

Web-Based Radio Show

The Developmental Levels for Forming Ideas and Thinking

Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.


June 26, 2008

Welcome to our web-based Radio Show. Thank you for joining us today. Today's topic is going to be a continuation of what we did last time where we talked about actual examples of the different levels of emotional, social, and intellectual developmental that we call our functional emotional developmental capacities. Today we are going to talk about the levels that have to do with the ability to form ideas and use ideas.

When we are talking about ideas or symbols, as we sometimes refer to them, we talk about our ability to make images in our mind; literally pictures – these can be pictures with words, or pictures with things we see, or pictures of things we touch or smell – any of our senses can create these pictures and we invest our emotions in these pictures so that they have meaning for us. So the picture of mom or dad or even the picture of our favorite car is invested with feelings and lots of emotionally based experiences, so they contribute to these images.

We can organize these images in different ways and different levels. So initially we just have these images and we play with them as we see with a 2 year old who is beginning pretend play – the dollies are hugging and kissing. These are some initial images. Or, the dolly is saying, “Want to, so hug mommy.” Later, by age 3 ½ or sometimes earlier or certainly often by four, the child is saying, “I want to go outside” and we say, “Why?” and he says, “Because I want to play.” Or, “Mommy, I’m sad” “Why?” “Because you wouldn’t play with me.” So now images are being connected or ideas are being connected in logical or purposeful or meaningful ways.

Then there is advancing to even higher levels with a child giving you many reasons for something, then what we call gray area thinking – telling you the degrees to which one reason is more important than another reason, and finally reflective thinking where a child of 10, 12, 13, or 14 – this gets better and better as you get older and older – can say, “Gee, I’m angrier than I should be today” or “Gee, I like Mark Twain better than Tolstoy because my upbringing was more similar to his” where you are actually




reflecting; taking a step away from yourself and reflecting on your own feelings or on your own observations. So it goes to higher levels.

Now today I wanted to give you some examples of these different levels to hang your hat on. People always ask questions about them and I thought giving some actual examples both from everyday life and from the clinical situation would be helpful. We'll start off with the example of just the ability to form images or pictures – get into the level we call “Using Ideas” which is for a child using pretend play and for an adult it is using ideas instead of actions.

Harry was a man who was married with three children and was married to a woman named Harriet. Harry and Harriet seemed to have a good relationship except whenever Harry felt certain emotions – felt annoyance or felt frustrated or felt disappointed – he wasn't able to use ideas. Instead he used actions and he would throw tantrums or throw fits or he would yell and scream but in an action way, like “I don't want to be frustrated!” not in a way to convey an idea of, “Gee, sweetheart, I'm feeling frustrated!”

Harriet, who liked to talk about things, could put her feelings of frustration or annoyance or anger or disappointment into ideas and explain, “I'm feeling disappointed” or “I'm feeling angry” and she couldn't understand Harry and how he would throw these fits and get into these rages. Sometimes he would even lose his temper and push. Fortunately, he never did it to her, but he was prone, for example, when driving to get into an argument where she was afraid he was going to push someone. One time at work he did push someone and got into trouble when he lost his temper. She couldn't understand why he couldn't just use his words and she kept saying, “Harry, use your words! Use your words!” And Harry said, “I try, but it doesn't happen and I just lose it and I don't know why.” He even got into therapy for it and the therapist thought he had depression and anxiety and put him on medication for it, but that didn't change the picture. It reduced his anxiety a little bit and made him a little bit more upbeat but didn't alter the basic problem and when Harry began doing this with their children, Harriet got more and more upset with him and the marriage started having more and more friction.

Their basic problem was that Harry couldn't yet use ideas. He couldn't do what a 2 ½ year old could do when he was having the little dolly say, “I'm mad at you and I'm going to take your horse and not let you have it until you become a nice little zebra” or “...until you become a nice little doggy.” Harry was having a hard time with that when he was feeling the feeling. He could do it in just normal conversation, he could invent a pretend scenario, but he couldn't do it when he was actually having the feeling.




