

## **An Introduction to the Emotional Coherence Framework for Educators**

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This article serves as an introduction to the [Emotional Coherence Framework](#) (as introduced in [Unlocking the Emotional Brain](#)) for educators. The Emotional Coherence Framework sets out a particular way of listening and responding to students so that we not only deepen our understanding and relationships with them but we do so in such a way that helps unleash their potential to grow and flourish both in learning and in life.

### **A way to deepen understanding and connection and promote flourishing**

A common refrain among educators is that a particular student is not behaving or learning in line with his or her “potential.” The Emotional Coherence Framework helps us address this by providing a compelling rationale and powerful methodology for establishing attuned and supportive responses to students, when patterns of reacting and behaving seem to get in the way of realising this potential. Adapted from [Coherence Therapy](#), a psychotherapeutic approach which helps transform problems in a deep and lasting way, the Emotional Coherence Framework is being made more widely available to educators, parents, and coaches.

When difficulties or problems arise with student learning, behaviour or wellbeing, it can often lead to misunderstanding, tension and sometimes conflict, both within and among individuals. This can result in the worsening of relations, further compounding the initial problem.

Familiarity with the Emotional Coherence Framework can help educators view problems as an opportunity to connect with the student and to look and listen in a way that goes beneath the surface to the emotional root of things; to find the emotional coherence of what is happening. In essence, it’s about exploring what makes “emotional sense” of someone’s behaviours or reactions. By exploring the Emotional Coherence Framework and illustrating it with a couple of examples, we will show you how emotional coherence underpins a vast portion of our reactions and behaviours and how this can be traced to unquestioned beliefs or assumptions formed from life experiences. By approaching things with a coherence mindset, not only is the problem more likely to be understood with greater depth and clarity, but any action that may be taken is better informed. Taking the time to really listen and seek understanding engenders trust and strengthens relationships, thereby reducing conflict and promoting more meaningful connection with the students. It also starts a process of tapping into the individuals’ native abilities to transform their own problems.

Before we get into further detail about the Emotional Coherence Framework, let's look at an example of two teachers with two contrasting approaches, which will illustrate the central idea and importance of the role of emotional coherence in promoting understanding and connection.

Mark is a fifteen-year-old boy whose girlfriend has just broken up with him and he is pretty upset by it. He's having great difficulty in holding in his tears and he knows that he can't leave the classroom without "getting in trouble." He is in class when his teacher notices that he is upset and may have been crying.

*Example 1: Teacher without a coherence-informed approach*

Mark's teacher sees that he is upset and asks what is wrong. Mark doesn't want to talk to him so the teacher suggests that he go and speak to the school psychologist. Mark refuses and goes to sit on the floor at the back of the class. The teacher is concerned about Mark and thinks it must be serious. He pushes Mark to go and speak with the school psychologist and Mark seems to get even more upset. Seeing his reaction, his teacher gets more concerned and leaves the classroom to try and get some help. Mark is feeling increasingly uncomfortable and he is angry at the teacher insisting that he should talk to someone. Mark also becomes anxious when the teacher leaves the class; he's thinking that someone will come in and try to make him talk. He's also worried that this will happen in front of his peers. The teacher explains to the school psychologist what has happened and asks him to come and speak with Mark. The psychologist has an inkling that this may not sit well with Mark, given his refusal to come. He suggests that if the student is not disturbing anyone, he is probably doing what he needs to do to cope with whatever he is dealing with. He suggests giving Mark some time to sit with his feelings. The teacher leaves, thinking the psychologist is not very helpful and should consider a career change.

*Example 2: Teacher with a coherence-informed approach*

Mark's teacher sees that he is upset and asks if he wants to talk about what is wrong or if he wishes to speak with the school psychologist. Mark indicates that he doesn't want to do either of these things and goes to sit on the floor at the back of the class. The teacher gives Mark five minutes alone and then approaches him again, this time asking if there is anything he can do to help. Mark says no and the teacher lets him know if he does want anything to just ask. After class the teacher asks Mark if he is worried about speaking to someone about what is going on for him. Mark says that the last time he spoke to a psychologist, the psychologist told his parents about it, and he would never trust one again. His teacher said, "I understand how you

would lose trust in that situation and if you do feel like talking, I'm happy to try and listen, just let me know". Mark says thanks but he's alright. He leaves thinking that he may talk to the teacher later on but he's feeling a bit too raw right now from the breakup. He doesn't want to be crying in front of his peers or at school and wants to be able to get a handle on his feelings first.

