

SOME IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION: How To Make An Authentic Connection With Those Around You

Communicating with others can be a very difficult and complex proposition. We all have our own values, beliefs, thoughts, feelings, wants, needs, and experiences. These can dramatically influence what we hear from others and how we interpret and respond to their messages they send us. These are the “filters” through which we view and interpret the world around us. We have all gotten strong and sometimes confusing messages from our family of origin and childhood experiences and from the culture around us about the “proper” way to communicate with others. Start to notice and think about the patterns you were taught to use in childhood and which of the communication styles (passive, passive-aggressive, aggressive, and assertive) that you were “supposed” to use in your life.

Communication always involves a series of choices, which can either facilitate or interfere with your understanding the other person’s perspective and with their understanding of your perspective. In fact, communication is inextricably connected to our relationship with the other person (it is not just the words we say). The following elements can be helpful in “keeping the door open” to those around us. Effective communication is a lot like practicing your tennis game, except that the object of what you’re doing is to keep the ball going back and forth over the net rather than “putting the it away” and “winning the point.”

1) ACTIVE LISTENING:

- **Active listening** is:

- ... a commitment:

- ...to really work to try understand what another person thinks, feels, wants, needs, and how they see their world

- ...to temporarily put aside your own thoughts, prejudices, beliefs, interpretations, judgments, and your anxieties and self-interest so that you can try to see things from that other person’s perspective

- ...a compliment and a gift to those around you because it says to the other person in a very real and tangible way:

- ...”I care about what’s happening to you”*

- ...”Your life and your experiences are important to me”*

- ...”You are an interesting and worthwhile person”*

- It is giving the other person your full and undivided attention and clearly demonstrates that you are truly interested in others for who they are, not just for what you want them to be

- It means working hard to tune into both the verbal and non-verbal messages and then attempting to truly understand what they want to communicate, which means temporarily suspending the preoccupied, distracted, reactive, judgmental, defensive, or blaming “static” in your own mind (which can interfere with truly hearing what the other person is trying to say to you)

- **Active listening** means listening with:

- ...**empathy**

- ...recognizing that you and the other person share the same sorts of human struggles and that “we are all in this life together”

- ...**openness**

- ...trying to understand others from their perspective, not your own

...genuineness

...being and acting “human”

...VS. being “a know it all,” “holier than thou,” judgmental, dismissive, condescending, arrogant, and grandiose

...respect

...making sure that our verbal and non-verbal responses communicate a basic attitude of caring, positive regard, and valuing of the other person’s unique thoughts, feelings, experiences, and their potential and desire to change and grow as a human being

...and understanding that people have the right and the responsibility to make their own choices, take actions they deem to be appropriate for them, and experience any consequences that arise from the behaviors they have chosen for themselves

- Part of what you can do to communicate interest and involvement while you are listening involves what is called “listener noise”
...e.g. verbal sounds like “uhm,” “uh huh,” “yep,” “really,” “could be...,” and “interesting”
- Be aware of and intervene in your tendency to become reactive and defensive with the people in your life; generally, if there is conflict or ongoing tension in the relationship with the other person, you may tend to hear only the “negative” in that person’s statements to you (which is often, in fact, your own negative interpretation, judgment, or self-talk)
...don’t assume that your partner or others are trying to “knock you down a peg” by what they say to you (i.e. try not to take things “personally” and view the other person’s communication as a “threat” to you; this really interferes with moving your communication with them forward in a positive direction)
- Use your breathing (slow and deep) to create an “inner calm” that allows you to be and stay truly open to hearing what someone else is saying to you (in order to avoid reactivity and defensiveness)
- The experience of being listened to and really heard in a relationship is often helpful and healing all by itself

2) REFLECTING BACK AND “MIRRORING” WHAT HAS BEEN SAID TO YOU:

- Reflecting back is a process that accompanies active listening and involves rephrasing or paraphrasing, in your own words, what the other person has just said which includes:
 - ...the content of what is said by the other person
 - ...their feelings behind what they are saying to you
 - ...your understanding of their intention in communicating with you about the issue
- Reflecting back:
 - ...shows that you are really hearing what is being said
 - ...clarifies what is being communicated
 - ...checks out your own interpretations and assumptions
 - ...helps promote further self-disclosure by the other person
- A good paraphrase:
 - ...captures the essence of what the other person has said
 - ...conveys the same meaning (usually with somewhat different words)
 - ...is clear, concise, and to-the-point
 - ...is tentative
 - ...i.e. checks out your interpretation about what they are saying rather than assumes you know exactly what they are trying to communicate to you
 - ...says clearly and openly to the other person **“I am with you at this time”**