So he was locked into what we call the “action mode” which actually is the way in which toddlers operate before they learn to use ideas. He had to learn to use ideas. Finally when I heard about this, I actually learned from friends in the neighborhood, they were telling me their problem one day, I just gave them a simple suggestion and some things to read. The simple suggestion was:

1. Whenever Harry was feeling very intensely – one of these feelings like disappointment, frustration, anger, or humiliation – whenever he was feeling that, to deep breathe, literally count to ten, to get away from the situation that was stirring the emotions so that he would reduce the level of intensity whether it was his children or someone at work or in a car, literally bite his lip, so to speak, and not let himself say anything or do anything, and just do this by sheer willpower. So first just calm down, just throw water on the fire and the flames.

2. See if he could label the feeling he was having. If he couldn’t do it, just to try to make up a story in his own mind about a similar situation with other characters. It could be some characters from a TV show that he was familiar with, but just to simply make up a story with other characters or pretend characters he could invent like he was a little novelist. Actually I practiced this with him a few times. Through that, try to see what the characters were experiencing. I encouraged Harriet then to spend some time each day with Harry asking him if there were any moments when he felt if he was in a situation where he needed to kind of calm himself down? Often there was something at work or something with the kids. Then they would do this together. Harry would make up a little pretend story and he would try to figure out what the characters were feeling and see if this had any relevance for him.

Over time, Harry was able to, actually, begin to describe feelings of frustration and annoyance and anger and disappointment, along with the happy feelings which he could always do, and it has reduced his action orientation because now he was able to use his ideas. Gradually over a period of a few years, he was able to do it with more and more emotional intensity. Everyone loses it when the intensity level goes up to a certain point, but he can actually now begin to do it a little bit. He learned, literally, for the first time in his life, to use ideas for certain feelings that he had never learned. That was a very, very interesting situation.

So we saw how the basic problem was with a man who was otherwise successful but who couldn’t go from the action level – the sort of toddler level of communicating through your actions to truly using your ideas for certain feelings. He could do it for other feelings. That is the dilemma that many of us face.




The same situation occurred with a colleague of mine who was treating a patient actually very much like Harry, where he got into arguments and fights around similar negative emotions as Harry. He kept interpreting these like, “Gee, you obviously when you feel angry something leads you to push and throw a tantrum, so you must have some conflicts over anger so let’s examine this.” He examined it in relationship to this man’s father and mother and early childhood friends and got the history of this and even helped the person verbalize how enraged they felt when they would push and hit and throw tantrums. He also looked into the sense of entitlement that often underlied this like in the traffic situation that he was entitled to go first and he shouldn’t have to wait at the red light behind twenty cars and how his parents indulged him and that’s why he was so entitled. So they explored all of this. The therapist empathized, the therapist analyzed his conflicts, but nothing changed. Other aspects of life got better through therapy, but he still had this failure to be able to use ideas when he was feeling very intense, negative emotions like frustration, anger, and disappointment.

My colleague came to me for a consultation on the case and I was able to basically tell him the story about Harry and Harriet as a good illustration and suggested he do something similar in therapy and that he teach this man to do something very similar to what we taught Harry in just a passing social situation. Much like the child who is learning to do pretend play with a full range of feelings – not just happy feelings, not just the dolly is getting kisses, or playing doctor games – but eventually the dollies have to deal with fear, anger, frustration, and disappointment if they are going to experience the full human drama and produce grand epics rather than simply soap operas in their pretend play.

Similarly, human beings of any age have failed to experience the full range of human feelings at the level of thinking or ideas, not simply “see a blur and then go right into action.” It is very interesting because when you ask patients in therapy settings what they actually experience inside in this circumstance, they often won’t describe what you think they are experiencing. You think they are experiencing anger, frustration, disappointment, or humiliation, and then they, because of conflicts or anxieties, not consciously but elect to go into their tantrum or their pushing or their other problem behaviors; or an older child for that matter or a teenager who does this. But actually they will describe to you not feeling anything or feeling a numb feeling or feeling a blur or feeling just a panicky feeling or feeling confused. They won’t describe the eloquent feeling you think they are having that you might feel in a similar situation.

We, as therapists, often make the error of giving them the feeling: “Oh, I imagine you are feeling frustrated or angry or disappointed” and then go into what is the history of




that feeling and ask if there is a similar time that you felt that. The patient often goes along with it: “Oh, yes I felt that when my father would yell at me” or “...when my mother embarrassed me in public” or “...when the teacher did this or that to me.” We keep reinterpreting it and we never get to the point where we become aware of the fact that the individual simply isn’t capable yet of making that transition around selected feelings; from action to using ideas.

