



Module 3: Reactive Clients – Managing Emotions

Welcome and Introduction

This session is the third module in our client service skills series. Taking the next step up in skills from Modules 1 and 2 where we explored the importance of making clients feel known and valued, reading body language and tailoring communication, we now advance to the challenges of upset clients and how to manage emotions.

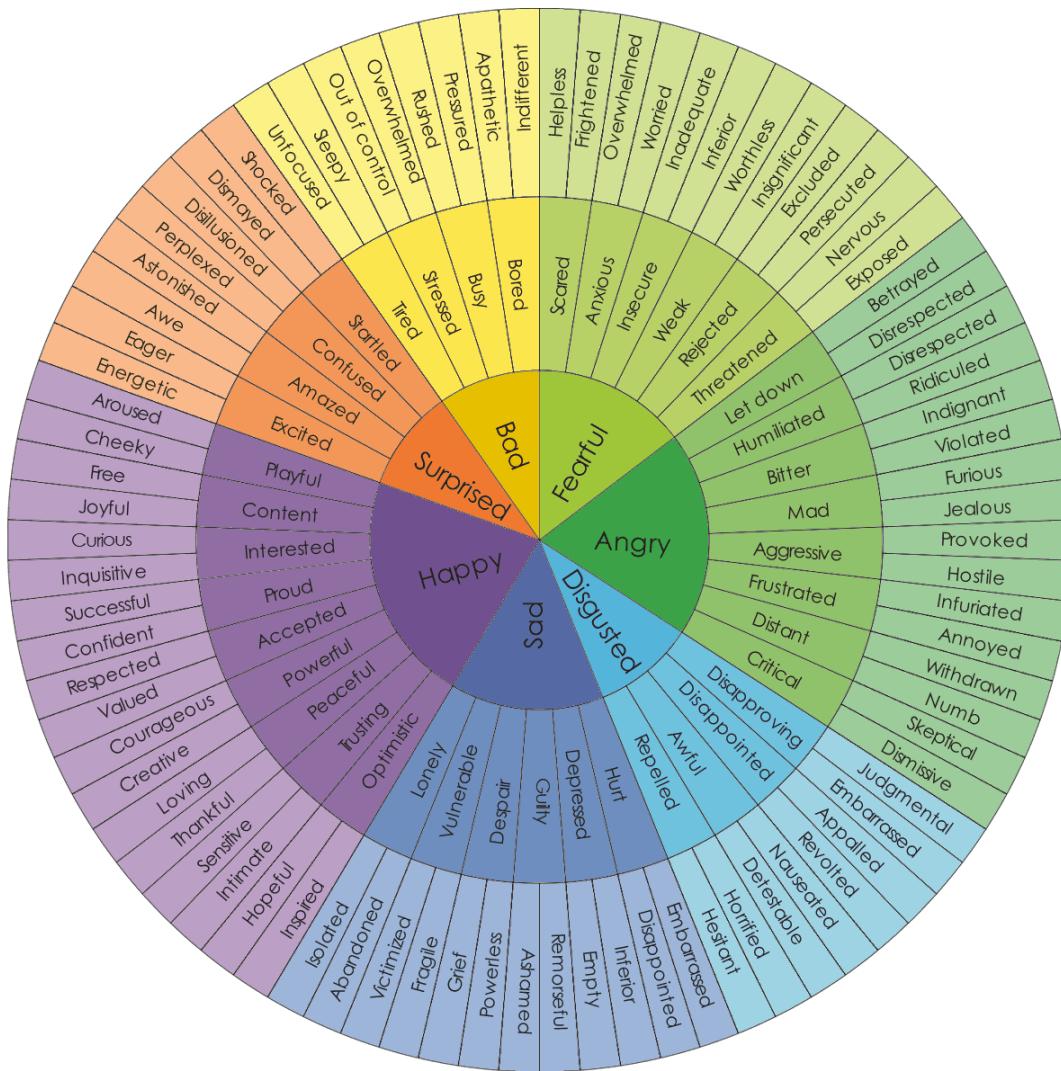
Recognizing Emotions

People manifest emotions in ways we can read, even when they are subtle, as long as we are observant. They are perceptible in different people through distinctive “tells”. By using situational awareness and our knowledge of body language, we should be able to discern specific emotions and react appropriately. Common situations that cause strong emotions in our practices are financial stress, time pressure, pet emergencies and miscommunication. Our challenge is to control our own reactions and emotions and develop tools and a skill set that not only calm our instinctive responses but also manage the clients’ emotions.

