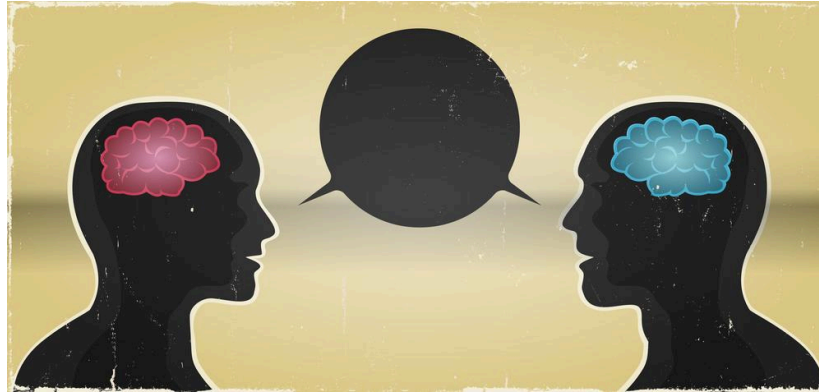


To share or Not to Share, That is The Question...Or Is It?

Navigating sharing your thoughts and feelings in your mixed-faith relationship

By Suzette Halterman



I am both a certified couples coach specializing in mixed-faith couples, and I am also in a mixed-faith marriage myself. The dilemmas around how to navigate connection in a mixed-faith marriage and in mixed-faith families are personal to me, and also so important to the couples that I work with!

One common theme that has repeatedly come up in my own mixed-faith marriage, as well as most of the couples that I work with, is about **sharing** authentic thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to religion/faith in a mixed-faith situation. Often people wonder whether they can really share their true joys or their pains related to their faith experience. They wonder if they can talk about things that are really on their mind, and they wonder what is appropriate or inappropriate to share with their kids in this mixed-faith experience.

The underlying questions are usually: Will I feel a lack of authenticity and connection if I don't share my inner world? Will we drift apart without the authenticity of sharing our deepest experiences? Will there be too much conflict and division if I do share? What will happen to my kids and family if I do or don't share? It can feel like a lose-lose situation where neither option of sharing or not sharing feels satisfying. So it is no wonder that couples and mixed-faith families often feel stuck around how to handle this! However, I have found that focusing on sharing or not sharing misses the more important questions. It misses the focus on self-awareness that can lead to more mature communication and healthy relationship patterns.

In my own personal and professional journey to sort out how to best handle the dilemmas around sharing, I have found a framework that is very helpful in navigating these waters of sharing. It is a framework that increases self-awareness, which is a very critical piece of establishing thriving relationships. Self-awareness can prevent reactive behavior, and it can open the door to finding more healthy, functional, and mature ways of relating and sharing. The

more maturity you have in your relating and sharing, the more flexible and adaptable your relationship will be, which is great news for mixed-faith relationships!

Sharing is really a manifestation of something deeper

The first thing to understand is that the impulse to share is really more of an outward manifestation of something else that is happening internally. Sharing is an external symptom or sign of an internal process. However, when we share, immediately the focus quickly becomes on that external process and it becomes less about gaining self awareness of our own internal process. This is a huge handicap for us, because without deeper understanding and self-awareness of our internal process, we can actually become very limited in how we handle things and we can be very impulsive and reactive. Without self-awareness of our internal process, we will miss out on making important choices that best serve our own personal growth and our relationship growth.

The ultimate question to ask in order to get to the heart of the internal process:

The best question to help point straight to the root of our internal experience is *“What is the function of this sharing?”* Or in other words, *“what am I hoping that sharing this will get me?”*

All behavior serves some sort of function/purpose for us or else we wouldn't do it. Psychologists have found that we can categorize all human behaviors into serving us in these 4 ways:

- 1) **E**scape or avoidance
- 2) **A**ttention
- 3) **T**angible access to something
- 4) **S**ensory experience

These 4 functions of behavior create the acronym **E.A.T.S**, which I will refer to throughout this article. Let's take a deeper look into each one.

