

Guide to better communication in a relationship

Good communication requires good listening skills as well as the ability to express ourselves in a way that is easy for others to listen and understand. We can communicate our intentions, express our views, desires and feeling respectfully to minimize tension or conflict. The goal is to express oneself clearly and to listen to the other person with the intention to come to a mutually satisfying interaction. In each interaction with others, we can be mindful, listening, being present, aware, accepting, appreciating, connecting and engaging.



We can improve our relationship, one conversation at the time!

Intention/attitude/emotion

When you want to have a conversation, before you start talking to someone, become self-aware and ask yourself:

- Which emotion am I feeling now about this? Is my mind set and my thinking rigid?
- Am I managing my feelings of fear or anger, so that they are not hindering my ability to listen and to negotiate?
- What is my intention in this moment, in this communication?
- What do I want to achieve with my communication?
- Are my ways easy on the listener?
- Am I treating the other person the way I want them to treat me?
- Which personal core value am I practising in my communication?
- Do I want to be honest, respectful, helpful, caring, empathic, tolerant, patient, open-minded, supportive, encouraging, loving, understanding, compassionate?

Levelling means giving the other person clear and specific information about your feelings, using “I” messages rather than hiding your feelings, accusing or blaming the other person for making you feel in a certain way.

Each of us is responsible for our feelings and beliefs. We own our feelings. We don’t get upset by the event or person as such, we get upset because of how we perceive and what we are saying to ourselves about the event or person.

By levelling, we can understand each other better.

If your feeling is about something the other person did, use an XYZ statement. Avoid general, vague, personal feedback. Keep it specific and factual. “I feel X, when you do Y, in the situation Z”

For instance: “I feel good when you cook me a nice meal after I come home tired.”

“I feel angry when you come home late without telling me beforehand”.

“I am uncomfortable/angry when your mother criticizes the children”.

When sharing feelings, it is good to **share positive feelings** (“I feel good this morning”) as well as negative feelings. It builds a strong relationship when we express our appreciation to our partner:

“I enjoyed the dinner you cooked, thank you that was so good!”,

“I like it when you say this...”.

Positive Request: instead of complaining or criticizing, you can express a positive request of what you would like to happen. For instances, if the dishes are left in the sink, rather than complaining, blaming or accusing, you can simply request that the dishes are placed in the dishwasher next time. You can say something like: “I would really like it if you put your plate in the dishwasher after you finish your meal next time”.

Listening means actively concentrating on what the other person is saying while minimizing judging and thinking about what we are going to say next. By being present in the conversation and putting aside our assumptions or defensiveness, we are better able to truly listen to what is being said, in an

open mind. It does not mean we agree with what is being said. It means that we hear what the other person has said, as being another perception of an event. When we truly listen, we help each other to relax and be calmer in our interaction.

It is more difficult to be able to concentrate and hear what the other person is saying accurately if you are feeling stressed, anxious, annoyed or angry. You may want to first ease the intensity of your emotion by being mindful, breathing, grounding yourself into the moment while you are listening. - It is often helpful to cultivate an attitude of curiosity and wonder while we are listening.

In addition, to help us to listen better, and to show the other person that we are really listening, we can repeat back what they have said or paraphrase it (without interpretation). For instance: "I see, you feel angry when I come home late and I don't tell you beforehand that I will be late". It also encourages the other person to clarify themselves further and reduces misunderstandings.

Validating means accepting what the other person says about their feelings. One avoids denying, dismissing, blaming, accusing or insisting that the other person feels as you do or as you think they should feel. For instance, you may say: "Yes I can see that this would make you feel angry or edgy". Validating does not necessarily mean that you agree with the other person; it does mean that you accept/respect their point of view even if it may be different from yours. This does not mean that you are giving in, only that you are respecting each other's right to be an individual and to have different views and feelings.