One challenge humans tend to have is to oversimplify emotions. We are more inclined to say we are “happy, sad, mad, afraid, surprised or disgusted rather than really define what we are feeling. We also dump the emotions of our reactive clients into the same buckets. To help you learn better emotional diagnosis I have shared the **Feelings Wheel** in a graphic below.

The spectrum of human emotions is charted on this wheel and the intensity of the emotions go from mild – on the outer circle – to high in the very center circle. So, many times when we conclude a client is MAD, they may be just frustrated, annoyed or feeling disrespected. When we diagnose emotions correctly, we are better able to solve the client’s problem or to make more accurate empathetic remarks that acknowledge their true feelings.

The Feelings Wheel



Developed by Dr. Gloria Wilcox

RewardCharts4Kids.com

Understanding the emotions of ourselves and others is the key to a collaborative society. Because we are social animals – when we are not nurtured emotionally, we don’t thrive physically. We evolved to collaborate. There are rules of behavior we expect others to follow. The rules can be influenced by culture, by family and even by the work team. Practices have unspoken rules about acceptable conduct because as humans we are wired for tribal behavior.

The Social Code:

1. We are WIRED to be Social
2. Our brain treats Social and Physical pain similarly
3. Our minds are meant to be influenced by others – ensures we come to value and hold the beliefs around us
4. We are all wired to feel Empathy and Compassion for the plight of others
5. Memories of Social Pain are more vivid than Physical Pain
6. Fairness trumps selfishness

The last two points are often key in dealing with clients and our team. First – clients who feel they were taken advantage of by other practices have social pain memories that they bring with them to our hospital. Then we end up having to manage those memories and overcome them. The last point - **do they feel we are being fair**. When we communicate poorly with others and blindside them we elicit a social pain... and they attack back. One of the most core values of people in the United States is a sense of fairness.

"A customer's dissatisfaction is in direct proportion to the gap between what they 'believe' they were to receive and what they "perceive" they are receiving."

Craig Bailey
Kurt Jenson
Customer Centricity

Holding Successful Crucial Conversations

Crucial Conversations, a book by Patterson, Grenney, McMillian and Switzler has sold millions of copies and is the result of a research project on what makes some people more successful than others when they have the same education, background and skills. What they discovered was the *successful people had the ability to have uncomfortable conversations with others* – including their boss – and still come out with positive results and no negative feelings all around.

Veterinary care by default is filled with emotions. New puppy or kitten visits are usually happy and filled with excitement. Sick visits bring on the negative emotions of fear, guilt, grief and financial stress. This typically manifests in a raised voice, pacing, interrupting, blaming, crying, sarcasm or withdrawal.

When clients become emotional – our instinct is to avoid danger. We may freeze in place and not be able to form an appropriate response because our brain has been hijacked. Our hands may sweat or get cold, our mouth becomes dry, and we may even shiver. But those responses don't help us solve the client's problem.

We must respond with emotional intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence

"Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage our own emotions and to recognize and influence the emotions of others..."

The more we are aware of our own emotions the better we are at guiding the emotions of our clients, our family and our coworkers. This is not about being manipulative. It is about the energy we are providing to others to help guide them to a reasonable emotional state.

Emotional Intelligence is found by research to be more valuable than IQ for success in life. Every point increase in emotional intelligence increases annual salary almost \$2000 a year – *per point!* The components of Emotional Intelligence are:

Self Awareness – Clients can often be abrasive and rude – having the awareness of what your body is doing that signals your frustration is rising is step one to managing the situation.

Self Regulation – Acknowledging your body and mind's reaction and pausing to evaluate your reply rather than snapping back.