So when I suggested this to my colleague, he tried this with his patient and over a period of about 8 months, they were also able to also make this transition because it shifted the way they did therapy. Instead of him interpreting or assuming he knew how the patient felt, he had the patient describe what his bodily sensations were like in these circumstances. Often it was just physiologic stress the person described – muscles tensing, feeling like he had to do something to reduce the tension in his body but not having any idea, and then he would just fly off the handle. The therapist felt a little silly to say, “Make up a pretend story about this.” Through that they did their own version of pretend play, but it was for an adult so it was creating little novels or little one-act plays, so to speak, they got to use imagination around these feelings with a lot of support from the therapist. As they were able to do this, the individual would gradually be able to do what Harry did – use ideas instead of actions.

What was interesting was that in terms of the history of this, once the individual could use ideas instead of actions, actions described as disappointed and humiliated feelings, he then went back and could historically reexamine his past; his relationship with his mother and father in a totally different light because he had now more ideas with which to work with; more ideas to do this with. He didn’t have to limit it, in essence, to the way he had before. So the history and examination of his past actually took on a fuller and richer quality as a result of having this broader range of ideas that he could use. So that is very, very, very, very important.

In just a moment, we are going to look at this issue of using ideas in terms of the higher levels of using ideas. Now we are going into two examples of the higher levels of thinking. Once an individual can use ideas, as we were discussing with the earlier examples of both in the clinical situation and the everyday situation, individual advances where they can use ideas logically and then where they can actually give you many reasons for something and expand their logic, do what we call gray area thinking where they can tell you nuances and shades of gray of various reasons for something or various feelings for something, and then finally, as we mentioned, reflective thinking.




However, here too, there are differences as to whether a person can apply these higher levels to all of life's emotional and social and intellectual dramas and whether they can do it with words as well as with things they see and things they do, or whether they are limited either in terms of their emotional range, they can't apply it to negative emotions like anger or disappointment, or positive emotions like love and intimacy, or whether they can do it verbally but not with things they see, or do it like a great architect who can see subtleties and nuances with things they see but can't do it verbally. So we want, ideally, the full range of the human emotional, social, and intellectual drama and an ability to do it in all modalities – through words, what we see, even in our actions like a great dance choreographer or a great coach who can design wonderful plays on the football field or on the baseball field.

With that brief introduction, I'm going to give you first an everyday situation, and then a clinical one.

Stephanie was able to be logical. She was able to connect ideas together, but she was at the first level of logical thinking, which we call “polarized” or “all-or-nothing” thinking. She saw the world in terms of reds or blues or blacks or whites. She was an all-or-nothing thinker, in other words. Things were either one way or another. They were either black or white; red or blue; green or yellow. Her husband, Harold, was a more subtle, nuanced thinker particularly when it came to certain emotions. What was interesting was that Stephanie could be a more subtle, nuanced, gray area thinker and even be reflective as Harold could with certain feelings as well. So they each had their areas. Stephanie was all-or-nothing when it came to angry feelings, disappointing feelings, or frustrated or humiliated feelings, or anything to do with assertiveness. Her husband had this problem where he was great at those feelings; he could even be reflective on them, but he couldn't apply the higher level thinking to intimacy, warmth, and love. Stephanie could. She could describe the way she loved Harold in beautiful, subtle terms – “I love him a little more on days when he's looking sweet, cute, and cherubic just like I remember him when we first got married and that happens usually on Sundays when he is well rested and not tired.” She could describe that in great degrees and even reflect on how she felt on Sundays when she felt so differently than the other days of the week when he is busy and stressed out and doesn't have a bubbly, cherubic smile on his face and his voice tone is a little harsher and I tend to feel a little rejected and a little annoyed. I know it's silly because it's not personal but I have those feelings. So she could be reflective on it and very subtle and very nuanced.