Escape and Avoid (E)

Human brains are wired to seek pleasure and avoid pain, so we naturally do a lot of escaping and avoiding things that bring us emotional or physical discomfort. Some of the things we might be trying to escape or avoid through sharing our experiences are: loneliness, powerlessness, fear, uncertainty, anxiety, discomfort, and worry. We might share something because we feel that if our partner or kids join us in agreement, then we won't feel these things as poignantly and we would escape those uncomfortable feelings. We also might share because we are trying to escape doing things we don't want to do. For example if you don't want to pay tithing or you

don't want to teach your kids certain principles, you might share in an effort to escape and avoid doing things that you don't want to have to do.

Attention (A)

Sometimes we share because we are trying to get attention, but attention is more than just someone noticing us or talking to us. Attention can also be about feeling connected, accepted, validated, loved, appreciated, safe, and secure. Those are all things we naturally long for as human beings! As much as we are wired to escape and avoid, we are also wired to seek connection. Dr. John Gottman might call attempts for attention a "bid for connection" because that is really what most attention seeking behaviors are. We are trying to satisfy the very real parts of us that need and long for connection and all of the many things that are associated with connection.

Tangibles access (T)

We might share because we want to get something tangible. Maybe after a change of faith we want the tangibles of being able to drink coffee or alcohol, remove garments, stay home from church, spend tithing money on something else, or spend Sundays doing a different activity. Or oppositely, maybe within our faith we share because we want the tangibles of sitting with the whole family at church, attending church functions, interacting with members, participating in a calling we enjoy, quality family time, or time spent in scripture study or family spiritual teaching time. There are so many tangibles involved in the spectrum of belief, non-belief, and everything in between. Many of our behaviors are actually functioning in service of trying to get access to those tangibles. There is nothing wrong with wanting access to tangible things, but if we can't identify that, we might inadvertently engage in very passive and indirect communication patterns that actually decrease our chances of getting the tangibles we seek.

Sensory (S)

Sometimes we share because of how it makes us feel good in our bodies. Again, humans like to seek pleasure and avoid pain. We might share as a way to find catharsis, or ease of the angst or stress we are experiencing. We might share as a means to try and feel peace, rest, or stillness. This is about getting some sensory pleasure and some relief. We are embodied beings and we feel many things at a visceral and physical level. Our internal feelings have a very real impact on our bodies and our ability to sleep, eat, and to experience pleasure or relaxation. Our minds and bodies are connected, and so many behaviors are about finding sensory pleasure and experiencing positive feelings within our bodies.

All behaviors that we engage in can be either functional or dysfunctional, helpful or unhelpful in achieving the underlying purpose at their root. For example, a child who wants attention can get that in a lot of different ways. Some of those ways could be dysfunctional and not serve them in the long run, or they could engage in responsible ways of seeking connection that will serve them well in their lives to build healthy relationships. The same can be said about our sharing behaviors. They can be dysfunctional and not actually help us to build a healthy and mature

relationship, or they can be very functional and helpful to us to build healthy and thriving relationships in the long run.

So How Do I Use This Information?

The key to developing more healthy, mature, and helpful sharing behaviors that will serve us in creating better relationships, lies in going through the **E.A.T.S** framework. First, Identify the underlying purposes that your desire to share, or not share, is serving. By doing this, you can gain self-awareness, which then opens up a whole menu of choices around what other behaviors are also available to you in order to achieve the same goal.

Let me give you a recent personal example (*Note that I am the non-believer in my relationship so these examples stem from that perspective, but you could easily find your own examples regardless of where you fall on the belief spectrum.)

Round 1: Identify all the different functions beneath your urge to share

I recently read an article about the amount of land the church owns. It bothered me and I wanted to share it with my husband. If I were to go through the E.A.T.S process to gain self-awareness around my sharing, it would look like this:

E-Escaping /avoiding: I often experience the loneliness of my belief system, I long for people in my closest circles to join me in being able to talk about these things. Sharing helps me to escape loneliness in that way.

A- Attention: Sharing is a bid for connection for me. I love the intellectual intimacy of talking back and forth about ideas, it makes me feel very connected to have intellectual conversations about things that matter to me and to talk deeply about things.

T-Tangible: Deep down I really don't want to give any more of our money to the church, I want to use that money for other charitable causes or other things. Sharing the article is an indirect way to try to convince him that we don't need to give more and could put they money where I would like instead.

S-Sensory: Reading the article made me angry, I want physical relief from the angst, I long for a physical catharsis, and sharing could feel like relief for me just to talk about these things.

