

GOOD COMMUNICATION SKILLS

WHAT HELPS, AND WHAT HURTS COMMUNICATION

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WHAT IS GOOD COMMUNICATION? GIVING AND RECEIVING

Good communication is when you are able to let your thoughts or feelings be known to another person in a way that they can understand, without attacking (trying to hurt) them. This requires an attitude of cooperation, honesty and respect.

In order to really be communicating, your message must be received as well as sent. If you say something that the other person doesn't hear or understand, you have expressed yourself, but you have not really communicated anything. If you want the other person to change or act differently somehow, it is especially important to carefully consider how to get your message across in a way they can hear it.

Communication can happen through written and spoken words, gestures, pictures, actions, body posture, facial expressions and the tone of voice. Often the words themselves carry the weakest impact, with the non-verbal signals being much more important.

Example: Someone says "I really like you" in a bored voice with a perfectly straight, stiff face. What have they really communicated?

It's very important to honestly, and carefully, communicate feelings. Uncommunicated feelings create distances between people. Even if it is uncomfortable, sharing your real experience in a caring way is the greatest gift you can give to keep a relationship healthy.

As human beings, we feel best when there is openness and understanding between us. Having lots of unsettled problems hanging in our relationships is not a comfortable

feeling- they tend to weigh us down and create a blocked, trapped feeling. It takes a lot of courage to face someone and honestly communicate our uncomfortable feelings, but the feeling of release and freedom afterward is a great reward.

Most of us were constantly criticized when growing up, by parents, teachers, relatives, friends. It is usually easier for us to verbalize our dissatisfaction than what we like. Many people are very sensitive about being criticized. It is important to communicate your critical feedback carefully, to make it easier for the other person to hear it. People learn best from someone that they trust and feel safe with. If they can hear it, there is a greater chance that they will change their behavior.

When both people communicate clearly what they think and feel, and are listened to respectfully, it is possible create solutions to problems together so that everyone wins. Many problems are imagined or blown out of proportion, and vanish when the people involved communicate carefully.

WHAT HELPS COMMUNICATION HAPPEN?

WHEN YOU WANT TO COMMUNICATE TO SOMEONE ELSE, Helpful steps are:

1. CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF:

Is this a good time for you to say what you have to say? Do you have enough time or are you in a rush? Is your thinking clear? Missing sleep, or taking drugs (even coffee) can make it harder to communicate, because the drug's influence will flavor what you say and do.

How are you feeling right now? If you are very upset, it will be harder to communicate in a way that can be received by the other person. The more calm, strong and clear you are, the easier it will be to have a good communication. If you feel inside that you want to hurt the other person, get back at

them, teach them a lesson or prove you are right, you are coming from a competitive rather than a cooperative attitude. Strong fear will also make it hard to think. The other person will feel this, and understanding each other will be harder.

This also applies when you have strong positive feelings that you want to communicate. Sometimes it can be just as hard to express affection as it is to express criticism.

What are some ways you can use to get clear and calm? Journal writing, counseling, a long walk, talking it over with someone else... What do you use to get back in touch with who you really are?

When it seems hard to get calm and clear enough;

It often helps to go talk it over with a friend who is uninvolved until you are feeling calmer. If you want to avoid gossiping, you don't even need to mention the names of the other people involved with your problem. Just talking about your feelings often takes a lot of the tension away. This step helps avoid dumping all the force of your old hurts caused by parents, etc. onto the usually relatively innocent person you are trying to talk with now.

Practice saying what you want to say, either alone or to a friend, or in writing.

Sometimes you might need to have an ally with you in order to feel clear enough to talk over something that you have a lot of intense feelings about. (For example, having your parent come with you to talk to a teacher about a problem).

Another option is to write a letter to the person, instead of talk with them. This sometimes helps you to carefully choose your words without pressure. Or some people find that talking over the phone feels easier.

2. ASKING FIRST- CHECK IN WITH THE OTHER PERSON

Does the person want to communicate with you right then? Are they in a hurry or tired, and do they have time? How much of a need do you have to talk right then, or is it something you can put off until a better time? Respect their right to say no, but be firm about setting up a later time. What you have to say is important.

If you have something uncomfortable to say, it is even more important to ask beforehand. A lot of bad communication happens when people just "pop" out with a critical remark and the other person is unprepared, and so responds defensively. This is a bad habit that many of us have grown up with. We are often more polite with and thoughtful of our acquaintances than the people in our families we really love most.