Let's unpack this a little. In the first example, while concerned and caring about the student, the teacher makes some assumptions about what is wrong and what to do to "fix things" or help the student feel better, thus ignoring and overriding what Mark is telling him. The teacher's decisions are being informed by beliefs or assumptions that he holds, including the following: *"Boys don't cry unless it's something serious," "I'm uncomfortable seeing this and I need to do something to fix it," "I'm not doing my job if I don't fix this" and "It's not okay to be upset; I've got to get him out of his distress."* As can be seen, this stance not only compounds the problem for Mark, but it results in a loss of connection and trust in the relationship. A little trust and faith between the psychologist and the teacher has also been lost on both sides.

In the second example, the teacher shows greater understanding and attunement. He holds internal assumptions that include: *"Something looks wrong with Mark and he may or may not want to talk about this to me or anyone else, but I'll do what I can to offer my help" and "It's okay to be upset, and feelings can take time to be processed."* A further assumption of emotional coherence he holds is *"It will make sense as to why Mark doesn't want to speak about this to me or anyone else."* Respect is shown for Mark having knowledge about what is the best way for him to deal with the problem and in giving Mark time and space. The teacher is later able to get an understanding about what makes sense of Mark not wanting to speak with the school psychologist. In approaching things in this way, Mark is also able to reflect on and get in touch with why he doesn't want to talk about things right now as well. As a result, Mark's stance toward speaking with someone starts to open up. From the interaction he has had with his teacher and without even expressing what he is going through, Mark knows that his teacher is available to go to and feels that the teacher is someone that he may be able to open up to. This developing sense of trust is reassuring to Mark, even if he doesn't speak to him about what is going on in the moment. Mark leaves the situation feeling better about what he is dealing with, having had some time to just sit with his own emotions. He also feels better in the knowledge that his teacher cares about him and is available to talk to. His teacher's stance results in Mark feeling more empowered and in touch with his own agency, with the implicit assumption that he knows what is best for himself going forward.

## The Emotional Coherence Framework: core assumptions

With this second example in mind, let's look at some of the central assumptions of the Emotional Coherence Framework. Try reflecting on each statement below and then see if you can relate it back to the example above to see how it may apply.

- The Emotional Coherence Framework's governing assumption is that a vast portion of our unwanted or problematic patterns of response—our emotional and behavioural reactions in life—make “emotional sense.”
- These reactions occur for a reason or reasons due to “emotional learnings” —unquestioned beliefs or assumptions that were formed during or as a result of our life experiences.
- Our reactions have purpose and function underpinned by the beliefs or assumptions that we have generated about ourselves, others and the world.
- These unquestioned assumptions or beliefs are often unconscious and, as such, the associated reactions or patterns of responding become automatic or default responses that lie largely outside of our daily awareness.
- Once we become consciously aware of the underlying beliefs and the purpose or function of these patterns of reacting—the emotional truth about what is going on—change and transformation are possible. As long as the emotional truth remains hidden from view, transformational change is unlikely.
- Finally, there is the assumption that when we listen and respond with a coherence mindset, by taking a stance that seeks to listen empathically and compassionately to an individual without judgement or trying to fix things, but rather trying to understand what is going on beneath observable behaviour, we start to help our students make sense of what they are doing and why they are doing it. This discovery is a necessary step towards transformational change.

Once discovered and integrated into daily awareness, these inner beliefs become available for change when we either become aware of or encounter disconfirming knowledge or experiences.

