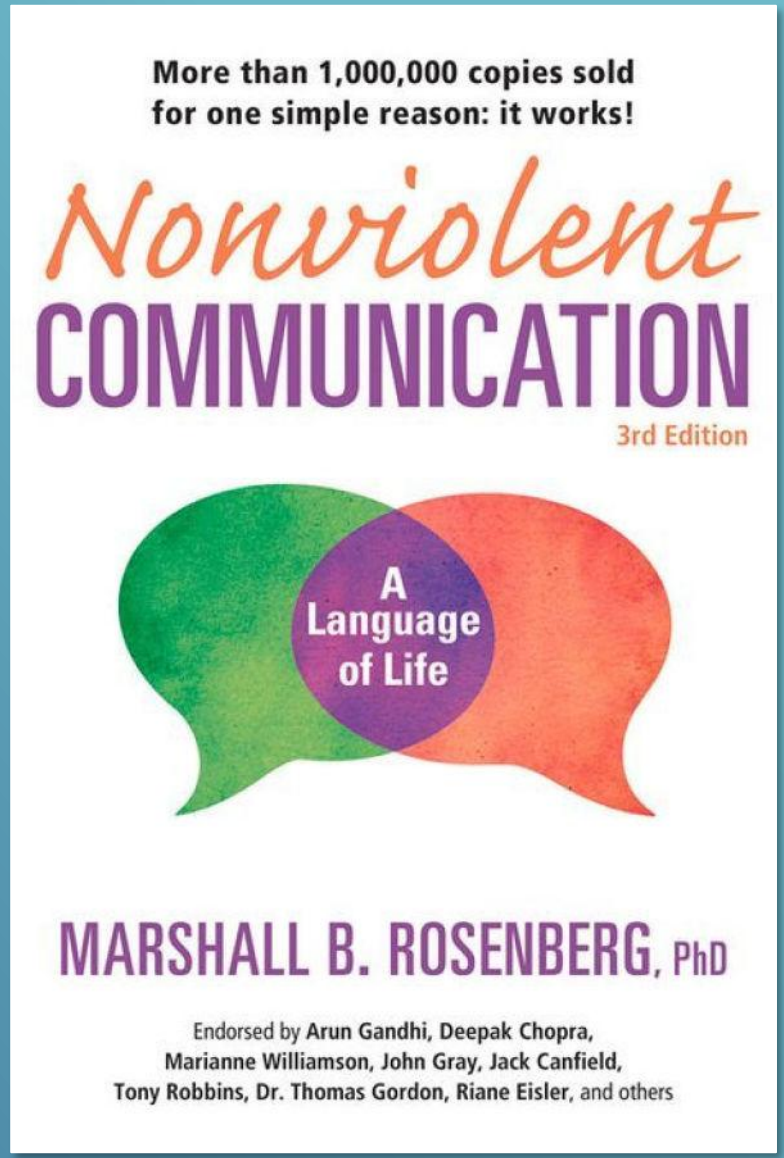
- **We judge others and/or ourselves; others judge us.**
  - “They are lazy.” “They have it out for me.”
  - “They are disrespectful.” “They get on my nerves.”



I can handle your telling me
what I did or didn't do.
And I can handle your
interpretations,
but please don't mix the two.

If you want to confuse any issue,
I can tell you how to do it:
Mix together what I do
with how you react to it.

— Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD



So, if unmet needs prompt judgments, what might the unmet needs be underlying the following?

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- “They have it out for me.”
- “They get on my nerves.”

Knowledge Check

Based on the core tenet of nonviolent communication, to communicate effectively you should:

A. regulate your tone of voice to not be aggressive.
B. identify the unmet need you have.
C. listen carefully to the other person.
D. talk face-to-face if at all possible.

Knowledge Check

Based on the core tenet of nonviolent communication, to communicate effectively you should:

B. identify the unmet need you have.

So, step 1 is accurately identifying your needs, which entails identifying feelings, and separating them from your stories and judgments.



Exercise

- What was your unmet need(s)?
  - “I needed . . .”

Exercise

- Recall an occasion where you made a negative judgment about someone.

- What was your unmet need(s)?
  - “I needed . . .”

Needs are nouns.

- We often use the word “need” in expressing strategies for meeting our need.
  - “I need my boss to appreciate me.”
  - “I need more time to finish the project.”
  - “I need you to pull your own weight.”
  - “I need people to leave me alone.”

(Ungerbock, 2020)

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- “Direction vs. destination”

(Ungerbock, 2020)

Make a clear request that addresses the need.

In your own example of forming a judgment about someone. . .

How could you have communicated clearly what you needed?

How can you increase the likelihood of meeting others' needs?

- When receiving negative message . . .
  - Empathic/investigative listening



(Photo courtesy of Canva AI)

Let’s practice . . .

- **“How could I do something so stupid!?”**
  - Don’t get down on yourself; no one is perfect.

Let’s practice . . .

- **“How could I do something so stupid!?”**
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- **“I’d like to strangle him!”**
  - I know what you mean.

Let's practice . . .

- **"How could I do something so stupid!?"**
  - Don't get down on yourself; no one is perfect.
- **"I'd like to strangle him!"**
  - I know what you mean.
- **"You seem to underestimate my abilities."**
  - That's not true! I've never had an issue with you.

Another approach . . .

> “When that happens, what are you wanting more of?”

> “What were you hoping would happen?”

(Ungerbock, 2020)

Needs-Based Communication In Conclusion . . .

- **If communication is ultimately about meeting needs:**
  - Start with, “What is the actual need?”
    - What unmet need does your feeling point to?
    - Do not focus on judgments (self or others)

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  - Start with, “What is the actual need?”
    - What unmet need does your feeling point to?
    - Do not focus on judgments (self or others)
  - Be as clear (behavioral) as possible with your request.
  - When receiving a negative message, focus on uncovering the need behind it (empathic listening).

Contributors to Misunderstandings and Conflicts



(Photo courtesy of Canva AI)