Sometimes the other person may level with you that they don't like something that you did even though you did not mean to make them uncomfortable. That is the intent of your action or words did not match its impact on the other person. When your intent and impact don't match, it is important to validate the other person's feelings, not to deny their feelings by being defensive. For instance: "Yes I can see how my being late makes you angry. I did not mean to make you angry, but I can see that is how it would have affected you. I am sorry. I did not mean to upset you."

Perceptions and feelings

When you make assumptions, interpretations you have decided on the meaning of the other person's behavior/words, then you stop listening to what that other person is really saying. You are seeing the other person through your glasses of negative judgments. You are not experiencing the person and the event directly, you are filtering through your judgments fed by your expectations. Remember judgments and assumptions are not facts, they are possibilities, probabilities, opinions but not facts.

When we are angry, anxious, excited or scared, our cognitive abilities and focus are impaired and we are less able to listen accurately to the other person. We are then more likely to be judging, distorting the messages because of our high level of emotions. When you find yourself very angry or overwhelmed, it is better to stop the communication for a while, take time out to ease the emotions, to relax and to discuss the matter when you are calmer. You can ask for "**time out**" and make a time when you will discuss the matter again; not putting off the discussion, but delaying until you both feel calmer. Make a specific time when you will discuss the matter again, such as in an hour or two or the next day when you are calmer and more able to listen in a non-judgmental and less defensive manner with more perspective.

Self-talk for better communication

Self-talks are what we say to ourselves all through the day. They are often automatic, unconscious but we can become aware of them when we start paying attention and be mindful. They can also take the form of stories or beliefs that we keep repeating to ourselves. They influence how we feel and what we do and say. Here is some example of self-talks that can make it harder to communicate followed by more helpful self-talk.

When you are levelling:

Unhelpful self-talks	Helpful self-talks
"There is no point telling him/her how I feel. She/he does not care."	"I know I will feel uncomfortable or anxious when I level, but I can cope with those feelings."
"If I let him/her close to me again, I will only be hurt again".	"I relax, I breathe out ...I can do this...I will take it as it comes".
"She /he should know how I feel. It is obvious. We have been through this before."	"My intention is to be a good caring partner".
	"If our relationship is to be better, I need to listen and communicate differently, I want to try at improving our relationship."
	"Learning to improve my relationship is more important than the uncomfortable feelings I have."
	"We may not have communicated well in the past, but that is no reason to assume that we can't do it better now."
	"I can change...my partner can change...we can change our ways for the better."
"I don't want to talk about this because she/he is going to get too upset, she/he will never understand me and I feel way too uncomfortable"	"It's okay, I am learning to be more open, I will be respectful in my communication. I am learning to bear/regulate my feelings. The other person is stronger than I think"

When you are listening:

Unhelpful self-talks:	Helpful self-talks
"She/he has no right to feel this way."	"It is my turn to listen now, I can always level later."
"This is so wrong"	"I am in the present, listening, in an accepting, nonjudgmental ways". "I breathe, I ground myself in the present moment"
"It is silly for him/her to feel like that".	"This is a chance to understand each other better, to clarify issues and improve our relationship."
"I did not mean it that way."	
"What can I say back to defend myself to that now?"	
"This is so unfair...I cannot take this."	
"She/he is just trying to get back at me."	
"She/he is hurting me on purpose"	"She/he is hurting just like me"
"She /he is just trying to upset me."	"She/he does not mean to upset me"

When you are validating:

Unhelpful self-talks	Helpful self-talks
"If I allow this now, she/he will have it all his/her way."	"I can validate his/her point of view without surrendering mine".

"I can't agree with that; it is not how I feel or think."	"We are two individuals who have the right to think and feel differently."
"She is so wrong...I am so right"	"Our different point of view and feelings, make our relationship richer".
"He should not feel like that..."	"Telling people to feel different does not change their feelings"
	"We each have valid perspectives even when different."
	"I cannot change the other person, I can only change myself"

Rule of thumb: whenever communication breaks down, check:

- your expectations
- your intentions in this situation,
- what has been said
- your own self-talks
- the intensity of your emotions

The chances are that you are saying "should" instead of "I would prefer", and there is a lack of listening, understanding and maybe a low motivation to connect and engage with each other. Both parties can be close-minded thinking: "It is my way or no way". In any case remember that you can't change how other people feel, think or say, but you can control how you react to it.

