

Communication in Relationships, Part Four

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When people talk they are communicating on two levels simultaneously. On one level they are communicating some message (content) and on the other level they are making a comment on their perception of the relationship (process). Let's look at a simple example.

Bob (stepparent) to his stepson Joe, *"Tomorrow morning I want you to clean your room and finish your homework before you leave for the day."*

Joe responds sarcastically, *"Sure, sure, whatever you say."*

What are the two levels being communicated? On the surface, Bob is asking his stepson to do some chores. On the process level Bob is implying that he is in charge, that he has the right to make this request of Joe, that he can decide what Joe does, and that he places a high value on Joe's room being clean and his homework being completed. What does Joe's response tell us about how he views the relationship?

Communication is a constant process of defining relationships. Every interaction, every conversation, says something about your relationships and in turn, the relationship determines the nature of these interactions. In the example above, Bill and Joe will continue to have superficial, passive-aggressive conversations until they address their relationship issues. What kinds of questions about the relationship are raised during conversations? Examples include, "Who sets the rules?" "Whose needs are more important?" "Are you really listening?" "Are my needs being adequately addressed?" "Did we accomplish anything with this talk?" "Are we still okay?" Nonverbal cues (body language, facial expressions, etc.) provide relationship information that is just as important as what we hear. Awareness that both levels of communication exist can help develop more effective ways to communicate and create healthier relationships in the process.

Processing the answers to these questions, we continually define and re-define our relationships. This mutual process is what leads to intimacy. Relationships are always changing and listening to the messages underneath the content gives us important clues as to our own feelings and well as those of the other person. This time, we will look at one of these factors, "attitude." Next time we will explore several other factors and see how they contribute to effective communication.

Attitude

During interactions we process how we, as well as the other person, feel about the relationship. We pick up cues as we interact. Most of these cues are nonverbal. Each relationship is unique, with its own set of rules and expectations, and the nature of the relationship (spouse, child, fiancé, etc.) will determine what the appropriate feelings should be. We decode personal relationship messages

all the time. This decoding process is based on *guesses* we make about the other party's attitudes and meanings, based on our past relationship history and our current beliefs about how well we relate. There are three basic relationship messages:

- "Our needs are of equal value and concern."
- "My needs are more important than yours."
- "Your needs are more important than mine."

Communication is most effective when both parties feel respected and equally valued. When mutual respect and value is missing, interactions are normally less than positive and generally unsuccessful. Effective communication follows the *golden rule*—"I will respect you and your position just as I would expect you to respect mine." *One-up* messages often produce resentment, defensiveness and resistance from others. *One-down* messages can invite control, manipulation or codependency.

How would you answer the following questions?

What kind of relationship messages do you send?

What message does your partner hear?

Is there a discrepancy between the message you intend and the one your partner hears?

What kind of relationship messages did you hear as a child?

Do you know how to send healthy, positive relationship messages?

What will it take for you to send a relationship message that asserts equality?

Are you alert to the relationship messages you hear from your partner. Do you feel respected? Put-down? Patronized? Valued? Understood?

Next time we will examine some other process factors. Keep communicating.