From 'But' to 'And'

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I'd been in my apartment all day, but now, at this moment, the sounds of it seemed amplified. The air conditioner kicked on with a low, mechanical groan. I could hear the high-pitched electrical whine of the refrigerator, a sound I usually tuned out. I leaned in toward my laptop, checking the audio settings for the third time, adjusting the camera angle, trying to find a version of myself that looked less... tired. I took a big, almost desperate sigh, a last-ditch attempt to shake the anxiety from my body. It didn't work, but I clicked connect anyway.

My therapist's face appeared, her smile kind but pixelated on my old laptop.

"Hi, Brian. How are you feeling today?"

I opened my mouth. My lips parted, but no sound came out. The word I was looking for, any word, felt lodged in my throat.

My mind went terrifyingly blank.

This was still early in our sessions, and I had promised myself I would be better at this. I had spent the week cataloging feelings, trying to be "more in touch." But now, faced with the simple question, all I could find was static. Silence. It felt heavy, a physical weight in the room. My therapist waited; her patience felt like an invitation, but my mind was white noise. I knew the feeling was in there, a heavy, tangled knot behind my ribs, but I couldn't find a single word to pull on that thread. My hands, hidden just off-screen, twisted in my lap. On the screen, from my shoulders up, I was a statue. Internally, my thoughts were racing, crowded, and anxious: *Why can't you just answer? It's a simple question. She's waiting. You're failing at this. Just say 'fine.' But you're not fine. But you can't explain it. So just say 'fine.'*

This was the core of it, the very reason I was here. This frustrating, painful gap between what I thought and felt, and what I was able to express with words.

The silence wasn't new. In fact, it was what had finally pushed me to seek help in the first place. For months, I had been walking around with this growing sense of emotional confusion, this feeling of being fundamentally misunderstood. I'm a vulnerable person, and usually I feel like I'm good with words. I can write an essay, analyze a book, and debate a point. But I couldn't, for the life of me, answer "how are you?" with anything that felt true.

The communication struggle was the critical part. I thought I had all of these beautifully complex ideas and feelings in my head, but when I tried to speak, what came out felt simple, flat, and wrong. This failure made me feel dumb, like I was a fraud. It was like having high-resolution ideas, but a low-resolution way of communicating them. This inability to express these ideas made me doubt the original thoughts themselves. If I couldn't explain them, maybe they weren't so complex after all? Maybe I wasn't smart? This loop of second-guessing had hollowed out my self-confidence. I was searching for a language that could accurately transmit my internal world, so people could get to know the real me. And not just to my therapist, or to others, but more importantly, to myself.

A few months in, I tried to show my therapist the progress I thought I was making. "I think I'm feeling anxious," I said in one session, proud that I had finally pinned a name to the chaos. But the word hung in the air; it didn't feel right. My therapist nodded, waiting. I had a label, but the feeling itself was still locked away. It felt like I was reading from a textbook, intellectualizing it. I played it back in my head, and I physically cringed. I was describing the feeling, but I wasn't actually feeling the feeling. My shoulders tensed up, bracing for a correction, but my therapist nodded gently, not judging, just waiting. Looking back, I can see that I was

making progress, but at that moment it still felt like I was stuck at the start line... and the real breakthrough wouldn't come until months later.

So I kept at it. Session after session became this frustrating loop: identify, intellectualize, rinse, repeat. I was learning the vocabulary, but I still couldn't speak the language. The gap between knowing the words and feeling them seemed to get wider until one afternoon, I finally found the words to describe the frustration itself.

"It's like... I'm doing the work. I can see the feelings now. I can literally watch myself get dysregulated, and I can even tell you why it's happening. I have all the words... but what's the point? I still get steamrolled. The feelings just take over anyway, and I can't do a single thing about it."

My therapist let that sit in the air for a moment. Then, she said, "I hear that, and that sounds hard... What happens if you try that sentence again, but change 'but' to 'and'?"

I think I stared at her. It seemed too small, too simple, like a grammar fix. "What do you mean?"

"Just try it," she said.

I took a breath. "I'm getting better at identifying my feelings... and I still feel them taking over."

I stopped. Paused for a minute. And then my brain... clicked. It was small, but the shift was seismic. "But" was a wall. It canceled out everything that came before it. "And" allowed both things to be true at the same time. I was getting better at identifying things. And I was still getting overwhelmed. Both were real. Neither one canceled the other out.

In the moment, there wasn't an overt, dramatic breakdown. There was a softening. A quiet release. I felt my shoulders, which I hadn't realized were up by my ears, finally drop. I could be a work-in-progress and a mess, all at once.

A few nights later, I was journaling, a practice I'd started and stopped a dozen times. I wrote, 'I'm worried about this project, but I'm proud of the work I did today.' I stopped, stared at the 'but," and slowly crossed it out. 'And,' I wrote above it. 'I'm worried and I'm proud.' A tear came to my eye as I reread the sentence, and for the first time, it felt 100% true. I felt patient with myself. The realization in my mind that I could hold two opposing feelings at once was only solidified when I saw the words on the page. Instead of looking at this chaotic knot of emotions as one single entity, the different parts of the knot became more clear.

The old "but" still shows up. I said it three times today. The difference now is that I notice it. And noticing is a form of progress, maybe even the most meaningful kind. The transformation for me isn't in achieving perfection, it's in developing awareness.

Changing one word didn't solve everything, but it opened a door. It gave me a tool. I can choose to make space for all of it, for the trying and the messing up, all at once. Language, I learned, does not just communicate emotional experience; it's what actively shapes it. When I changed how I spoke to myself, I also, finally, changed the way I felt about myself. And, to me, that has been the most important thing. It's a practice that allows me to be a work-in-progress and a whole person, all at once.