## **Unlocking potential: It's our beliefs that promote or limit our success**

It should be acknowledged that it can take some time to learn to fully appreciate and utilise the Emotional Coherence Framework with our students. When we start to use it, we begin to see things very differently, we view things through a different lens and it begins to influence all of our relationships, with both ourselves and others. The more engaged we become as educators in utilising the Emotional Coherence Framework with our students to explore and discover the rich emotional meaning and purpose of what lies beneath their actions and reactions, the more apparent it will become how much of our success in life hinges on our understanding and use of this stance of assuming emotional coherence.

Our success in learning, goal setting, relationships, showing empathy, decision making and happiness is driven by emotional factors that often lie outside of our awareness. Understanding this and adopting a coherence mindset helps us tune in to our own and others' reactions in such a way as to help us discover more about what's going on inside and between us. When we do this, we start to enter a realm of great possibility, where the constraints on both our own growth and others' growth and development can be unlocked.

### **A Case Example**

Let's look at another example in some detail to help illustrate how emotional learnings become a kind of "internal working model" by which we live and how the coherence framework can facilitate conversations towards greater insight, understanding and, potentially, transformation.

In the following case the student, Daniel, who is 13 years old, has some awareness of his problem's origins but his parents and teacher do not.

As a student in upper primary school, Daniel experienced ridicule and was laughed at by his classmates whilst giving a class presentation. From this single negative experience, he both feared and avoided any similar situations of having to speak in front of his peers. The emotional learning that occurred as a result of this embarrassing and shame-filled experience was this: *"If I have to speak in front of the class, they will judge me and make fun of me. I'm never going to let that happen again, no matter what."*

Great anxiety recurred each time the prospect of having to talk in front of his peers arose. Although aware of the early aversive experience, Daniel did not replay the whole experience in his head; he just had a physical and emotional response that overwhelmed him at the thought of having to speak in front of others. He "knew" that things would end badly, in both shame

and embarrassment. This emotional learning or belief led to a pattern of responding whereby he would avoid some classes if he knew teachers might randomly ask for students to stand up and speak or read in front of the class. Where scheduled presentations of any kind were involved, he would have sleepless nights and was plagued by stomach aches that led to vomiting. This resulted in his parents keeping him home for the day. His parents took him for a medical check-up with the family doctor, who found nothing physically wrong with Daniel. He was not able or willing to speak to his parents or the doctor about his fear of speaking in front of his peers, as he thought that they would respond negatively and he would be forced to face his fears and present to his peers.

Due to the absence of any physical explanation, Daniel's doctor suggested that anxiety may have something to do with what he was experiencing. The doctor offered sleeping tablets to help him sleep better and said that anti-anxiety medication was available, should it prove to be anxiety. He suggested that the parents speak with Daniel's teachers to see if they could shed any light on things that might be going on in the school context.

They approached the person in charge of the welfare of his year group, who also happened to be his geography teacher. A conversation between the class teacher and the parents resulted in both parties starting to wonder if this didn't have something to do with anxiety about a series of short items that students had to present to their classmates. The teacher noted that Daniel's father appeared frustrated in the interview and said Daniel needed to grow a "thicker skin". Daniel's parents felt that the teacher might have better luck in speaking with him, as they had not been able to get him to say much at all.

His teacher, adopting a coherence mindset, asked Daniel to stay back for a chat one day. She gently approached him about the subject of the upcoming talks in her class. She spoke about how lots of students have difficulty speaking in front of the class and she was wondering if this was something that had him worried at all. Daniel cried when asked about this and was not able or willing to say anything more. His teacher reassured him that he would not have to speak in front of the class, if that was what he was concerned about.

Using the principle of "taking small enough steps" (the idea that when trying to discover the emotional coherence of someone's reactions, steps taken have to be small enough to be tolerable to the individual), she resolved to speak to him again in couple of days' time. On approaching him a second time, she asked if it was okay to ask him about the upcoming talks again. Asking permission to ask about something is one way of making the steps small enough. Gently approaching issues that may be sensitive allows for the student to have some control over the conversation. Daniel nodded his agreement and started to cry. His teacher gave him

some time to cry and, when he settled, asked if he was finding it difficult to speak about what was going on for him. Daniel nodded. In the absence of anything being said by the student, wondering out loud about what may be going on allows the student to acknowledge or dismiss any tentative assumptions the teacher may hold. It also allows the student to develop trust, which can help progress the conversation.