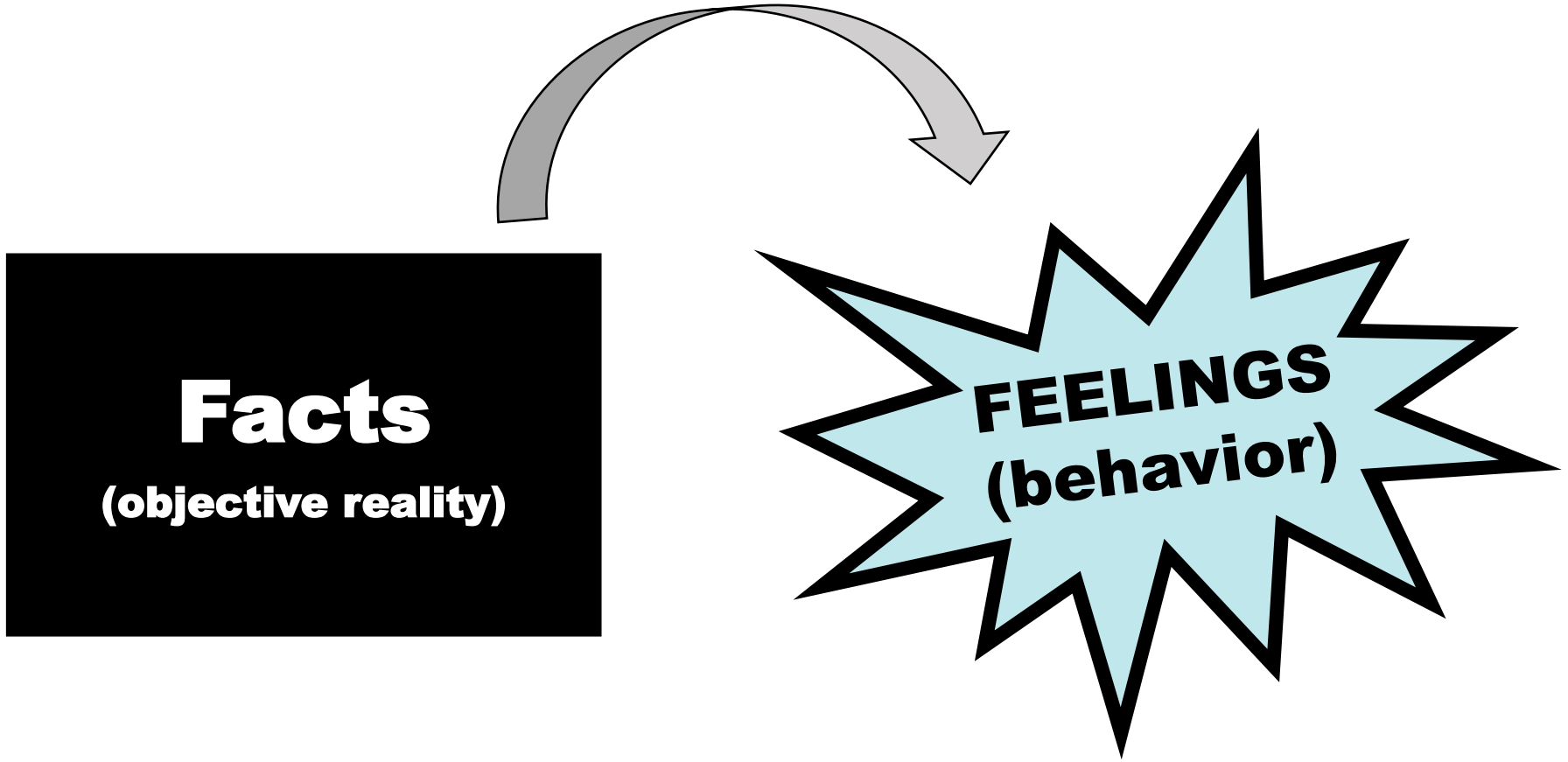
- In a group meeting at work, Jane says something about you, and you leave the meeting upset.

- What caused your negative emotion?

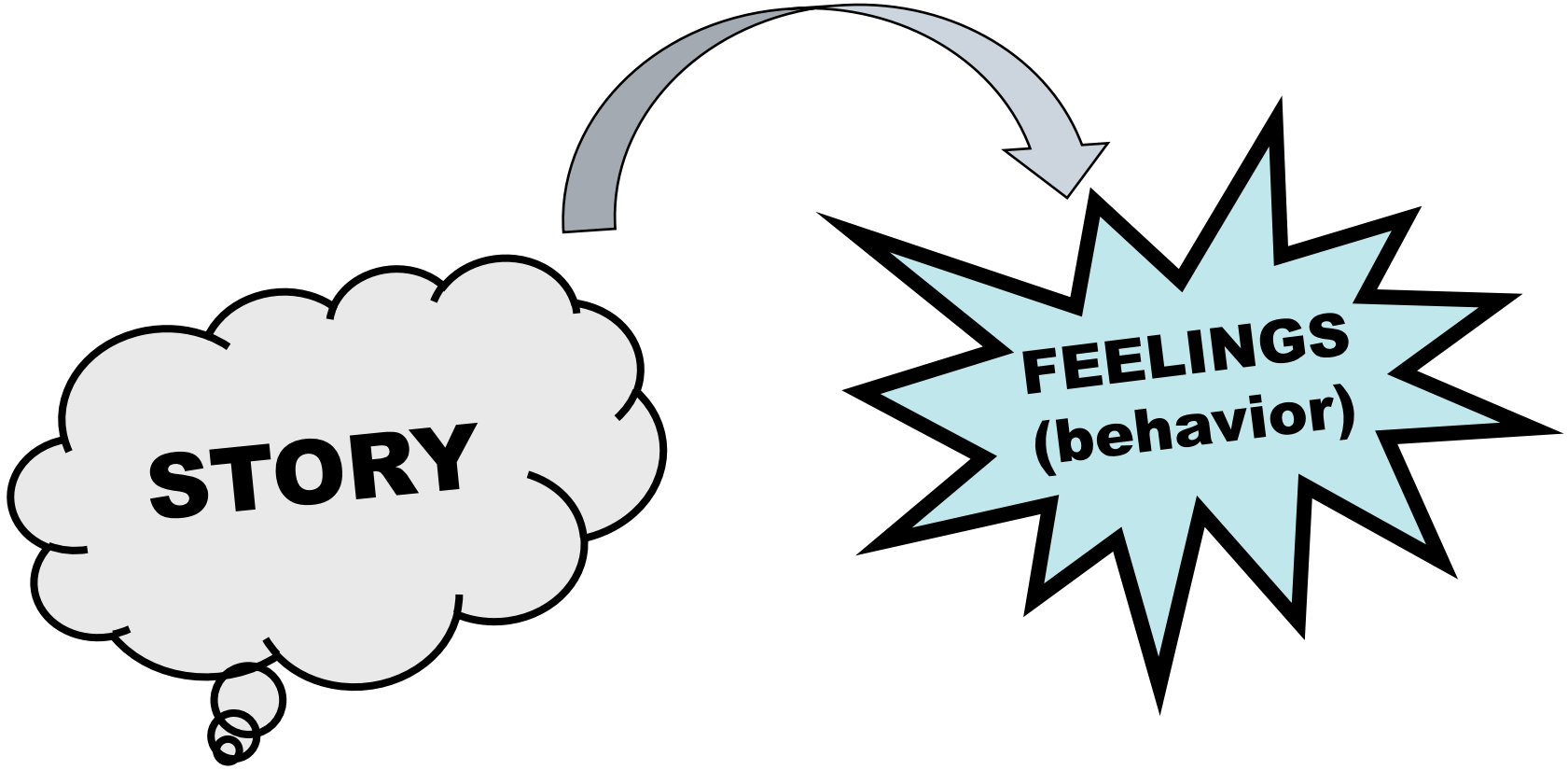


(Photo by Liza Summer/Pexels.com)