When it came to feeling angry because Harold wasn't helping with the kids – he had promised to do something with the children and wasn't doing it, and she felt very




devoted to the kids, she would get into her all-or-nothing mode and say things like, “You are a lousy father and you’re not doing what you said you would do and I have no use for you.” She didn’t want to understand whether he was tired or whether he had other things on his mind or whether he found it hard to play with the kids and that’s why he avoided that, which actually turned out to be the reason – he didn’t know how to play well and felt he was good at doing tasks with them like homework which occurred more during the week than on the weekends, but didn’t feel as able to just relax and play with them.

For his part, Harold mentioned just the opposite. When Stephanie would be talking about the million ways that she loved him and how cute and sweet he was, he would go into silence and he couldn’t return the descriptions, although he felt what he described as, “I feel totally committed to Stephanie, I feel fully in love with her, but that’s it. What more is there to say?” He could not be a poet of those feelings. He was an all-or-nothing thinker, and when she would criticize him, he would say, “That’s a turn-off and I hate her.” He could describe the degrees of hate and the shades of hate because he was very good at describing his aggressive feelings – a little more when she was harsher and a little less when she was not as harsh, but he would get very polarized around his warm feelings and couldn’t go into any great subtlety. As a consequence, they couldn’t understand each other’s realities; they couldn’t understand one another. They felt this lack of communication. They would read books on “men versus women” and nothing seemed to apply to their situation. It really had to do with looking at how far they had advanced in terms of their thinking in different emotional realms.

I know it sounds like I get my best collection of stories from the neighborhood, but this also came up in a relative who was telling me about their situation and whether or not they should seek couples counseling and I told them that this sounds like a problem in the way you each think about different types of emotions. I got them both on the phone and what they described was that one of them was great when it comes to loving feelings, can describe subtlety in shades of gray and be reflective on it, and one of them is great when it comes to describing angry feelings and frustrated feelings. You speak past each other because you are not talking the same language. One of you is an all-or-nothing thinker in one emotional realm, and the other is an all-or-nothing thinker in the other emotional realm.


Just that, pointing that out to them, was helpful. I made a concrete suggestion to them. I suggested what they might try to do is when the other person is being all-or-nothing in their thinking, because Harold couldn’t understand how it was that Stephanie could be so eloquent when it came to describing her love, and yet so harsh when she was disappointed in him like he was the scum of the earth. And, Stephanie couldn’t



understand why Harold couldn't return her loving descriptions with loving descriptions of his own. I said, "When the other one is in the all-or-nothing mode, which each had to do with your upbringing and what you practiced with your families, why don't you just be supportive and empathetic and very patient – realizing that you are dealing with differences in your poetic abilities and you're ability to use ideas when it comes to different emotions. Don't take it personally," which they each had been doing. Gradually that is going to help the other person become a little better at describing those feelings. Just that suggestion of not taking it personally and being supportive and realizing that they each operated almost in a different level of reality; a different way of thinking; that not all human beings think in the same way – some are more all-or-nothing thinkers and some are more gray, subtle, and nuanced thinkers and some can be even more reflective in their thinking, but it will vary from what emotion we are talking about and for different individuals it will be different emotions – that proved helpful. When I talked to them a month later because they were relatives and it was just a normal, follow-up call, they said that it helped them significantly and enormously.

Now we are going to consider a clinical situation involving the higher levels of thinking. A colleague of mine was seeing a young woman who was very eloquent in describing her feelings. She would describe the enormous rage and anger she felt and the enormous lust she felt and the enormous embarrassment and humiliation she felt, and she could go back and talk about having similar feelings as a child. But she was continuing having difficulties in forming intimate relationships and staying with even the nicest young men, she would get annoyed with them and frustrated and describe her feelings and then often do something to break off the relationship. The therapist, after two years of this work was, in a sense, dumbfounded. He came to see me for a consultation because he said, "We have explored all the feelings, she is in touch with her anger, she is in touch with her dependency needs that she wants closeness and she wants warmth, she is in touch with loving feelings, she feels great passion, she even writes eloquently and we have explored this in relationship to each of her parents and her siblings and there still is almost no progress. She is still having the same problem in her relationships where she breaks them off when things don't go her way. We have even explored the narcissistic sense of entitlement and expectation, etc.

