

Communication in Relationships, Part Two

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Last time we began a series on communication by looking at some unhealthy communication patterns. In reviewing that list, I must confess that I have, at one time or another, used every single one of those patterns. So, I am ready to look at some healthier ways to communicate.

Effective communication is about integrity—doing what you say and saying what you do. When we communicate honestly, the message we send clearly and accurately reflects the meaning we have in our heads. Honest communication is critical if you are going to connect with others in an accurate and meaningful way. Here are some suggestions for increasing the level of effectiveness in how you communicate.

Take responsibility for what you say. *Good communicators are aware of their own ability to choose how they want to respond to another. They do not react to others, but rather express who they really are at the moment. Self-disclosure is their primary purpose for communicating. They know that their own thoughts, feelings and opinions are not controlled by someone else or by circumstances outside themselves.*

Do not contradict. *What the other person is saying is always valid for him/her. The primary purpose of communication is to mutually understand each other's point of view. You may state your disagreement, but avoid the phrase, "Yes, but..." when you contradict another, you invite defensiveness or justification rather than clarification.*

Keep your voice pitch and volume at a comfortable level. Screaming may help relieve you of anger, but it rarely invites others to listen to what you have to say. You generate more heat than light, and you invite others to defend themselves or tune you out.

Summarize and validate. *Regularly take the time to summarize what you have heard, what you have said, and what you both have accomplished in the conversation. Be sure and include your own understanding of what the other has said. Validation means communicating, that given the other person's perspective and beliefs, the way they feel makes perfect sense. Our willingness to consider the other person's point of view as valid is what builds intimacy in relationships.*

Listen to yourself and others. Do you like what you are saying and how you are saying it? Are you responding in ways that accurately reflect your true thoughts and feelings? Listening to others is half of the communication process. By listening to yourself, you might learn something about yourself as well as about the topic you are discussing.

Be direct. Speak your truth. Direct communication means you say what you mean and you mean what you say. We are not mind-readers. The more concise and direct the better.

Stay in the present. Talk about how you feel right now, not how you felt last week, last month, or last year. The past and future are too abstract and dependent on one's own view.

Ask for what you want. Others cannot read your mind, your heart, or your stomach. No one can know what you are thinking, feeling, or when you are hungry...unless you let them know by making statements about yourself and asking directly for what you want. If you expect the other person to anticipate and guess about what you want, the likelihood is you won't get it.

Plan ahead. Think about what you want to say before you start speaking. Planning ahead also means thinking about the other person. Is he or she more receptive to what you have to say before or after lunch? Is she or he having a good or bad day?

Avoid double messages. "I am not questioning your decision, I'm just wanting to know why you decided what you did" is an example of a double message. Double messages breed confusion, and create barriers to communication. Since there are always at least two messages sent, honesty is lost somewhere between them. Be clear and straight with messages.

Tell your truth. Even if the other person becomes angry or leaves the situation, tell the truth early in conversation. Refuse to let the other person's attempt at manipulating you or denying the importance of what you are saying, detour you from speaking the truth. Choose to be honest. Don't lie, even if you think it is going to get you what you want. It won't. And the price of discovery is always too high.

Your verbal and nonverbal message should match. Do you ever say one thing and do another, insisting that what you are saying is the only message? Perhaps you say one thing and your body language is showing something different? Picture yourself saying, "I love you" with clenched jaws. Keep in mind that actions speak louder than words, and so does body language.

Next time, we will look at some practical ways to communicate effectively and explore the five levels of communication. In the meantime, speak your truth clearly and listen carefully to your children or partner. Communication is about building intimacy.