Our Subjective Experience of Life

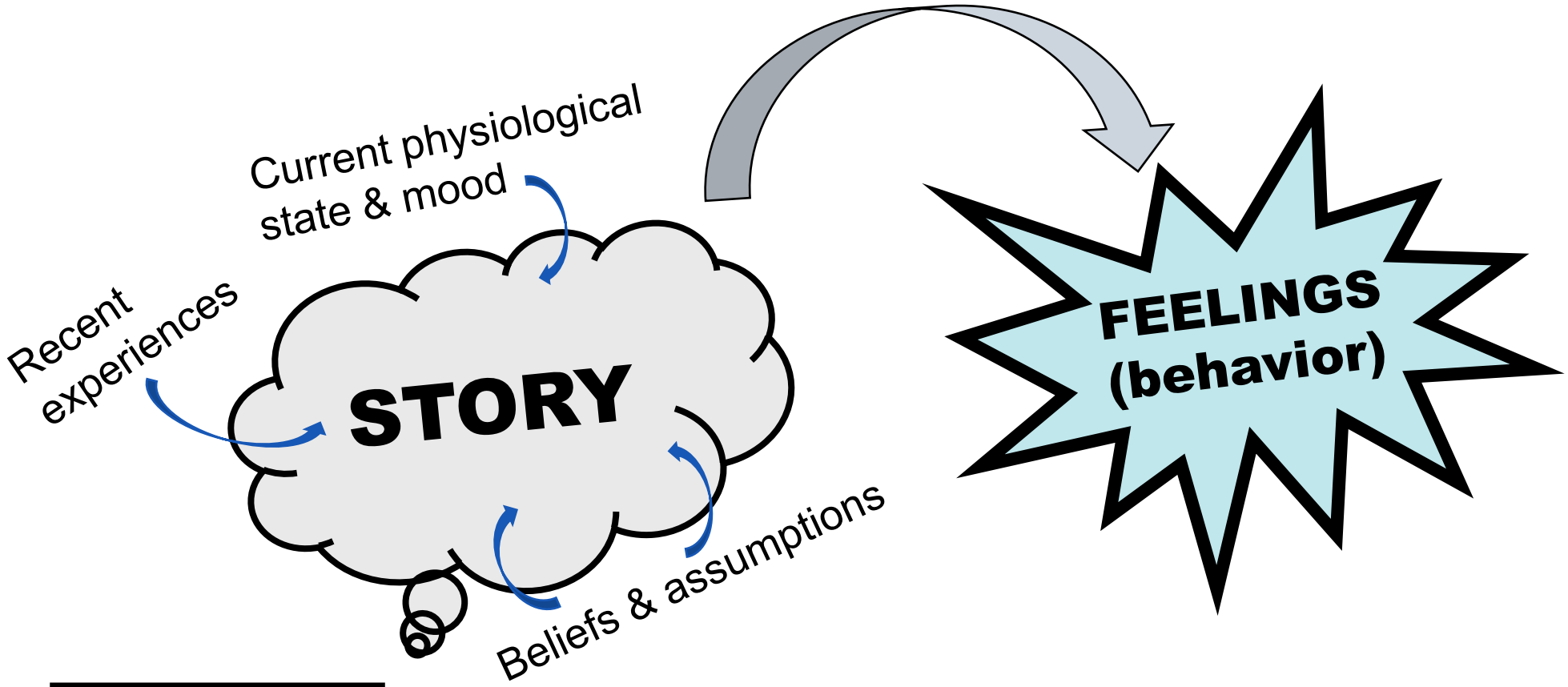


A More Accurate View



Facts

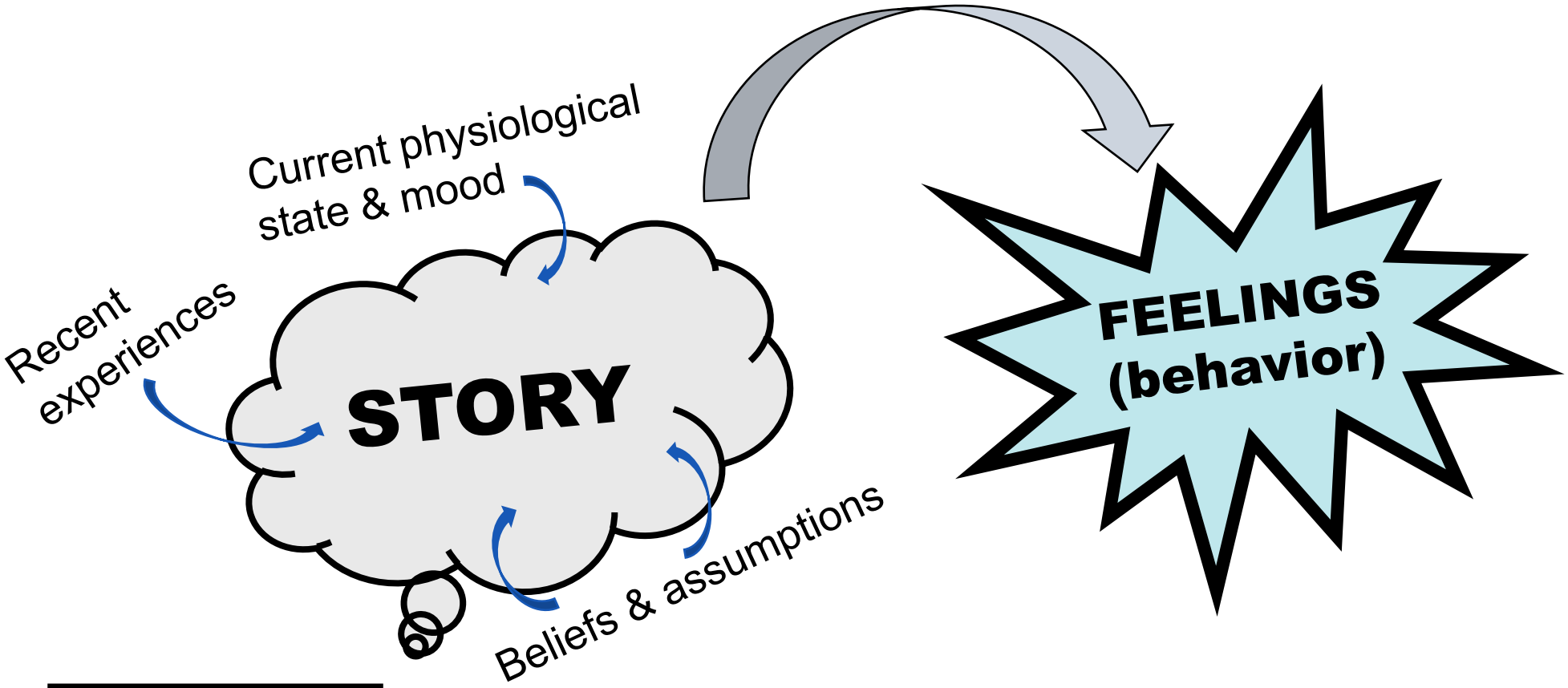
(objective reality)



Facts

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Byron Katy . . .



