

Conferencing can also be used for truancy, drug possession and other “victimless” offenses, probation and parole violations, and interpersonal conflicts. It can sometimes be used when responsibility for an offense is not clear, but the parties affected are willing to participate in a conference. This handbook focuses on conferencing for incidents involving distinct victims and offenders, but the conference script and preparation can be modified to address other types of offenses, conflicts and situations, including school truancy or “victimless” offenses. Sometimes family and friends of offenders are embarrassed and concerned by the offender’s actions and therefore indirectly victimized.

Silvan Tomkins’s Affect Theory

Silvan Tomkins’s psychological theory of human affect, as articulated by Donald Nathanson (1992), helps explain why the scripted conference is so effective.

Conferencing encourages free expression of affect, the biological basis for emotion and feeling. The conference allows expression of true feelings, while minimizing negative affect and maximizing positive affect. In Tomkins’s theory, this kind of environment is the ideal setting for healthy human relationships.

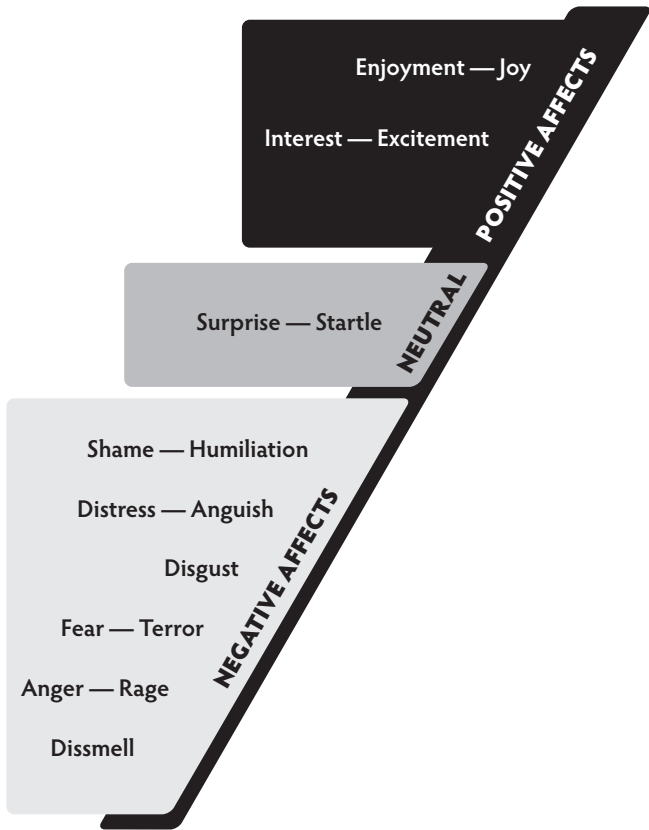
The conference script uses open-ended questions that encourage the display of all nine basic affects (see Figure 1), which Tomkins identified as existing in every human being. Tomkins presented most affects as hyphenated word pairs that name the least and most intensive expressions of that affect. When a conference begins, people are feeling *disgust*, *dissmell* (which originated biologically as a response to offensive odor), *anger-rage*, *distress-anguish*, *fear-terror* and *shame-humiliation*. These six negative affects are the most prevalent when participants first enter the conference room and sit nervously as the conference begins.

When participants respond to the scripted questions, they may express any or all of those negative affects or feelings. Anger,

distress, fear and shame are diminished through sharing. Their expression helps to reduce their intensity.

THE NINE AFFECTS

Figure 1



ADAPTED FROM TOMKINS, 1962, 1963

As the conference proceeds people experience a transition characterized by the neutral affect of *surprise-startle*. Victims, offenders and their supporters are usually surprised by what people say in the

conference and how much better they begin to feel. When the conference reaches the agreement phase, participants are usually expressing the positive affects of *interest-excitement* and *enjoyment-joy*.

People recognize the affects seen on others' faces and tend to respond with the same affect. When one is angry, others become angry. When one feels better and smiles, so do others. Tomkins called this "affective resonance" or empathy. Through affective resonance, conference participants make the emotional journey together, feeling each other's feelings as they travel from anger and distress and shame to interest and enjoyment.

The prospective conference facilitator can take comfort in knowing that Tomkins's affect theory is reliably demonstrated by the scripted conference process. People consistently move from negative to positive feelings in the safe and structured environment created by the script.

Reintegrative Shaming

Tomkins teaches us that shame is a basic affect occurring spontaneously in all human beings when confronted about their wrongdoing. John Braithwaite, in *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* (1989), advises that the experience of dealing with shame should be reintegrative, not stigmatizing.