Examples of good ways to ask :

"I want to talk to you about something important. (or serious, or uncomfortable, or a problem) Is this a good time to talk?" "Can we set up a time to have a private talk?" "Something is bugging me and I want to clear it up with you. Do you have a few minutes?" "I would like to share some of my feelings with you." "I have something difficult to say to you. Can you give me some time?"

3. VALIDATE and APPRECIATE BEFORE GIVING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK.

-Satisfying relationships are built on a positive flow of love and appreciation between the people involved. The more you receive, the more you will want to give. The more continuous and deep is this exchange, the more satisfaction will be felt.

-This positive feedback loop is a skill that can be practiced, and can become a habit. Many people become locked into habits of criticism and invalidation with their

partners or children, creating a loop where they get more and more shut off and less willing to give. Sometimes this ends in a feeling of the relationship "not being worth it" because the rewards become less than the effort.

Build a positive relationship- practice appreciating the other person. Tell them you like it whenever they do something you appreciate. Look for things to appreciate, even if it seems difficult. Examples: "I really love you" "I'm so glad you are my special (friend, partner, mate...)" "I love being close to you" "I am proud of you, I respect you" "I appreciate the work you do" "Thanks for taking care of that project- you did it well."

-When preparing to give negative feedback, first give appreciations. This builds safety, reminding both of you of the good energy possible between you.

-If you can't think of any appreciations, at least explain to the person that your intention is to communicate honestly and clearly, in a way that neither of you gets hurt. Why are you bothering to talk with them? Let them know your good intentions. "I don't want this to stand in the way of our friendship." "I want to be honest with you."

4. CLEARING - Guidelines for giving negative feedback in a considerate, effective way:

It will be helpful if you both agree to use these guidelines first: to take turns listening and paraphrasing, to agree not to interrupt each other, to use "I" messages and avoid the things that block communication.

CLEARING IS NOT THE SAME AS COUNSELING- A time set up for clearing and good communication is a time to be as calm and centered and rational as possible. It is a time to communicate information, ask for changes and make agreements.

People will hear what you have to say much better if there is not a strong emotional

charge mixed with it. If you have strong feelings, try to work them out beforehand in a counseling session, where you don't have to concern yourself with being polite or rational. Depending on who you are clearing with, (your boss, your mate, your child) they may be more or less interested in the details of your emotional reactions. Don't expect them to be your counselor.

Decide if you want to be their counselor or not, if they become irrational during the clearing process. If you do, listen to them calmly without taking it personally while they express their emotions. If you don't, stop the process until they can calm down. Ask for help if necessary.

A. TELL THEM HOW YOU ARE FEELING FIRST, before you try to give information. Then they will have an idea where you are coming from and be less likely to misinterpret. Examples: "I feel really nervous saying this." "I am kind of tired right now and distracted." "I am a bit angry."

USE "I" MESSAGES: statements about your own experience; feelings, thoughts, desires. While people can argue about an accusation or insult, ("You are always sloppy") they can't argue with a statement about your own experience. (I don't like it when you don't clean up")

Examples of feeling "I" messages: "I'm really annoyed and I don't want to stay upset with you." "I am afraid." "I am really happy and excited."

"I Messages" can also contain information about why you are feeling that way.

Examples: "I feel happy and warm when you visit me." "I am worried that you might be in trouble." "I am scared that you might hit me, and I feel unsafe." "I felt rejected when you didn't call."

You can also explain what you are thinking with "I" messages: "I have a different opinion.

The way I see it..." "I don't want to join in that activity."

WATCH FOR HIDDEN "YOU" MESSAGES:

Beware of statements that begin "I feel that you..." because they are always what you think about them, not what you feel. These give no information about your own experience or feelings. Like "I feel that you are untrustworthy because you didn't call." (A true "I" message would be: "I don't trust you, because you didn't call.") Or "I feel that you are wrong about that." (better: "I disagree.") "I know you are trying to hurt me." (better: "I feel attacked and unsafe with you.") Sometimes changing these into direct questions is useful: "Why didn't you call me?"

B. WHAT YOU WANT AND WHY:

Say exactly what you want the other person to do from now on (what you want), as opposed to explaining what they were doing "wrong" (What you don't want). Going into all the ways the other person was "bad" puts people on the defensive and closes them down. Stating the problem as factually as possible is helpful.

Not so good: "You never get to meetings on time! You are so unreliable and self centered!" Better: "You have been late every day this week. I would like you to get here on time from now on. I am frustrated when you are late."