Facts

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> Life is so simple: We walk; we sit; we lie horizontal. That's about it. Everything else is a story about what's going on while we're doing it.
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> Your story is your identity, and you’d do almost anything to prove that it’s true.
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Our stories are necessarily incomplete . . .

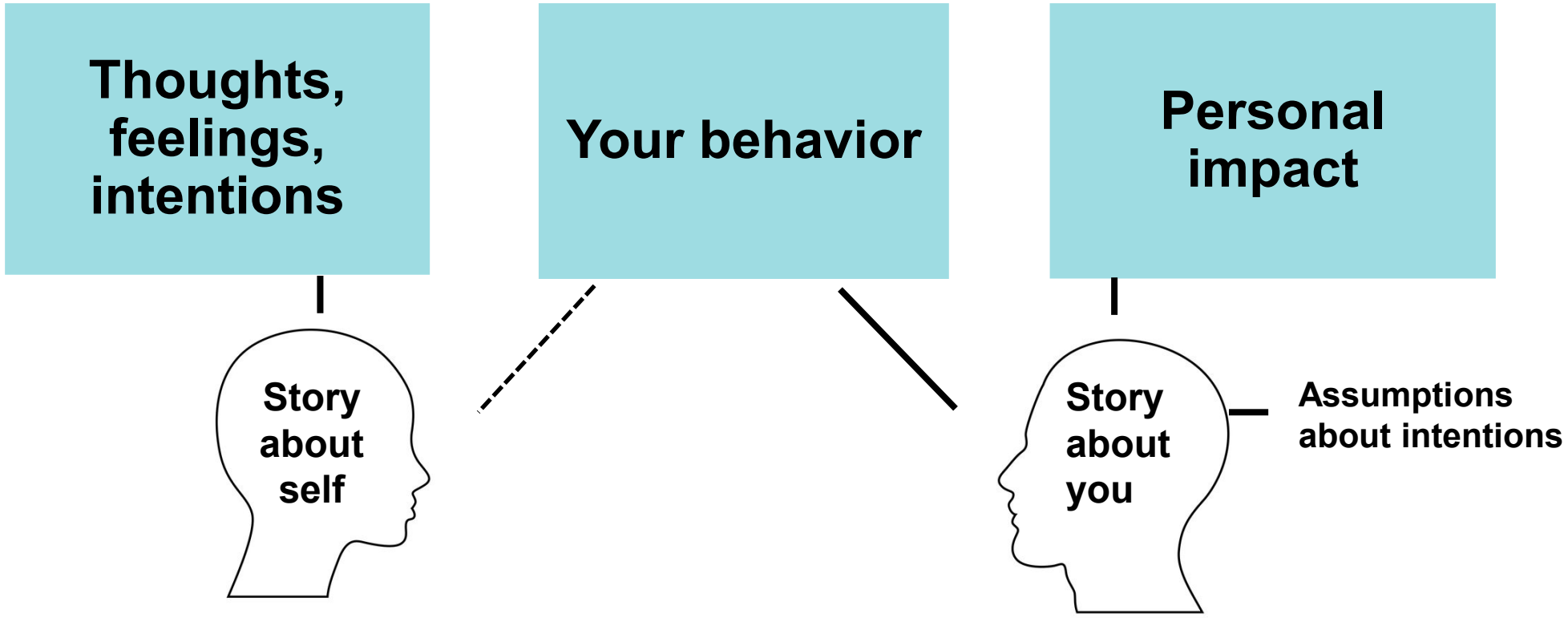
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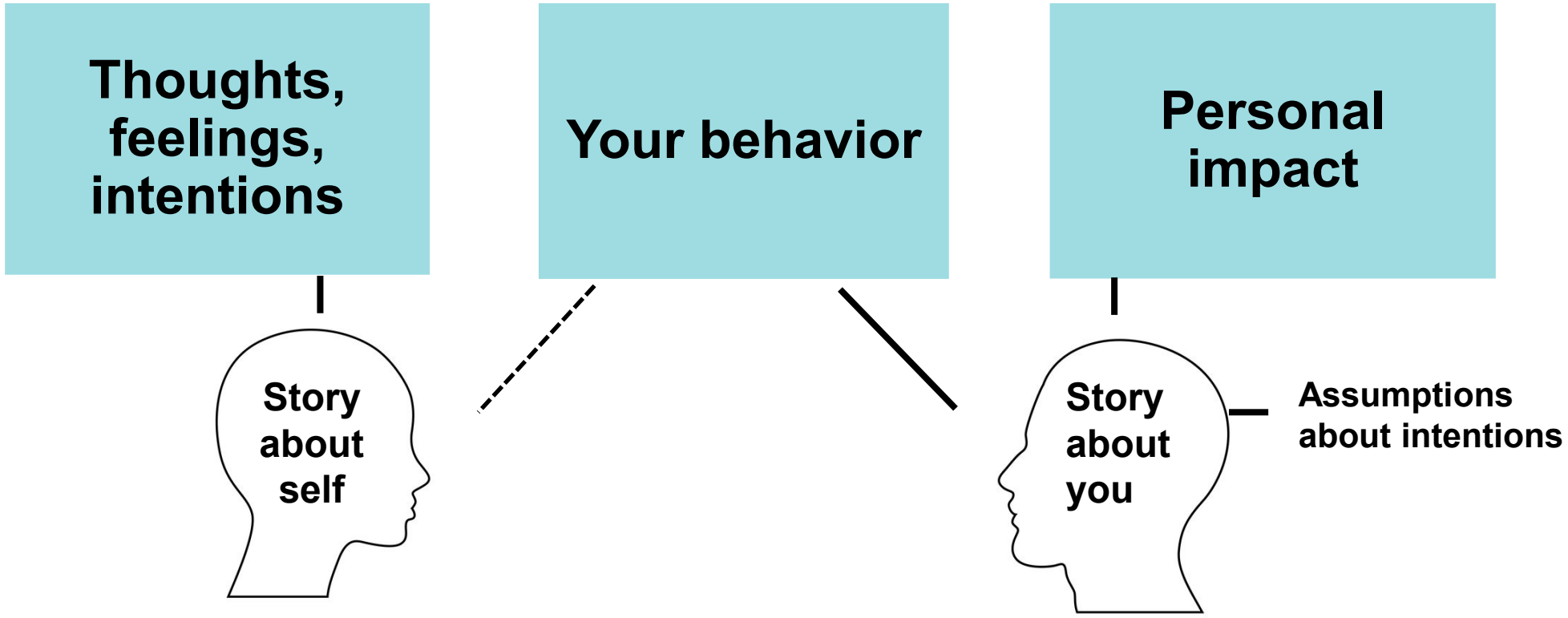
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> There are 172 data points. We know three of them and construct our story.
>
> — Robert Best

How We Experience Each Other



How We Experience Each Other



What Can You Do?

Assumptions About . . . *Everything*!

- **From**
  - Experience
  - Education
  - Media
  - Other people

Because We All Create Stories . . .