Relationship traps

Rehashing the past: During a discussion, practice being in the present, do not unduly bring up past hurts or experiences. Revisit issues with a fresh new look as much as you can, learning from the past.

Controlling: In a relationship we can become anxious or angry or frustrated, being a focus on our own desires and use the threat as a way of controlling/dominating our partner. When this happens, stop, breathe, become aware of the trap take time out and begin to listen more to your partner, exploring how you can both have your needs met. The paradox is that when you let go of control others, you can start being more in control of yourself and your life.

Assuming: sometimes we are sure that we know the intentions or outcomes of a certain situation. often those assumptions are possibilities and it is good to check how true or real those are.

Generalising: sometimes we think that because someone has behaved in a certain way in the past he/she will always behave in this way. We can be open to the possibility of people behaving in a different way as well as being aware that promises of changing have to be followed by actions.

Anger/Revenge. Anger has two sides: the feelings of anger and the actions fuelled by anger which can be aggressive, abusive and destructive. When angry our desire to hurt back may express itself in obvious or subtle ways. When angry, we take responsibility for our anger as feelings, becoming aware; caring, managing our anger...Angry feelings do not justify angry abusive reactions. When you are angry it is time to turn to yourself, to care for yourself, you are hurting. Avoid thinking unduly about the other person. And always keep yourself safe.

When you feel angry ask yourself:

What do I really want to achieve in this situation?

Why is the other person thinking or acting in this way?

What can I do to be helpful and constructive to myself and the other person?

Are my expectations realistic, reasonable?

Is there another way of going about this?

Is there another way of seeing this, of relating, of communicating?

Am I judging unduly, being critical, being rejecting... attacking or blaming... Or am I supportive...encouraging...connecting...?

Am I using my own perspective, starting with “I” messages or am I absolute: “This is a lie” or accusing: “you are lying”.

Am I saying “this should be...he/she should be doing or not doing... instead of “I would like...I would prefer... could you please do this....”

Am I rigid in my approach or flexible?

Am I willing to see things differently?

Am I open-minded?

Do I want to be right or happy?

Am I willing to be in the present, to experience life in the now directly...to let go of dwelling on the past or unduly anticipating what can go wrong in the future and instead to work on being a pleasant relationship in the now?

Some tips to better communication

-The time to level is when you feel upset: the time to listen is when the other person feels upset. If the other or is silent. When you are both upset, it is time to take a break called “time out”, to ease the emotions. Make a time to come back when you are both calmer with “I” conversation.

-Become aware of how you begin a discussion. Are you critical, attacking or defensive (wanting to justify yourself)? Are you judging, mind-reading, assuming or side-tracking the issue? Do you start with the intention of joining, sharing, positively problem-solving? Are you being empathic?

-How can you show the other person that you are interested in and even that you care? Maybe you can look at them, maybe you can look into their eyes and repeat what they have said to you gently, calmly, patiently. “I hear that your perspective on this is that I am not telling the truth”

-When the other person is upset, can you put your self-interest aside, can you see their hurt?

-If you have built up resentment, anger, bitterness or excessive guilt, can you put that aside and explore the other person’s point of view just for a moment?

-When you are upset, can you see how the way you are thinking contributes to the upset?

-What type of person do you want to be in the relationship?

-What are your values and how do you want to express those values in your relationship?

“Be the person that you want your partner to be”

“Love is an ability, it is an action, and it is a verb, not just a quality or a feeling”

This advice is of a general nature only and does not take into account particular conditions or situations. For further assistance contact a psychologist.

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