- You can follow your paraphrase with statements like:
 - ...*"Am I on target?"*
 - ...*"Am I missing anything that you wanted to say to me?"*
 - ...*"Is there anything more that you want me to hear that I have left out?"*
- E.G. If someone tells you they are worrying about a meeting at work where their boss became critical and shaming about their group's performance, you might respond by saying:
 - ...*"It sounds like you're feeling pretty upset about what your boss said to you yesterday"*
 - ...*"So you're beginning to think that your company might be starting to lay people off again and that you might be one of the people to be affected"*
 - ...*"What I hear you saying is you're feeling concerned about what might happen to your job in the near future"*

3) ALLOWING OTHERS TO KNOW WHO YOU REALLY ARE AS A PERSON: SELF-DISCLOSING AND BEING ASSERTIVE:

- Self-disclosing means taking the risk to be open and honest by sharing the important parts of who you are as a person, including your:

...thoughts	...feelings	...wants
...needs	...goals	...values
...dreams and aspirations	...interests	...preferences
...desires	...expectations	...likes/dislikes
...character defects	... <i>"shadow side"</i>	...shortcomings
...fears and insecurities	...vulnerabilities	...resentments
- This means tuning into what you think, feel, need, and want and who you really are inside and then taking the risk to share this directly, especially with the people who are important to you
- It also means using "I-language" and taking clear and full responsibility and ownership for what you are saying
- Self-disclosing serves as a means to be open and honest with others about how you really see yourself and the world around you

4) INQUIRING ABOUT THE OTHER PERSON:

- This means actively asking open-ended vs. closed-ended questions to get more information and to show interest in that other person
 - ...closed-ended questions are looking for a "yes-no" or a very specific and pre-determined answer and don't really allow the other person to talk about what is actually going on for them
- Open-ended questions demonstrate that you are truly interested in the another person's thoughts, feelings, wants, needs, goals, values, dreams, aspirations, interests, preferences, desires, expectations, likes and dislikes, character defects, "shadow side," shortcomings, fears and insecurities, vulnerabilities, and resentments
 - ...but be sure to avoid using the information you get from them as a "weapon" in future times of conflict or disagreement
- Asking questions helps you gain an understanding of how others view themselves and their world which can then assist you in realizing and accepting that you are separate and different people
- Some examples of open-ended questions:
 - ...*"How was your day yesterday?"*
 - ...*"What did you do today?"*

...“How was your phone call with your sister?”
...“How are you feeling about that?”
...“How did you react to what happened to you?”
...“What more you would like to tell me about that situation?”

- Some examples of closed-ended questions:
...“You really don’t want to talk about this issue anymore, do you?”
...“Were you angry about that?”

5) STAYING TUNED TO YOUR OWN AND OTHERS’ NON-VERBAL SIGNALS:

- Non-verbals are a powerful and critical part of the communication process and can include:
 - ...facial expression
 - ...looking interested/attuned to what the person is saying and doing appropriate head-nodding and “uh huh’s” at times
 - ...vs. looking bored, distracted, or preoccupied (e.g. looking away or focusing on your watch/cell phone/tablet/computer)
 - ...vocal tone, volume, and inflection
 - ...a calm, relaxed tone of voice
 - ...vs. being loud and intimidating or overly soft, quiet, and difficult to hear
 - ...eye contact
 - ...looking directly at the other person most of the time
 - ...vs. avoiding their gaze, looking around or down, or staring and glaring at them
 - ...posture
 - ...seeming comfortable and relaxed and leaning in toward the person
 - ...vs. fidgeting, acting restless and “antsy” (e.g. frequently looking at your watch or cell phone), leaning away, slumping down in a chair, or moving aggressively into the other person’s space
- This means being aware of your non-verbal messages and making them as congruent as possible with the words that you are saying
 - ...an incongruent message might include your smiling and joking around and also talking about how angry you are with a friend
- Research indicates that most people trust non-verbal signals even more than they trust the words that others say to them
- It also means being aware of others’ non-verbal messages and taking the risk to point out conflicting messages that you receive in order to find out what was actually intended to be communicated by that other person

6) OFFERING FEEDBACK TO OTHERS:

- Taking the risk to tell other people what you hear them saying and see them doing and being honest about how you are responding to them
 - ...in a respectful and non-judgmental way
- Using descriptive rather than judgmental terms; using specific examples rather than offering “global” generalizations
 - ...e.g. **NOT:** *“I can’t believe how rude and inconsiderate you are to me!”*
RATHER: *“I’m upset that you made a commitment to be home at six o’clock for dinner but ended up coming home at 7:30 without even calling me to let me know that you were running late.”*