- Texts and emails are OK for:
  - Factual information
  - Easy questions/directions

- Avoid if there is any (possible) emotion on the part of the sender or receiver.

The Subjective Nature of Memory

- Episodic memory is *reconstructive*
  - Detailed memory vs. gist memory
  - Continued recall of recent memories fosters conversion to gist memories.

(Brook, 2021)

The Need to be Right & Assign Blame

- What do we “get” for pointing our finger?
  - Preserve our self-image and reputation.
  - Don’t have to do anything, or change.
  - Gain sympathy, play the victim/martyr.



(Photo by Yan Krukau / Pexels.com)

Our Brains Contain Some Biased Programs and *We Don't (Can't) Realize It*



(Image courtesy of Canva AI)

Become aware of well-researched human biases in your perceptions of others.

- Inherent in our operating system; we're blind
- Knowledge of them unrelated to whether we experience them (no immunity)
- Frequently lead to misunderstandings/conflict

(Dale, 2015)

Anchoring Bias

> Hungry for data to begin building our story about another person, we latch onto initial information and fail to adjust enough based on subsequent data.

(Rezaei, 2021)

Confirmation Bias

> We tend to both *notice* and *remember* information that supports our beliefs (and ignore and forget exceptions or disconfirming information).

(Born, 2024)

Character Attribution Bias

> When someone else does something negative, we tend to attribute it to their character, whereas when we do something negative, we are more likely to attribute the cause to some external reason (e.g., circumstances).

(Paul, 2021)

Outgroup Homogeneity Bias

Any group that we belong to is our “in-group” and others are “outgroups.” We tend to recognize more diversity in our in-groups, and tend to imagine members of the outgroups as more similar to each other (homogeneous) than they are actually.

(Tepper & Gilovich, 2024)

Representativeness Bias

> The more closely a person matches the stereotype or mental image of a particular type of person, the more likely we attribute other characteristics to that person that fit the mental image or stereotype.

(AlKhars et al., 2019)

False Consensus Bias

We tend to assume that most others would see a situation the same way we do, or would make a similar decision/judgment.

(Choi & Cha, 2019)

Transference

In some cases, our immediate reactions to a new person are strongly influenced by feelings about someone in our past, if the newer person at some less-than-conscious level reminds us of that other person. In essence, we have transferred those older feelings and reactions into the newer scenario.

(Prasko et al., 2022)

To Address Transference . . .

- What are your personal triggers?
- What “kind of person” really upsets you?
- Where do you think these sensitivities originated?

Knowledge Check

Your coworker joins a group meeting noticeably late and quietly sits down as the meeting continues. The thought you have in the back of your mind: "They are disrespectful of the rest of us." This experience is an example of the _____ bias.

A. anchoring
B. outgroup homogeneity
C. character attribution
D. confirmation

Knowledge Check

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C. character attribution

Managing Conflict & Difficult Conversations



(Photo by Liza Summer / Pexels.com)

Possible Styles of Responding to Conflict

- Compete/defeat
- Avoid/withdraw
- Accommodate/give in
- Compromise
- Collaborate

What is the basis or history for your style?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of your style?

(Nikitara et al., 2024; Wolf et al., 2018)

Amygdala Hijack

- Emotions typically last 60–90 seconds if not stoked.
- Pause . . .
- Perform a personal scan during a conflict.
  - What am I experiencing physically?
  - What do I want to achieve here?
  - What thoughts am I focused on?
  - How might I look to others?

(Lange, 2023)

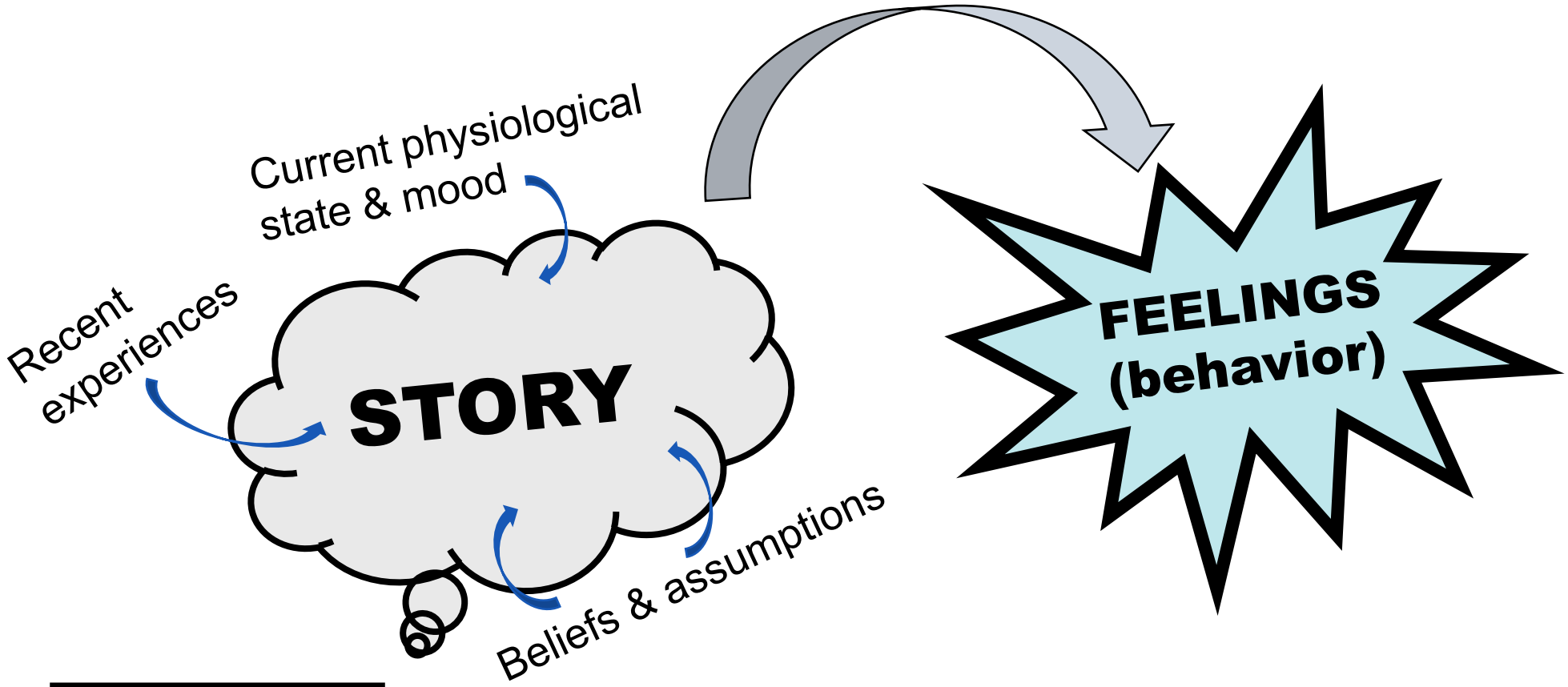
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Decentering

(Lange, 2023)

What's Your Story in this Conflict?



Facts

(objective reality)

The real hell of life is that everyone has their reasons.