With apparent discomfort, Daniel started to speak about what had happened in primary school and how bad he had felt. He then started to speak about earlier experiences in his life where he had expressed fear in front of his dad. His teacher was alert to the fact that this spontaneous revelation might be an important part in understanding Daniel's anxiety. His dad's stance towards fear was one of "get over it" and "you've gotta confront your fears" and, on some occasions, he had pushed Daniel into facing his fears in really uncomfortable situations. Daniel recalled an incident when he was about 5 years old and he was climbing a tall climbing frame in the park. At the halfway point, he started to come down when it felt too scary to continue. His dad started calling him a baby and telling him to be a big boy and climb to the top. Frozen in fear and unable to go up or down, he became trapped in a no-win situation. He didn't want to disappoint or anger his father or face his disapproval, but he was terrified to continue upward. In such a context of strong emotions, emotional learnings become highly durable and tightly held. The beliefs formed from this and other experiences with his dad included *"Dad doesn't understand or care that I'm scared. He'll make me do things, even if I'm scared," "It's weak to be afraid of something; I'm weak and a baby," and "I mustn't ever show that I'm afraid, or I'll be disapproved of."* And while only part of this was articulated in the conversation with his teacher, Daniel was starting to get in touch with a deeply held, shame filled belief and state of: *"I'm weak and a baby, and if I tell people I'm scared to do something they'll know that I'm weak and make me do it anyway. It's not safe to tell anyone when I'm afraid to do something so, I won't."*

His teacher, showing empathy for Daniel's emotional learnings, acknowledged how difficult it must be for him to talk about his fears and face speaking in front of his peers. She wondered about this out loud by asking Daniel if it had taken courage for him to face his fears in talking about this to her. He nodded. She asked if he felt weak right now and he said no, that he felt strong. By asking Daniel about this, she was encouraging him to connect with the possibility of his own disconfirming experience. She was not taking the more commonly used, counteractive stance of trying to reassure him by saying "You're so brave talking to me about this, you're not weak at all," which is something Daniel may not have been able to let in and could easily reject. She continued to try and connect Daniel with what he was experiencing in the moment by reflecting back to him both sides of what had just been discovered. She did this by saying back to him that it seemed as if a part of him feels he's weak and a baby when he's afraid, and he's

too scared to mention his fears to others, as they'll judge him to be weak. He agreed with this. She then reflected back that there seemed to be another part of him that had just noticed how he'd been brave and he'd felt strong in speaking about his fears. He agreed with this, too. She also asked him what it was like to have someone hear him speak about his fears and not judge him as weak. He looked a bit surprised and smiled and said it was good. By asking Daniel these questions, his teacher was creating time and space to help Daniel to pause, notice and integrate this new experience and feeling. By sitting with the part of him which holds a new view about himself—that he can be brave and strong—she is allowing Daniel to get in touch with two contradictory knowings about himself. She also brings his attention explicitly to his experience of not being judged by her when talking about his fears, as this can also help disconfirm a belief that he will be judged as weak for speaking about his fears. Rather than trying to *convince* Daniel of a different view of himself by logical argument, his teacher is trusting the process of setting up and sitting with a different *experience* of himself. His new knowing is felt and owned by him; it is not given to him by the reasoned argument of someone else. The coherence approach favours the use of this kind of experiential learning over conceptual reasoning, as this is the level at which emotional learnings are activated, engaged, and open to modification.

As you can see from this example, these types of beliefs or assumptions that Daniel held led to a pattern of responding that involved great anxiety and shame and an inability to show fear or appear weak in front of others. What he knew from his interactions with his dad added additional layers of complexity and greater anxiety to the presenting issue of speaking in front of his peers. The compounded anxiety in this case led to physical symptoms which unconsciously became Daniel's adaptive solution to the problem at hand. By getting physically sick, Daniel could express what he was going through without voicing his fears and appearing weak in front of his father. It served to help him both avoid expressing his fears out loud and avoid exposure to ridicule in front of his peers by giving him the excuse to not attend school on days when he was expected to speak in front of his peers.

