

## **Emotion Work and People with Communication Disabilities**

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### **Short Abstract**

Emotion Work is something that we all do. But, how and why do we do it?

Let me ask you: Have you laughed at a joke that you thought wasn't really funny? Been annoyed when people speak for you? Or have been excluded from conversations because it is assumed that you don't understand what is happening?

If you answered 'yes' to one or all of these questions, then you have been doing Emotion Work. Emotion Work is the controlling and managing of our emotions for the benefit of others. Emotion Work is also the management of the emotions of others. For example sometime when someone has done something for me, but they've forgotten a particular detail, I would thank them, but I might not tell them that something is not quite right, especially when they've spent a lot of time doing it.

Sounds tricky, doesn't it? I am hoping that by the end of my presentation, together we can explore the reasons that we do Emotion Work.

We also explore the techniques of doing Emotion Work that were first written about in 1979, by Arlie Hochschild. Hochschild talks how we monitor, pretend and suppress our emotions, for the benefit of others.

I also introduce the Cycle of Negativity and will explain how and when combined with the constant practice of Emotion Work the two have serious ramifications of our mental health.

### **Long Abstract**

Emotion Work is something that we all do. But, how and why do we do it?

Let me ask you: Have you laughed at a joke that you thought wasn't really funny? Been annoyed when people speak for you? Or have been excluded from conversations because it is assumed that you don't understand what is happening?

If you answered 'yes' to one or all of these questions, then you have been doing Emotion Work. Emotion Work is the controlling and managing of our emotions for the benefit of others. It is also the management of the emotions of others.

Sounds tricky, doesn't it? But when we think about our day-to-day experiences, you may be surprised to know how much we do Emotion Work.

I first became familiar with the concept of Emotion Work, during the research of my Honours Thesis. The objective of my research was to prove that disabled women did Emotion Work, because of their disability.

In her early writings, Hochschild defined Emotion Work as “the act of trying to change in degree of or quantity an emotion or feeling” (Charlesworth 2007: p7). She further explains that there are times when even in failure it is important to focus on the ‘effort’ that a person puts into doing Emotion Work, and not necessarily the outcome. This is because, as in anything, as humans, we often learn just as much, if not more, from our failures, than our successes (Charlesworth 2007: p9).

This presentation will explore a number of concepts related to Emotion Work that are relevant in the lives of people with communication disabilities. At the heart of the presentation will be the fact that everyone does Emotion Work and we do so almost always for the benefit of others.

As well as naming the techniques, it is important to explore what they mean. For example, if talking about the cognitive technique, it is important to explain that this refers to the attempt to change the cognitive ways of performing Emotion Work. Again, this technique is about how we change thoughts about images, ideas and thoughts, ultimately changing the feelings associated with them (Hochschild, 1979, p.562). A good example of this is when we get “a gut feeling” about someone or something. Or when we just “know” something is not right.

The second technique is bodily, relating to the controlling of the physical symptoms of emotions - slowing breathing, trying not to shake. The controlling of the bodily symptoms might be tricky for many people with communication disabilities particularly for those of us with CP. An example could be when we feel really angry, we might count to 10 to slow down our breathing, giving us time to consider our response.

The third technique is expressive, referring to the ways that we alter our gestures in the attempt to change our inner feelings. I do this when I go to the movies or a live show. I am the worst crier and it doesn’t matter whether it has a happy or sad ending! I try to get it over and done with, before the house lights come on, so that no one can hear or see me cry. In doing this, I am also trying to alter my inner feelings from sad to happy, so that I can chat to my friends about what we just saw.

Also important to the discourse of Emotion Work is the concepts of surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting is simulating emotions which could be described as “fake” or “false”. This is because surface acting is about what the emotion is visible to others. Deep acting relates to what we feel inside us. This is about what we feel inside ourselves. These are emotions that people cannot see.

One of the discourses I expand on and draw a direct connection to Emotion Work is the Cycle of Negativity. Here will explain the ways that the Cycle of Negativity can have life-long and profound ramifications on anyone with disability, and the ways that it has been perpetuated by society.

People with communication disabilities perform, suppress and manage not just our emotions but those of others.

The presentation also pays attention to the ways that people who surround the person with communication disability, manage emotions of those with communication disabilities, by “shielding” them from the realities of life.

Death is a good example of this. I shopped at a particular Chemist and noticed that a member of staff was no longer there, and when I asked about where the person was, I was told they went on holiday. Which could be true, but I have not seen the person since. This is similar to how a parent might spare a young child's feelings if a child's pet dies, the child might be told that it “went to sleep”.

While no one likes to hear about the death of someone, the overprotective, shielding of people with communication disabilities denies them the right to grieve, and more importantly the chance to say goodbye, or just to pass on condolences if they were not close to the person.

My presentation will explore the reasons and techniques of Emotion Work. It will also make direct connections between the Cycle of Negativity, and Emotion Work, and explain why people with communication disabilities do Emotion Work, over and above people without communication disabilities.

Finally, the presentation explores the mental health ramifications that can develop as a result of constantly "doing" Emotion Work.