— Jean Renoir

Everyone is necessarily the hero of their own life story.

— John Barth

Challenging Your Story

Besides being a jerk, what other forces might be influencing their behavior?

Challenging Your Story

- **Hanlon's Razor** – Never attribute to malice what can be explained by stupidity or carelessness.
- How am I contributing to the conflict?
- What would I do in their shoes?

Challenging Your Story

- **Understand their story . . .**



(Photo by Mikhail Nilov / Pexels.com)

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.

— Rumi

The experience of being understood, versus interpreted, is so compelling, you can charge admission.

— B. Joseph Pine II

Genuine Listening for Understanding

- Expressing interest in learning more about another person's perspective leads to:
  - lowered defenses
  - increased liking of you
  - increased openness to change

(Itzchakov et al., 2020)

Active/Reflective Listening

- Focus on the other person with the goal of understanding.
- Face each other, maintain eye contact.
- Non-verbal facilitations (body language)
  - e.g., leaning in, head nodding, facial expressions
- Verbal facilitations (e.g., “uh huh,” “I see,” “ah!”)

(Gallo, 2024)

Active/Reflective Listening

- **Reflections**
  - Reflecting back what you hear; e.g., You were really angry," "It sounds like you were going through a lot."

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  - e.g., "So it sounds like you were exhausted, frustrated that no one was helping, and decided that you had had enough."

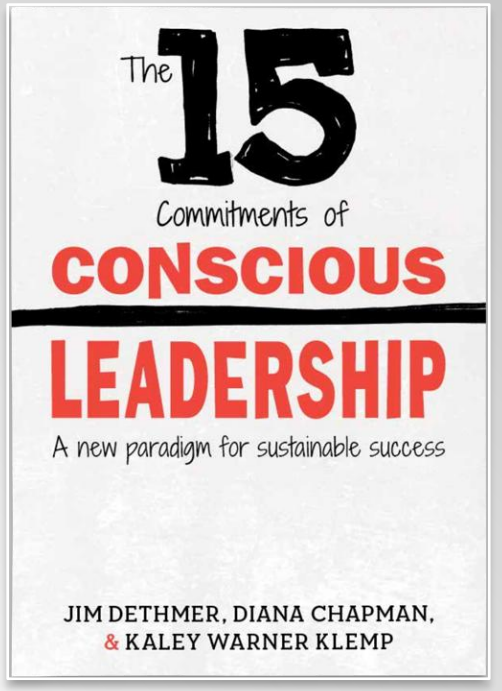
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  - e.g., "So it sounds like you were exhausted, frustrated that no one was helping, and decided that you had had enough."
- **Empathizing**
  - e.g., "I imagine that you were angry," or "I sense that you're upset."

- Is there an interpersonal conflict you are experiencing currently but have yet to address?
- Or a past conflict that was not addressed?
- *Here are a few models to consider . . .*

The Clearing Model

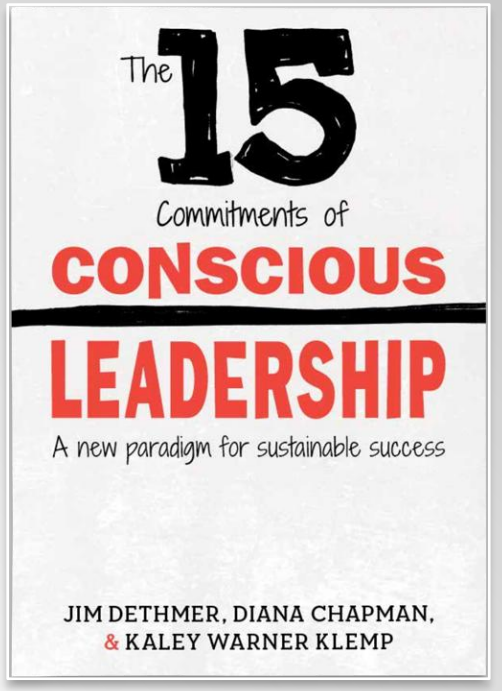
1. **Is this good timing, setting?**



The Clearing Model

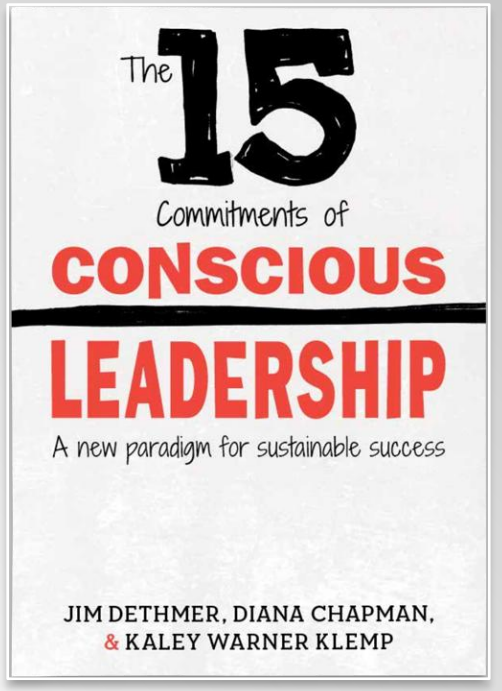
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2. **Communicate positive intention—**
   - *Why* are you asking for this talk?



The Clearing Model

1. **Is this good timing, setting?**
2. **Communicate positive intention—**
   - Why are you asking for this talk?
3. **“The facts are . . .”** *(as captured by video)*
4. **“My interpretation/story was . . .”**
5. **“That led me to feel . . .”**
6. *[Possibly]* **“What I need/would like from you . . .”**



The Clearing Model

1. Examine and process your emotions so that they are not running the show.

(Kennedy et al., 2023)

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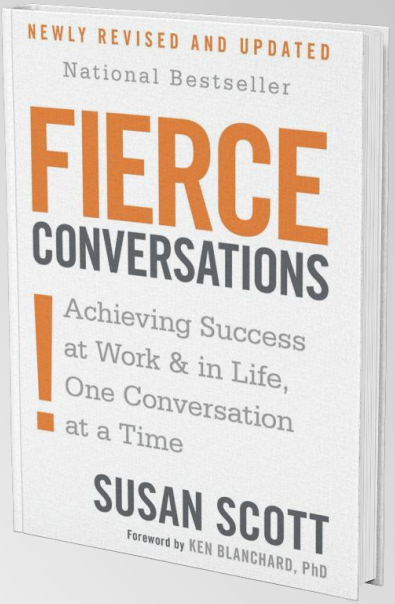
The Clearing Model

1. Examine and process your emotions so that they are not running the show.
2. Try to understand the unmet need(s) that may be at play, as well as the other's perspective.
3. Be humble and vulnerable—admit what you don't know.
4. Create alignment to foster problem-solving and collaboration.
5. Co-create a new path forward.
6. Have an exit strategy (but if used, make concrete plans to re-engage.