As I listened, it occurred to me as he was describing it, I asked him to share with me exactly what she shares in the sessions. As she would describe all of these feelings, like "I hate him when he does this," "I love him when he does that," I could see how she was an all-or-nothing thinker – she went from one extreme to another. Rarely did she describe shades of gray and rarely did her emotional intensity shift to more modulated




tones with empathy and understanding of where her partner was coming from, which in order to do that you need gray area thinking and even a little bit of reflective thinking where you take a step away and say, “Gee, I’m feeling angrier than I should be” or “I’m feeling a little more frustrated than I should be in this situation.” Those are things she did not do spontaneously.

As I listened to the sessions as my colleague went over his notes, he would often do that. He would say, “Well, let’s take a step away from those feelings and what do you think you did and what do you think your partner did?” She could then intellectually analyze the situation, but he was the one who introduced the “taking the step away.” She almost never did this on her own. My colleague was also a person of low emotion and I could see that he was identifying with his patient and almost wished that he could have her emotional intensity and her vibrancy and he kind of admired her for this. He wasn’t seeing the fact that she was an all-or-nothing thinker; that she hadn’t really progressed beyond that.

I shared this framework with him of the different levels of thinking; that it wasn’t simply the level of analyzing her conflicts or doing the work for her, and he would often do complex interpretations which she nod intellectually about relating this back to her parents and conflicts and feelings she was having and he would be very subtle in his description of these feelings and very reflective, and she would agree with it. But then there would be no positive results from the “insight.” But she could even verbalize it back next week but again with no positive result.

I explained that she hadn’t really progressed from concrete thinking to subtle thinking to truly being able to take a step away from her feelings on her own, examine how she felt, and how the other person felt. We went through a simple game that I often recommend for children but it is very good for adults too, and that was the “Thinking about Tomorrow” game. I encouraged him to have her anticipate situations that would come up with her boyfriend of the moment, and where she would feel love, where she would feel hate or anger, and then try to compare how that feeling compared to the last time. Was it a little more or a little less? Also, get into more textured descriptions of feelings and see if she could feel more textured ways related to the situations that were likely to happen but hadn’t happened yet so she wasn’t caught up in the emotional intensity of it. Then, to always take a step away when in the midst of the feeling and think about how she felt and how it compared to other feelings she had, and how he might be feeling (the partner) and why he was doing what he was doing.



She was to practice this in a fantasy way ahead of time – before the emotional intensity took over. That way he was going to literally teach her to experience her feelings in more shades of gray and more subtle gradations. And, to take a step away and be reflective because she would think about it ahead of time and slowly, at the moment of truth, try to do that and certainly come in the next day and do it in retrospect – but always anticipating the next day also.

This little exercise helped him see how hard it was for her to do. She found it very difficult and at first couldn't do it at all. She couldn't describe tomorrow or describe what was likely to happen other than to say, "Well, I would be outraged and I would get rid of him." But slowly but surely, as he pointed out to her that she was experiencing the world in all-or-nothing terms, their job was to see if they could look at the more subtle shades of gray and also anticipate them as they were going to come up the next day. He was very patient with her and very calm and he was also always doing that with her; always asking her to break it down and compare it to other times and do this for her childhood recollections as well and she got better and better at it. It took about a year and a half of doing this for her to become a better gray area thinker and finally become truly reflective. Instead of doing the work for her and saying "you must have felt this" and "if you take a step away, this is the conflict you seem to be re-experiencing" he would have her do it. He would say, "Well, given this set of feelings, what can we understand about it?" She was able to take a step away from it and look at her feelings in shades of gray and say, "This is what I think is going on and this is how I think it relates to the history." She got better and better and more reflective.

Over time with this approach, she began having more stable relationships that meant tolerating the negative features of her love interest of the moment. Also, the hardest feeling for her was disappointment; the hardest feeling for her was experiencing the sense of loss; the sense of sadness because that was what she was avoiding by her all-or-nothing thinking also. When that came up, they had to practice that the most. As they did it over a two year period of time, she gradually improved and she was able to have more stable relationships.

This is a clinical example of how applying the levels of thinking and the levels of emotional and social development to a clinical case proved helpful.

Thank you very much for listening, and I hope these little vignettes; these little examples help us understand the levels of emotional social intellectual development that all individuals must master for healthy lives.