Begin by asking for 100% of what you want. You can compromise later, after you hear what they want, to work out something mutually agreeable.

EXPLAIN WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO YOU: It will help the other person to understand what you want and need if you tell them why. Ex: "It is important to me because the other people at the meeting can't really get started until you arrive, and a lot of time gets wasted." This is especially important when

talking to young people. "Because I said so" is not a good reason, it is a command.

C. MAKE SURE THEY HEARD WHAT YOU SAID

PARAPHRASING- After one person has expressed their thoughts, feeling and wants, have the listener paraphrase what was just said in their own words. Do this every few minutes, or it will be hard for the listener to remember all that was said! Ex: "What did you hear me say?" "I heard that you are frustrated because you don't like waiting for me to arrive to get started working, and you want me to be prompt from now on." Keep doing this until the first speaker feels satisfied that the listener heard what was being said.

D. TAKE TURNS- They deserve a chance to say what they have to say to you.

After the first person speaks, and the listener says what they heard, then let the listener have a turn. Keep taking turns until you feel that everything has been said. Try to give each other approximately equal time. It is not fair if one person keeps talking so long that the other doesn't have a turn. You can even time it- try five minutes each, back and forth til you feel done.

THINGS THAT HURT AND BLOCK GOOD COMMUNICATION

1. DISRESPECT: Things that imply the person is helpless, unimportant and incompetent.

INTERRUPTIONS-breaking in while the other person is talking, before they are done. It implies that what they have to say is not important. Sometimes this is unavoidable, like when you have a time deadline, or when the other person is attacking you. You can say "Excuse me for interrupting, but..." "This isn't working for me." If the other person interrupts you, or seems to spend much more time talking that is fair, express your

feelings using "I" messages, and request change.

RESCUING - Stepping in to take care of someone, doing it for them, protecting them in a way that keeps them from learning from their own direct experiences. "Oh, here, let me do that." "I'll tell him for you." This is not the same as defending someone from an attack, when they really need help. It is more like not letting them have a chance to be as strong as they really are.

ADVICE- Telling someone what you think they should do to solve a problem. "Maybe you could try..." Even if it seems that you know exactly what they should do, really they are the only person who can know the best thing in their own unique situation. Advice implies lack of trust and respect in the person's own power. Sometimes it is appropriate when they ask for it directly.

CORRECTING- Pointing out bluntly what they did wrong. "You said 'ain't' again. That's bad grammar." "You shouldn't have told him the answer."

ASSUMING/ MIND READING- Believing that you know exactly what the other person is experiencing. "I know just how you feel, it is caused by..." "Oh that has happened to me a million times, don't you feel mad?"

2. **HUMILIATION**: Ways of actively putting other people down, or insulting them.

KIDDING- this is often a form of disguised criticism or insult, which would not be said at all if it had to be said in a straightforward way. Kidding makes people defensive and cautious. If challenged, the kidder can say "Oh, I didn't mean it" but there is always some truth under a jibe. Ex: "Hey, is there a real face under all that make-up?"

SARCASM & RIDICULE- like kidding but usually intended to be hurtful. Sarcasm is saying one thing when you mean the opposite. Ex: "Oh my, look at the beauty

queen today! I just LOVE your make up." Ridicule is mocking and sneering with the intent to belittle. "You don't even know THAT?" "Everybody else has a better one than you."

SHAME- Making someone feel somehow bad, wrong and that they should be different. Shame is a paralyzing feeling that keeps us from learning from our experiences and mistakes. Ex: "How could you wear so much make up? Shame on you! That's disgusting!"

NAME-CALLING AND LABELING- Name calling is a personal insult: "You look like a slut!" "You are stupid" "Dummy!". Labeling is putting down the person as a member of a whole group: "All you freshmen are so uncool and tacky." "Another dumb blond." Both of these make it hard for the other person to respond in any way except being defensive. There is no invitation to improve the situation or be helpful. They are another form of hurtful attacks.

DISCOUNTING- When someone is not taken seriously, either for their feelings or thinking. Discrediting or invalidating a person's right to state what is real for them. Ex: "Oh it's not that bad." "Why are you upset about that little thing?" "Don't be silly." "No, that's wrong. You don't know what you are talking about." "You're too young to know what I mean." Or even worse: "You don't really feel that way."

3. **MANIPULATIONS**: Unhealthy ways of trying to make the other person to do what you want, or see it your way. Using fear and guilt to get them to change.