(Kennedy et al., 2023)

The Clearing Model

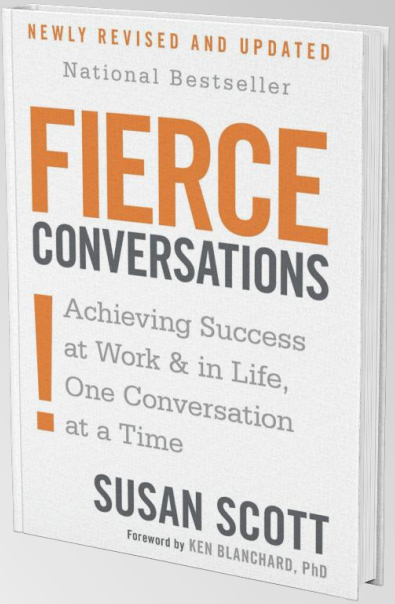
1. Name the issue that needs solved.



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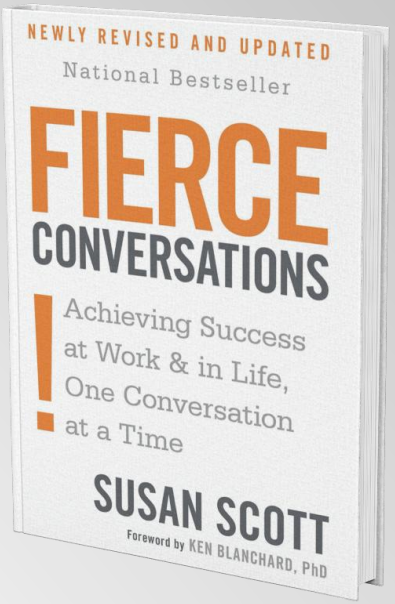
1. Name the issue that needs solved.
2. Provide a specific example.



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The Clearing Model

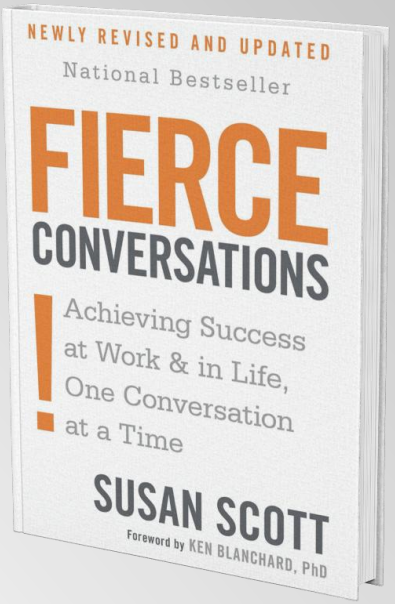
1. Name the issue that needs solved.
2. Provide a specific example.
3. Describe your emotions about it.



(Kennedy et al., 2023)

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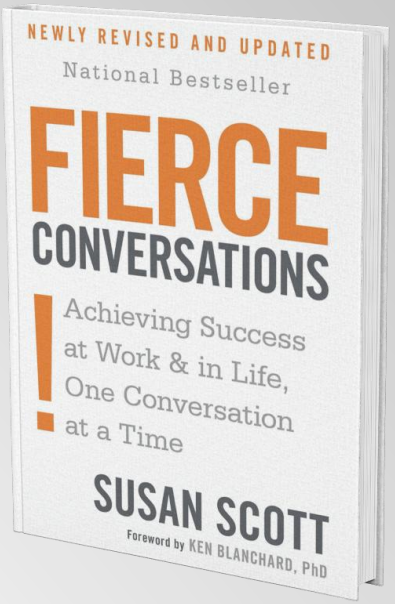
1. Name the issue that needs solved.
2. Provide a specific example.
3. Describe your emotions about it.
4. Indicate why it's important.
5. Identify your contributions to the problem.



(Kennedy et al., 2023)

The Clearing Model

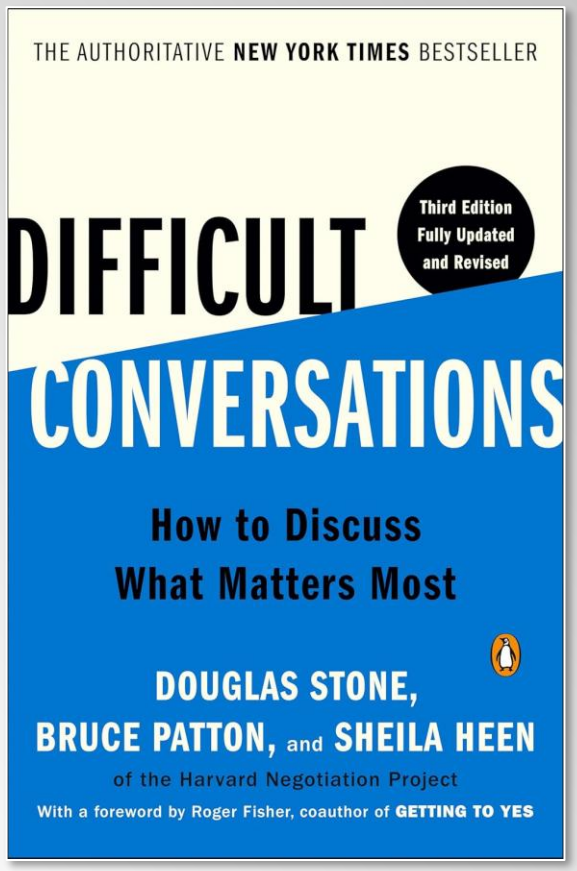
6. State that you want to resolve things.
7. Inquire as to your partner's views.
8. What have we learned? Where are we now?
9. Make an agreement—how will we hold each other accountable?



(Kennedy et al., 2023)

The Clearing Model

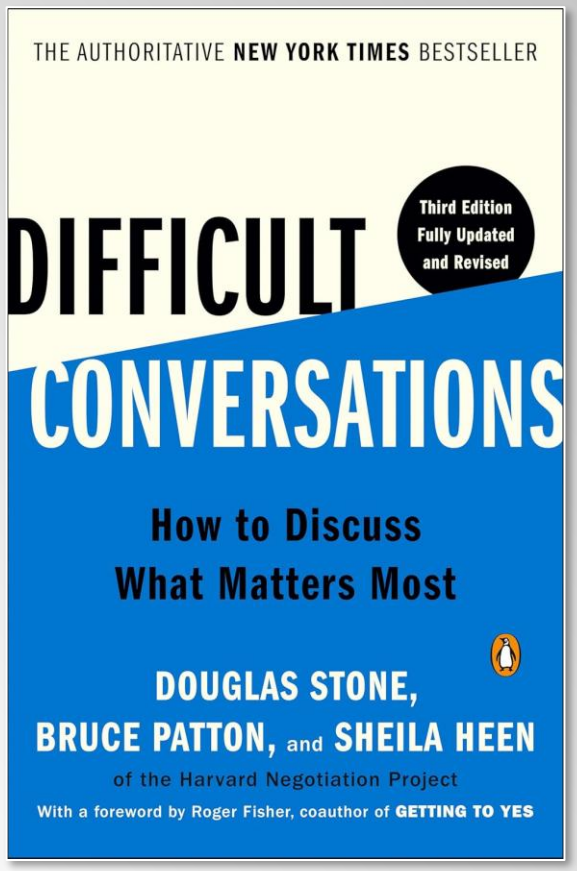
- Prepare (process your emotions).