When I have more self awareness about the functions beneath my urge to share, then I can go through the **E.A.T.S** framework again and think about all of the different options available to me that would serve the same purpose. In doing this I can see all the choices in front of me and choose what would be the most functional and beneficial to creating a healthy, mature relationship.

Round 2: What else could I choose to do that might serve the same purpose?

E: I can escape loneliness in a lot of ways. We have great physical intimacy, we share a lot of other interests that we can talk about. We haven't been on a date in a while because life has been so busy. I could initiate a date night because the reality is that I am not alone and these other ways of connecting remind me of that and make me feel very connected. I could also initiate physical intimacy. I also have plenty of groups and friends I could have these deeper religious discussions with. The reality is that I have many ways of feeling connection to avoid feeling lonely, I would probably rather just initiate more closeness with my husband through spending some quality time with him on a date.

A: If I want some intellectual conversation, I can own that and share the article with the caveat that I am looking to honestly hear his opinion and have some debate with no goal of needing either of us to change our position. I could directly ask for the kind of conversation I am wanting. I could also bring up any other article in the news not related to the church and have an intellectual discussion about that because there are lots of things we like to talk back and forth about and we have fun in those discussions and I enjoy them.

T: If I want to not give money to the church, I could communicate that desire directly instead of through sharing as a passive way to try to get what I want. We could work out a compromise of how to spend charitable money (we have actually done that and have a good compromise about this, so I feel like I can let this topic go.) I would rather have a healthy compromise and show my kids how we can do a healthy compromise around our differences rather than totally prioritize my own tangible desires.

S: I have a lot of ways to reach catharsis, I love to go for runs or do an intense workout to relieve anger. My husband does not always have to be my source of catharsis, I am very capable of finding lots of ways to manage my internal experience independent of him. I would rather have catharsis with him about parenting struggles and other daily stressors than use him for catharsis about this faith-related topics because it is not a fair expectation that he can be my source of catharsis for it all, that would get overwhelming I would imagine. And I have plenty of other things I need catharsis about!

The Result

In the end of the process I had much more self-awareness and had regained an internal locus of control about what I really want and all the many options I have to achieve those same purposes. I could see that my well-being was not tied into my husband reading the article, listening to my thoughts about it, or agreeing with me. I could see how my initial urge to share was more about trying to use him to manage my own self, which is one of the most common (and damaging) things we tend to do in relationships! The end result of my self-awareness in this situation was a diminished urge to share. Instead, I felt very satisfied by focusing on all the things under my own control. Instead, I initiated a date night and some quality time with him. I brought up other intellectual conversations and felt attention and connection as a result. I worked out and lost the angst I was feeling and gained a sense of peace which made me a more effective spouse and parent. Sometimes this exercise might lead me to share things, but if I do decide to share, the process usually guides me into patterns of much more effective and

direct communication patterns with a clear, stated purpose instead of passive, indirect communication.

I could give so many more examples, because personally I come up against this weekly. I go through the same process when I want to share something with my kids. Most often with my kids, the self-awareness I gain is that I am trying to gain some control by trying to guide them, and I am trying to escape the powerlessness of not being able to fully control their future. But I often find that in the process of this E.A.T.S. exercise I can come up with many other ways that I can guide them, and other ways to manage the feeling of powerlessness much more effectively than making my children the target of my own anxieties! I have a lot to say about sharing with kids as far as what things are helpful and not helpful to share, and thoughts about mixed-faith parenting in general, which you can find on my blog here:

<https://www.suzettehaltermancoaching.com/blog>

Summary

Using the **E.A.T.S** framework can help to gain self-awareness about your urge to share. The more self-awareness you have about your internal experience and the purpose that sharing is serving for you, the more you can explore alternative options that might actually be much more effective and less dependent on your spouse or kids agreeing with what you share. It puts the locus of control within yourself, which is critical to well-being and healthy relationships.

Self-awareness is a skill and requires practice, so this framework may not feel easy at first. But the more you can use it, the quicker and easier it can get in time to identify your inner processes and then choose from your options which behaviors would lead to the most healthy kind of relationship. Healthy relationships look like each partner being responsible for managing their own internal experience, and each person using clear, direct communication skills to make requests for what they would like to be different so that they can negotiate workable solutions.

So when it comes to whether to share or not to share....the more important question is *“what is the function of the sharing,”* and *“are there more relationally healthy and productive ways to achieve that same function that would better serve me and my relationship?”*