Motivation – Keeping the big picture in mind – how can we help our patient and our fearful client?

Empathy – Mentally stepping into the clients shoes and understanding their fear, confusion, frustration and anxiety yet not taking on those emotions yourself. Show you care.

Social Skills – With grace, calmness and bridge building we acknowledge the client's perceptions and offer solutions.

Reactivity can be contagious. When we are composed, our calm energy is guiding the path to problem resolution.

The chart below contains the components of Emotional Intelligence. Each is defined and the gray box shows how these skills can be used in Veterinary Client Service situations.

Self Awareness	Self-Regulation	Motivation	Empathy	Social Skills
The ability to recognize and understand your own emotions, triggers, and their impact on behavior and performance.	Managing your emotional reactions, staying in control, and responding appropriately in challenging situations.	Inner drive to achieve goals with energy and persistence; focusing on positive outcomes even when the environment is stressful	Understanding and sharing the feelings of others; seeing things from the client's or coworker's perspective.	Building and maintaining positive relationships through clear, respectful, and effective communication.
Knowing when you're becoming frustrated with an upset client and choosing to pause before responding	Taking a deep breath instead of snapping when a client blames you for a delay.	Staying focused on helping pets and clients even during chaotic days or negative encounters.	Recognizing that an angry client is really scared about their pet's health — and responding with compassion.	De-escalating a tense moment by calmly summarizing concerns and offering solutions
Reflection, recognizing body cues, emotional vocabulary, mindfulness	Impulse control, adaptability, maintaining calm tone and body language, professionalism under stress	Optimism, resilience, goal-setting, commitment to service values.	Active listening, perspective-taking, reading nonverbal cues, expressing understanding.	Conflict resolution, teamwork, persuasion, cooperation, and clear communication.

Mastering the Story We Tell Ourselves – Avoiding the “Fools Choice”

When people start to disagree with us our automatic response is to Freeze, Flea or Fight. Our brain begins to create stories about the other person to justify our position as being RIGHT and to confirm to us we are always the Hero, and this other person is the Villain.

All these internal stories are escalating negative situations rather than soothing them. When we allow our brain to tell a false story we are making the Fool's Choice. Another aspect of the Fool's Choice is that we believe we can't tell people the truth without it blowing up in our face.

When you develop the right skills, you can tell someone anything and still remain friendly.

Curiosity Is the Key!

When we come to situations with curiosity, we eliminate accusations and instead open up dialog. Many times, in conflict, people just want to be acknowledged and heard. We can do that!

If we begin any difficult conversation with the end result in mind, we are more likely to work towards that goal.

Companies spend a lot of time, money and effort to attract clients to the practice, so part of our end game could be – salvage the client. If this is an otherwise good client who is just having a “moment” then we certainly want to do what we can to work the problem and come out with a mutually satisfying resolution. We can say – “*Help me understand your viewpoint*”. And then listen intently and respectfully to the entire story.... even if is is inaccurate! On the other hand – this may be a client who is not only difficult but abusive and possibly dangerous – our end goal is now to calm them enough to get them satisfied and out of the building where we will later send them a letter of dismissal. Hopefully that is rare and it will be when we become better at managing emotions.

When situations begin to escalate it is important to find common ground with the other person. For a client who is frustrated by fees you can acknowledge that providing the care they want you to deliver can cause financial pressure and the practice understands and has provided tools to help with spreading costs over time. Apologize if appropriate for not sharing this information earlier with the client and offer to help them navigate options so you can help them help their pet. It is OK to agree that good medical care is costly due to the amazing medical advances in recent years and the cost of supplies increasing.

Notice we are not making apologies for prices – they are set based on time, overhead and labor – but most of the public has little to no concept of how much care really cost and often they are shocked. All we are doing is saying to the client “I get it!” but we have a plan to help.