(Kennedy et al., 2023)

The Clearing Model

- Prepare (process your emotions).
- Avoid blame; instead, focus on contributions (claim yours first).
- Stay curious; investigate to understand their story.
- Reflect, summarize; include emotions (yours and theirs)



“Don’ts” for Difficult Conversations

- Avoid “I *need* to talk *to* you” (vs. “I *want* to talk *with* you”).

“Don’ts” for Difficult Conversations

- Avoid “I *need* to talk *to* you” (vs. “I *want* to talk *with* you”).
- “Avoid “You . . .” Use “I . . .” instead.
- Avoid asking “why”—inquire “what” instead.
- Avoid exaggerating: “Always” and “Never”.
- Avoid throwing in other issues or complaints.
- Avoid “If I were you” and “You should have”.
- Avoid sarcasm—“And you were just trying your best, huh?”
- Avoid blaming, labeling the person, and the word “fault”.
- Avoid negative facial expressions, body language.

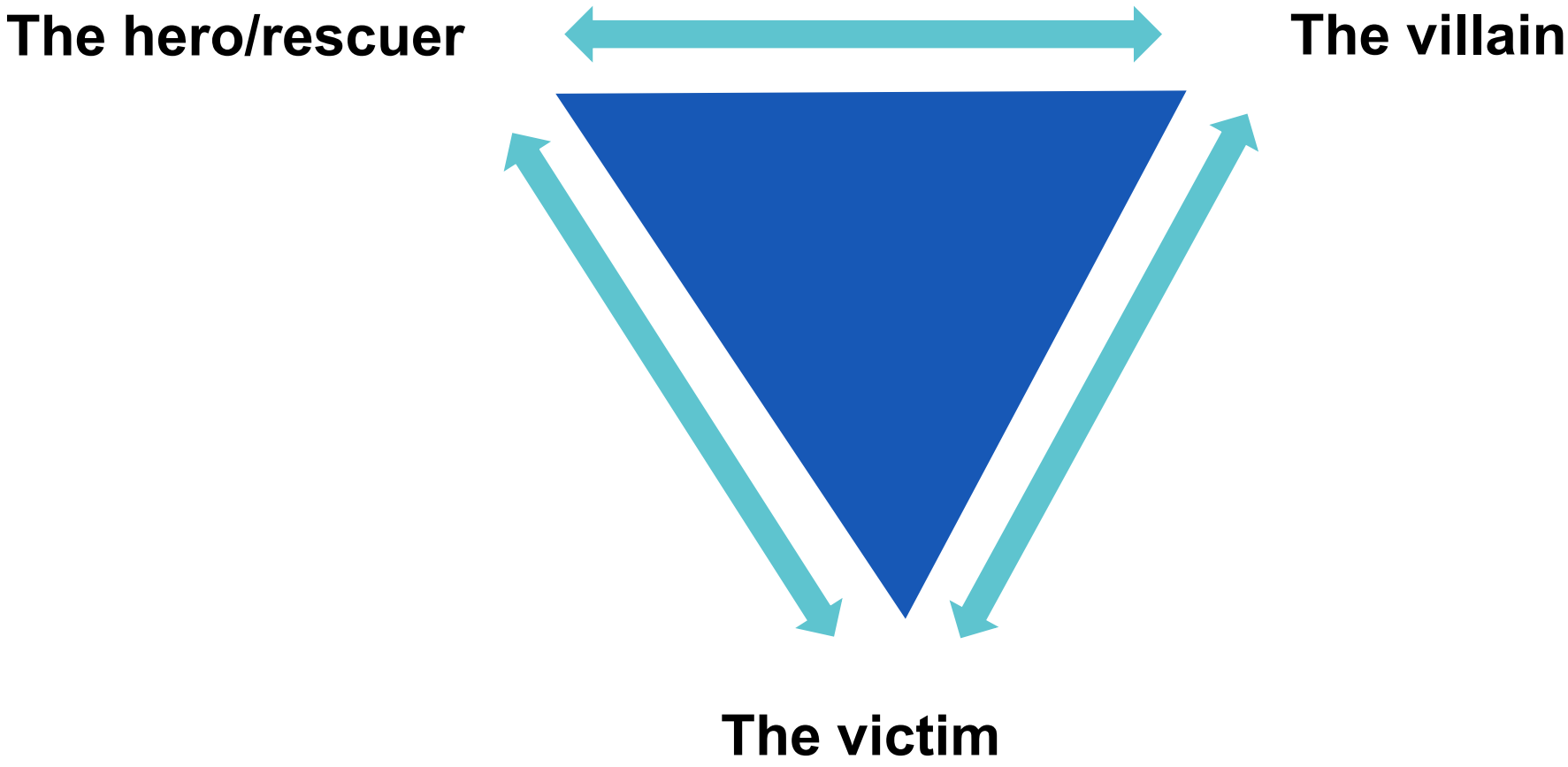
Is there a sense of interpersonal *drama* (turmoil) in the particular situation?

- **Beware “the drama triangle”.**



(Photo by Mikhail Nilov / Pexels.com)

What do we “get” from playing each role?



(Karpman, 1968)

What About Apologies?



(Photo by Brett Jordan / Pexels.com)

Steps in a Successful Apology

- Say “I apologize that . . .” (not “if”) or “I am sorry” — not “regret,” or “upset”.
- Name what you’re apologizing for (actions, be specific).
- Show that you understand why what you did was bad (don’t explain or provide excuses).
- Say you will work to ensure it doesn’t happen again (specifics? reparations?).

(Ingall & McCarthy, 2023; Ungerbock, 2020)

Sincere/Successful Apologies

- Sincere apologies involve less eye contact and less facial expression compared to insincere.
- Unexpected apologies are especially impactful.
- *Accurately* identify the other person's feelings.
- Beware of onlooker effect.

(Redelmeier & Roach, 2025; Yamamoto et al., 2021)

General Advice for Difficult Conversations

- Prepare: Process your emotions, plan wording, anticipate tricky spots, imagine your reactions.
- “I” as the default start to each sentence? Avoid “Always” and “Never”.
- Stay curious, play detective—toward yourself and others.
- Share/check out your stories, assumptions, biases.

(Redelmeier & Roach, 2025; Yamamoto et al., 2021)

General Advice for Difficult Conversations *(continued)*

- Be aware of the Drama Triangle (and address it).
- Express appreciation for engaging with you.
- Follow-up: Make sure there is continued satisfaction.

(Redelmeier & Roach, 2025; Yamamoto et al., 2021)

Case Study

- In a group meeting at work, Jane says something about you, and you leave the meeting upset.

- What caused your negative emotion?



(Photo by Liza Summer / Pexels.com)

Thank you!

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The Psychology of Communication and Difficult Conversations

Thank you!