



Maryville Daily Times FROM THE HEART Column

The Universal Language of Emotion

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Early in my career as a psychologist, a very concerned young Chinese man called me about his distraught wife, Daiyu. (Not her actual name.) He was attending a local university on a student visa. After arriving in the United States, it took eighteen months before a visa was issued for his wife and then four-year-old son. Eventually after such a long unanticipated wait, Daiyu and her son found themselves transplanted in a foreign culture, unfamiliar with the language and confined to a small campus apartment. Chinese was not in my language repertoire and a translator who spoke their particular dialect was not to be found anywhere in the city where I practiced.

With no other options, Daiyu's husband offered to act as translator. With some reservation, I obtained his wife's consent and made an appointment for them. When I went to the waiting room to bring the couple into my office, Daiyu was seated on the sofa huddled close to her husband. She was sobbing with tears streaming down her face. With her small stature and delicate features, she looked completely lost and overwhelmed.

I knew I would need to cross the language barrier relying not only on her husband but on important nonverbal cues. As we entered my office, I guided her to a chair directly across from me and pulled my desk chair close to her. As her husband translated, I turned my focus to Daiyu as if she were the only other person in the room. After a few minutes, her husband and I established a synchronous rhythm as he brought her words to me and I matched them with her facial expressions and other body language. As the session progressed, Daiyu began to appear much less apprehensive and addressed me directly as though I spoke the language fluently.

The waves of depression began in her homeland not long after her husband left and continued during the frustrating red tape and delays prolonging the separation from the man she loved. In our sessions, Daiyu told me she missed her husband terribly during the long absence and when they were reunited on campus, the language divide left her feeling lonely and isolated. With her husband spending long hours studying at the university, Daiyu was now left alone with her young son. Her inability to speak English made it very difficult to make friends or engage in social activities. This was certainly not the reunion she had envisioned.

When I asked Daiyu if she sought help in China for her feelings of intense sadness, she told me that depression was considered shameful and counseling was not available or supported there. Discussion with family about such matters was not an option and communication with her husband was limited. She kept her feelings to herself because she had no one to talk to about the growing despondency and

loneliness. Now, Daiyu spoke with a great deal of emotion throughout the entire session as though there would never be another opportunity. Interestingly, a counselor who spoke not a word of Chinese was the first person with whom she truly communicated about her secret sadness.

With each subsequent session, we became increasingly adept at reading each other with the occasional aid of drawings on pieces of paper. (Luckily we both were fairly animated and used plenty of hand gestures.) I can't remember when but at some point, Daiyu began coming without her husband and we continued on speaking in Chinese and English—two women communicating without a common culture or spoken language, but with a universal language of pain and hope we both understood.

In the course of my nearly thirty years as a therapist, I have counseled persons from Spain, China, Mexico, Brazil, Sudan, Iran, Iraq, Puerto Rico, Bulgaria, Germany, Egypt, and other countries. While their command of the English language fell all along the fluency continuum; my command of their language was non-existent. Sometimes a translator was present but often was not. Some came into therapy with only a language dictionary and we stumbled through a few sessions until we had some wind beneath our wings. I've seen two-year-old tantrums in five different languages—it looks the same regardless of the culture and mothers look just as exasperated no matter what the country of origin. I've also witnessed a few familiar adolescent “huffs” and “eye rolls” in more than one diverse cultural environment. Loss of a loved one, fear, betrayal, marriage, joyous milestones, broken relationships, and other life challenges and successes may have different cultural influences but still elicit the same basic range of human emotion. A different language is a different vision of life but what lies deep within is common to us all.