What if the client is accusing the practice of medical malpractice? First of all, *don't react by being defensive*. This is not going to make things better – only escalate to a battle that both sides are determined to win. In another favorite book, **Talking to Crazy**, the author discusses the need to “ride along with crazy” until the person gets their story out completely. Once the client has finished their story you can ask politely if they would be ok if you asked some clarifying questions and offered some observations. You can use terms such as “I noticed you said Dr. Jones didn't inform you she needed to extract 10 teeth,... was that before she began Spot's procedure or did you not find out until Spot was discharged? I am seeing a note in his chart that she had the nurse call and leave a message mid procedure.

I am wondering if someone mistakenly left a message on the wrong number or someone else received it in your home? " This doesn't accuse the client of lying but instead offers an option of what may have happened. *Then we can continue in a dialog of exploration.*

In intense situations we should always acknowledge the emotions of the client. " Mrs Jones, I am so sorry we made you feel as if we didn't care about Spot. That is unacceptable. " Notice we don't apologize for medical wrongdoing or mistakes ...*only that our actions made her feel a certain way.*

Watch Your Behavior and Body Language

In conflict, emotions run hot but our Emotional Intelligence helps us not get sucked into the drama.

1. Our first step is to manage our breathing. Keep it deep, slow and steady. We tend to hold our breath or take shallow breaths when we are verbally attacked so acknowledging and noticing our breath is vital.
2. Keep in mind that the client is upset with a real or perceived issue that you did not cause so you can stay "clinical" about the solution.
3. Speak in a normal speed and tone. Speeding up and getting loud turns up the volume on angry clients. Soon both parties are shouting to be heard. You may find slowing your speech and lowering your voice helpful. al
4. Watch your body language. Don't cross your arms or widen your stance as this reads as a posture of belligerence and power. Balance on both feet, keep your hands out of your pockets and arms loose and relaxed.

Our goal with all this is to have the client mirror our relaxed behavior

In emotional conversations with others you must:

- ❖ Acknowledge and Validate Emotion
- ❖ Express Empathy and Shared Concern
- ❖ Offer Solutions or Next Steps
- ❖ Maintain Calm, Kind Energy

Sample Scripts:

Lets look at an example of an upset client who wants to come in today but we have no openings and 3 walk-in's already waiting in the lobby.

Start with Emotions – “I can hear how frustrated you are — I would feel the same way if my pet needed care and I couldn’t get in right away.”

“It’s clear you really care about your pet, and I completely understand how stressful it feels when timing doesn’t work out.”

“Thank you for being patient with us. I know it’s disappointing when we don’t have the time you were hoping for.”

Express Empathy - “We truly want to help your pet as soon as possible. Let’s look at every option we can to get you the care you need.”

“Your pet’s health is important to us too, and I want to make sure we find the best possible solution together.”

“We’ve been seeing an unusually high number of sick pets, and I know that makes things tough — I really appreciate your understanding.”

Offer Solutions- “Let’s see what we can do — I can check for any cancellations or add you to our priority list.”

“If it’s urgent, I can speak with a technician to see if there’s a way we can triage your pet today.”

“We may not have a full appointment, but I can schedule a quick nurse visit or call the doctor to see if we can fit you in between patients.”

“If we can’t see you today, I can refer you to one of our trusted urgent care partners to ensure your pet is seen right away.”

Maintain Calm, Kind Energy : “Let’s work together to find the best next step for your pet.”

“I want to make sure we take good care of both you and your pet — let’s see what’s possible.”

“I know this is hard — you’re doing the right thing by calling, and we’ll do everything we can to help.”

Tone Tips for Delivery

- ❖ Keep your voice low and slow — tone conveys calm.

- ❖ Use soft empathy phrases (“I understand,” “I can see why,” “That sounds hard”).
- ❖ Avoid defensive words (“policy,” “can’t,” “you should have”). Replace with positive framing (“here’s what we can do”).
- ❖ Smile gently — even on the phone, it changes your tone.

In the building, try to lead clients to an exam room or private office. I found that asking the client to follow me and then simply starting to walk towards my destination got most people to come with me. Sometimes people act up more when they have an audience. Watch your body language. Balance on both feet, arms relaxed to your sides, calm and pleasant but concerned look on your face. Tilt your head to show you are listening intently. Nod and make acknowledging sounds like “I see, oh my, really!”. Lean in to show deep listening. Focus. Don’t interrupt until the entire story is out in the open and you have let the client vent. Only then can you ask to share your side. Then watch carefully for any signs that agitation is increasing again. If you see this, then go back to the listening mode until the person is calm once again.