ORDERING- telling them what to do directly without considering their wants or needs ("You must finish that right now!" "Shut up and listen!")

COERCION- Sneaky ways to get someone to do something, like bribing ("I'll like you better if you do this for me") or pressuring ("Everybody will know that you are the only

one who didn't go along with this" "Come on, just try it once, just a little?")

THREATENING & WARNING- Directly threatening bad results ("If you don't do this, I'll never speak to you again.") or intimidating ("You are really going to get in trouble if you do that").

PREACHING & SHOULD'S- Assuming you know what is best for them. "You should always be honest with your mother."
"Everyone knows that the right thing is to always be clean and tidy."

TEACHING- Giving a lecture, telling them you know more than they do, giving information when it is not wanted. You may be correct in what you are saying, but if you don't say it in a way the other person can hear it, it is useless. "Sugar inhibits your immune system, you know- it's really bad for you."

4. HURTFUL ATTACKS: Ways of trying to hurt the other person, making them your enemy, saying they are the problem, fighting

ACCUSATIONS - Telling others what we suspect to be true, in a disapproving way. "You left those dirty dishes!" "You cheated on that test!" They are almost certain to deny or argue in response. These can easily be turned into questions to get accurate information: "Did you leave the dirty dishes?"

GENERALIZATIONS- Always and Never are words to avoid. "You always say the wrong thing!" "You never tell me you love me." It may feel like it's true, but it usually isn't, and it gives the other person something to argue with.

BLAME- Making it seem as though it is all the other person's fault, and that they are bad. "This is all your fault! You're the one that got me in trouble!" It implies that their very nature is bad and ignores why they may have acted in that way. It is important to

separate people's negative behavior from who they really are; in other words, the action is bad but the person isn't. Often negative behavior is just a mistake. When it is intentional acting out, that is a call for help and attention from someone who is hurting inside. Often blame is used to project the responsibility onto someone else, when really it was our own.

ESCALATIONS- When you are arguing about something, and it is getting louder and faster and more heated. The end of an escalation is a shouting match, in which no one is thinking or listening. If you feel an escalation happening, tell the other person that this is too intense and loud for you to continue right now, and wait quietly to see if they calm down. Tell them what you hear them saying, in as considerate a way as possible. If they don't calm down, it is better to leave and try to talk again later. It's not necessary or helpful to be some else's punching bag or dumping ground.

GOSSIPING AND BACKSTABBING- Complaint about someone, but not taking it directly to them, but instead complaining to everyone else about them. "Do you know what she said to me yesterday?" This hurts the other person in many ways- mainly because the people who are listening to the gossip form negative thoughts about them without hearing their side of the story. People will often gossip to form coalitions; to get a group of people on "their side". This is very divisive in a group, and it makes a problem between two people become a problem of the whole group.

It is much more workable to take your issue directly to the person you have it with. Or as mentioned earlier, discuss the problem with others first, preferably with people who are not involved, but don't reveal the identity of the other person.

IGNORING and ABANDONING- This may not seem like an attack, but really it is the most

devastating way to hurt someone emotionally. It is a cutting off of relationship, a closing of the door for communication. Many of us learned to do it, since in the past there was usually not a way to clear up the bad feelings, our only choice was to ignore them and avoid the other person. But this leaves a festering wound between you. Attempts to avoid the other person often mean giving them a lot of power over your life, for example choosing to not attend events you think they might be at. Ignoring someone can be used as a last resort, if all attempts at communication have failed, and the other person still insists on attacking you. But it is a short term, less than ideal solution. It usually feels better if we can discover why the other person is attacking us, and try to deal with the real problem and resolve it.

GETTING HELP- Don't Give Up Before you Have asked for Help

MEDIATION- If you have tried to communicate one-to-one and it hasn't worked, or if for some other reason you feel unsafe communicating that way, call in a third person to mediate. This will often defuse the conflict enough to work it out rationally. The mediator can help make sure that the guidelines are followed, that each person has equal time, that each person is hearing the other, and that things do not escalate. Professional mediators also help people work out agreements and solve problems.

RELATIONSHIP COUNSELING SESSIONS- These are different from mediation because the purpose is to explore the feelings of each person about the other, and see what is within each person that is creating their mutual problem. The counselor may work with each person, encouraging emotional expression, while the other person watches. This promotes greater understanding about the roots of the conflict and can be essential if the problem is between mates or family

members. Some relationship counselors also do mediation and problem solving.