Braithwaite's sociological theory of "reintegrative shaming" suggests that Western society's current strategies for responding to crime and wrongdoing may actually be doing more harm than good. Schools and courts punish and humiliate offenders without offering a way to make amends, right the wrong or shed their "offender" label. Instead, offenders are stigmatized, alienated and pushed into society's growing negative subcultures. They join the others in their school or community who feel excluded from the mainstream and become a source of persistent trouble.

Braithwaite says societies that reintegrate offenders back into the community have a lower crime rate than those that stigmatize

and alienate wrongdoers. Reintegration involves *separating the deed from the doer* so that society clearly disapproves of the crime or inappropriate behavior, but acknowledges the intrinsic worth of the individual. The conference script emphasizes that distinction by stating that, “It is important to understand that we will focus on what (offender name/s) did and how that unacceptable behavior has affected others. We are not here to decide whether (offender name/s) is/are good or bad.”

In several ways, the conference script helps offenders move beyond their shame toward reintegration. The script provides an opportunity for offenders to take responsibility for their behavior and to apologize. In the agreement phase of the conference, offenders can define specific steps to repair the harm and show good faith, such as making restitution and doing community service. Finally the informal social interaction after the intense conference proceedings brings participants a sense of relief and allows them to interact one-to-one. Victims and offenders and their respective supporters often make gestures of reconciliation during this period, talking, sharing refreshments, shaking hands and sometimes even embracing.

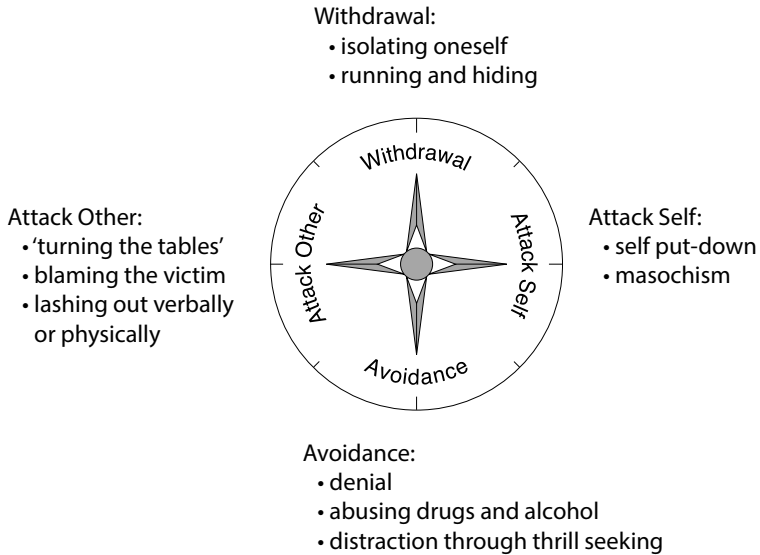
Nathanson's Compass of Shame

Donald Nathanson's “compass of shame” clarifies how people react to and express their shame (see Figure 2.) They usually react with one or more of four general patterns or “scripts,” which Nathanson depicts as directions on a compass: *attack other*, *attack self*, *withdrawal* and *avoidance*.

When parents or their offending children blame and criticize the school or the police officer when confronted with an offense, they illustrate the *attack other* response. These parents or offenders try to avoid shame by putting the responsibility on others. This is the most common response to shame exhibited in today's culture. Another contemporary response is *avoidance*, through alcohol, drug abuse or thrill-seeking behavior, like joy-riding in a stolen car.

THE COMPASS OF SHAME

Figure 2



ADAPTED FROM NATHANSON, 1992

Several decades ago, the commonplace responses to shame were *attack self* and *withdrawal*. In *attack self*, the shamed individuals are self-punishing and unreasonably hard on themselves. In *withdrawal*, the shamed individuals hide because they are so overwhelmed by the shame.

These are normal responses to shame. However, they are harmful and need to be addressed. Conferences help people move beyond the compass of shame through acknowledgment and expression of shame and through subsequent reintegration. Because the conference affirms the intrinsic worth of the wrongdoer and condemns only the objectionable behavior, parents and offenders feel less threatened and more readily acknowledge responsibility.

Victims also experience shame. Victims may blame themselves for the offense, withdraw and hide their feelings, and sometimes distract themselves. Victims may lash out at others close to them who are not responsible for the offense. In providing an outlet for expressing feelings and moving beyond shame to resolution and reintegration, the conference is as important to victims as to offenders.