Key Takeaway

No one enjoys being the target of an upset person but when we take the time to learn skills that prevent people from becoming upset our lives improve. Unfortunately, we can’t train our clients communication skills and emotional intelligence, but we can train ourselves.

Start with the simple dialogue” Work on me first, us second”
 - Crucial Conversations-

Recommended Reading

[**Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High**](#) By Kerry Patterson (Author), Joseph Grenny (Author), Ron McMillan (Author), Al Switzler (Author),

[**High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out**](#) by Amanda Ripley

[**Talking to Crazy: How to Deal with the Irrational and Impossible People in Your Life**](#) By Mark Goulston MD

Knowledge Check

Instructions: Choose the best answer for each question based on what you learned in this module.

1. 1. What is the main goal of Module 3 in the client service skills series?
 - A. To learn financial policies and payment options
 - B. To improve body language and first impressions
 - C. To manage emotional situations and upset clients using advanced communication skills
 - D. To train on scheduling and phone etiquette
2. 2. According to the module, what does the Feelings Wheel help client service representatives do?
 - A. Recognize that all clients express emotions the same way
 - B. Simplify emotions into basic categories
 - C. Identify the intensity and type of emotion a person is feeling for better response
 - D. Determine if a client is right or wrong
3. 3. What is the significance of the “Social Code” discussed in the module?
 - A. It explains the rules for how clients must behave in the hospital
 - B. It demonstrates that humans are wired for social fairness, empathy, and emotional connection
 - C. It lists legal requirements for customer interactions
 - D. It teaches how to discipline clients who break rules
4. 4. Why might a client carry “social pain” into your practice?
 - A. Because they expect discounts for repeat visits
 - B. Because they were treated unfairly or disrespected at another clinic
 - C. Because they are uncomfortable with medical settings
 - D. Because they dislike new people
5. 5. What does Emotional Intelligence (EI) allow veterinary team members to do?
 - A. Control clients’ emotions through persuasion
 - B. Recognize, understand, and manage their own emotions and influence others positively
 - C. Avoid uncomfortable conversations entirely
 - D. Ignore emotions to stay “professional”
6. 6. Which of the following best demonstrates self-regulation?
 - A. Snapping back when a client blames you

- B. Taking a deep breath and lowering your tone before responding
- C. Avoiding the client and letting someone else handle them
- D. Repeating clinic policy firmly

7. 7. What is the Fool's Choice described in the module?

- A. Believing you must choose between honesty and kindness
- B. Deciding a client is either right or wrong
- C. Agreeing with clients to avoid conflict
- D. Pretending emotions don't exist

8. 8. What does curiosity accomplish in a heated client conversation?

- A. It stops clients from speaking
- B. It helps de-escalate tension by encouraging dialogue and understanding
- C. It allows the CSR to prove their point
- D. It delays problem-solving

9. 9. When a client accuses the practice of wrongdoing, what is the correct response?

- A. Defend the practice immediately and explain the record
- B. Remain calm, let the client fully explain, and then ask clarifying questions respectfully
- C. Apologize for malpractice to end the conversation
- D. Avoid responding until a manager steps in

10. 10. Which of the following phrases best represents calm, kind energy as taught in the module?

- A. "There's nothing I can do; we're full today."
- B. "You should have called earlier if it was that important."
- C. "Let's work together to find the best next step for your pet."
- D. "You'll need to speak with the doctor about that."

Scoring Guide:

9–10 correct: Excellent — calm, emotionally intelligent communicator

7–8 correct: Strong understanding — continue to refine tone and validation

5–6 correct: Developing — review the Emotional Intelligence and Curiosity sections

Below 5: Needs review — revisit Social Code and Fool's Choice concepts

Answer Key

1. C

2. C

3. B

4. B

5. B

6. B

7. A

8. B

9. B

10. C