- Remember that the other person does not have to accept your feedback or even do anything with it
- Be sure to use “I-language” and take clear responsibility for what you are communicating ...vs. using “You-language” and derogatory, demeaning, and shaming labels and judgments
...e.g. “rude,” “stupid,” “sick,” “crazy,” “idiot,” “lazy,” “loser”

7) ACCEPTING FEEDBACK FROM OTHERS:

- Being open to and interested in others’ ideas, suggestions, descriptions of, and reactions to your behavior and using others as a helpful “reality test” in looking at who you are and how you are coming across to them
...don’t assume that your partner or others are simply “putting you down” or challenging you to “stick it to you”
...stay aware of your negative assumptions and interpretations about what you are hearing
...you may, in fact, be able to learn something about yourself that can actually be helpful to you
- Use active listening and paraphrasing to understand the feedback and remember that the other person’s feedback is their perspective and not “the gospel”
- Try to listen to the other person, think about their thoughts, feelings, suggestions, and feedback; take what fits for you; and learn from it (if their feedback makes sense to you)
...watch out for becoming reactive, defensive, or argumentative
...if this happens, you are even less likely to truly hear what they are trying to say to you

8) ATTENDING TO IMPORTANT WORDS IN THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS:

- Use “I” to take clear ownership of your thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs
...Saying “you” at the beginning of a statement can easily become blaming and shaming
...***“You’re the real problem in this relationship,” “You’re an idiot”***
...“They,” “it,” and “that” are often used to avoid taking clear responsibility for what you are saying to others
...e.g. ***“You know what ‘they’ say;” “That’s not a very good idea”***
- Clear “yes” and “no” answers are important
...“No” is often hard to say clearly and assertively, but it is absolutely critical to setting limits, maintaining healthy personal boundaries, and experiencing self-respect and self-esteem
...“But” generally allows you to say both “yes” and “no” in the same sentence and may erase or discount what has been said just before and what you really want to communicate
...e.g. ***“I’d really like to do that, but it’s just too hard for me”***
- “Always/never/no one/everyone/anyone” and other similar generalizations are very rarely accurate reflections of reality and tend to contribute to a defensive reaction in others
...e.g. ***“I can never count on you. No one has ever really been there for me”***
- “Should/ought to/have to” tend to be shaming and judgmental
...e.g. ***“How the hell could you do something like that. You should have known better”***
- Use “I don’t want to...”, “I’d prefer not to...”, or “I won’t” rather than “I can’t” to take clear responsibility for the choices you are making
...NOT: ***“I really can’t do that for you this afternoon”***
...RATHER: ***“I would prefer not to do that today. I really don’t have time. How about this weekend instead?”***

- The word “*Why*,” at the beginning of a sentence or question, can be perceived as abrupt, inflammatory, accusatory, and blaming to others and often invites a defensive reaction by the other person and a power struggle between the two of you
 „**NOT:** “*Why the hell did you do something like that?*”
 ...**RATHER:** “*I’m confused about how you decided to say that to me.*”

9) STAYING IN THE PRESENT:

- This means focusing on what’s going on “right now” vs. what has happened in the past
- It also means addressing hurts and resentments as they arise in your relationships so that they don’t get in the way of your current communication efforts with other people

10) BEING AWARE OF THE EMOTIONAL PROCESS GOING ON BETWEEN THE TWO OF YOU AS YOU ARE TRYING TO COMMUNICATE:

- This means staying tuned to the “emotional climate” between you and the other person, in addition to the words and content of your communication
- It means attending to **HOW** the two of you are relating as well as **WHAT** you are talking about
 ...e.g. noticing when you or others are escalating or becoming frustrated, impatient, or uncomfortable and then actually commenting on what you see and sense going on at that time

11) “AGREEING TO DISAGREE” AT TIMES:

- You need to begin to understand and accept that you and others who are close to you come from different backgrounds and have different life experiences
- This means that the two of you may have very different values, perspectives, and “world views”
- It also means that you need to come to the realization that there is nothing “wrong” or “bad” about disagreement and conflict and your different ways of looking at the world
 ...in fact, conflict is a natural and an important part of being truly close to other people

12) MAKING COMMUNICATION A COOPERATIVE AND A PROBLEM-SOLVING EFFORT:

- This means beginning to look at your partner and those whom you choose to have in your life as friends and supporters, rather than as enemies or adversaries
- It also means learning to view the communication process with a spirit of acceptance, caring, respect, and equality vs. one that involves a spirit of control, hostility, and “winning at any cost”
- Listen for and look for the “common ground” between the two of you as a means of moving forward in your communication efforts

13) BEING COMPLETE:

- Work hard to develop and practice **ALL** of the communication skills discussed above
- Learning effective communication strategies and knowing what to do is the easy part; being willing to actually put them into practice and **USE** them in an ongoing way in your relationships with others is the real challenge