As a result of these conversations, Daniel and his teacher started to become more conscious of some of the underlying emotional learnings that he held. Daniel began to open up more and was less emotional when discussing things with his teacher. In noting this, his teacher asked him if he would be willing to present his item to her outside of class time and have a good friend present as a supportive audience. Daniel agreed to do this, feeling he could do so without fear. His teacher outlined how this could be scaffolded over time until he was ready to try and speak in front of more of his peers. With Daniel's permission, she arranged for other teachers to do the same in their classes, should he require it. She worked with Daniel over a period of a couple of months, acknowledging his fear of speaking in front of his peers whilst asking him what he noticed about how others in the class reacted to students who had

presented. Thinking about this, Daniel realised that they were not like the peers he had in primary school and, when recalling some details of the earlier incident, he remembered that while some children had laughed, it was only one particular boy who “had it in” for him and had ridiculed him that day. Over time, Daniel learned to present to his peers without any remaining feelings of anxiety about being ridiculed. He still had some nerves about making mistakes, but there was no overwhelm or feeling of dread associated with the experience. He continued to remain fearful of his dad’s judgement but was less worried about how others would perceive him if he was scared or anxious about something.

As educators, by adopting a coherence mindset and developing understanding and skills in the use of the Emotional Coherence Framework, we can help both our students and ourselves.

We help our students to get in touch with their unconscious and tightly held beliefs and, in doing so, we help them gain clarity around—and facilitate their ability to articulate—their internal dilemmas. In short, they get to know themselves better and, in doing so, can get to the root of their issues. They begin to know the “emotional truth” of what’s happening rather than working on the surface of things. We start to work in the arena of transformational change versus incremental change that is prone to relapse in new or stressful situations.

This approach can help you gain greater satisfaction in your work as you feel better informed about how to listen deeply and what to listen for. Wherever you stand on the continuum of learning to use these concepts, you will move away from power *over* your students towards *empowering* change in your students. In doing so you can facilitate and witness greater progress in your students in life and learning. One of the benefits of this approach is that as you move away from counteractive approaches, ones in which you may make suggestions, give advice, cajole and sometimes coerce your students to do things, you will encounter much less resistance or reluctance on their parts and experience less frustration in your relationships. Resistance is eliminated when we sit beside our students and have permission to enter their world of meaning and understanding. By avoiding advice-giving and trying to fix, we acknowledge that the student is the expert and has proprietary knowledge of what is wrong and also has the innate ability to transform things. This methodology will also help you to greater awareness and understanding of—and freedom from—your own patterns of reacting and, in that sense, acknowledges that we are on much the same journey and are connected in similar ways to our students.

## Conclusion

The Emotional Coherence Framework helps us consider the fundamental importance and impact of what has happened to people in their lives rather than thinking there is something wrong with them. It highlights and favours listening deeply over talking..., compassion, acceptance and understanding over judgement and criticism..., curiosity over labelling..., and belief in individuals' agency and power to affect change for themselves over others "knowing" and telling them what is right for them.

We all start our journey in the world with unknown potential and, as educators, we are charged with helping our students on their journey towards fulfilling that potential. A big part of our role in helping them realise this potential is helping them know themselves more deeply. By utilising the knowledge and methodology of the Emotional Coherence Framework in our interactions with students, we come closer to "walking in their shoes" and in doing this, we help them notice what's happened to the "shoes they are wearing" as they learn about what may be holding them back and what may be moving them forward in life. To be deeply heard and understood by another is, in and of itself, a rare and affirming gift. In using the Emotional Coherence Framework to do so, we also help our students make sense of themselves. As a result, we empower them to grow and flourish across all life domains.

(For a comprehensive explanation and elaboration of this framework and an introduction to the concept of memory reconsolidation, the underlying process that is activated to achieve transformational change, please consider purchasing [WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON HERE? How to Navigate Life Using the Hidden Intelligence of Our Emotional Brain.](#))