

Communication in Relationships, Part Five

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We have been discussing ways to become more effective communicators. This time we continue our discussion of the process of communication. Last time we differentiated between the content (what we say) and the process (how we say it) of communication.

Communicating needs

We communicate to get our needs met and we do this on at least two levels. The first is a surface or level—"I am hungry, I am hot, I am sad," etc. The second level is much deeper, and of which we are less conscious. We communicate from the first level but our core needs come from and are expressed through the deeper level. Due to fear, guilt, shame or other wounds, we have difficulty being aware of and articulating what we need. Every interaction involves the communication of needs. These needs can be physical, emotional, mental or spiritual. Successful communication exists when needs are clearly articulated, acknowledged and responded to. There are several needs we attempt to fill by communicating with one another. They include feeling valued and respected, changing thoughts or feelings in another, defining or clarifying our relationship, venting our feelings, be listened to, being accepted, receiving affection or being encouraged.

Needs are met through interacting. Sometimes needs are in conflict. A common problem is when needs compete—that is, when your needs and my needs cannot both be met at the same time. In such cases, not perceiving that different needs exist can lead to frustration and a break down in the relationship. Needs are not wrong and competing needs are not uncommon. Emotional woundedness, including shame, guilt, inferiority and insecurity, can diminish our capacity to accurately articulate or process relationship messages. The key is to be clear about expressing your needs and acknowledging and understanding those of the other person.

Practice becoming alert to you and your partner's communication needs. One idea is to re-visit a recent not-so-successful conversation and try to determine a) the communication needs expressed, b) the needs that were at cross-purposes and c) the emotions at play that reduced your ability to respond effectively to one another's needs. Ask these kinds of questions:

What needs was I trying to express?
Am I having difficulty identifying my needs?
Did my partner "hear" my needs?
What needs was my partner trying to express?
Did I "hear" his or her needs?
What feelings did this invoke?

Focus

Communication is most effective when both parties are fully present and focused on what the other is saying. We all have experienced talking to someone who was not *present and focused* on us. The emotional message a lack of focus can send is “I am not interested in you and/or what you have to say.” When both parties are unfocused, communication is more like a train-wreck. What factors can prevent us from being focused? The most common are physical distractions, such as noise or silence, heat or cold, hunger, fatigue, thirst, physical discomfort, illness, pain, flashing lights, and commotion. Another form of distraction is emotional. Anger, fear or anxiety, for example, can render us inattentive and unfocused. Being alert to these distractions and acknowledging them is critical to effective communication.

Intensity

As you and your partner communicate, emotional levels will vary. These changes in emotional intensity will alter the focus and effectiveness of your communication. Emotional intensity must be addressed and not ignored. If your partner is displaying strong emotion, acknowledge it and attempt to discern his or her current need. Strong emotion, for example, may signal a need to vent. Listen carefully to the need underneath the emotion. Your partner will feel “heard” and his or her level of emotion will likely decrease. When emotions become intense, for example, listening becomes more difficult. We become so focused on our own thoughts and feelings that we cannot “hear” the other person. Monitoring emotional intensity levels will help you determine which communication skill to use. Below are some examples.

- If your partner’s emotional level is rising, it is likely that he or she needs to vent or receive some form of action from you. The best communication skill would be active listening.
- Confrontation should not take place unless intensity levels are low.
- As a general rule, careful listening should increase with the intensity level.
- The presence of anger or rage should cause a temporary halt to interacting.

Outcomes

You and your partner must, from time to time, ask some hard questions about the quality of your communication. The following are examples of questions to ask one another.

Did we each get our needs met?

Did we effectively listen to one another?

Did we feel accepted?

Did we understand what each other wanted to accomplish?

Did you respond to my needs? (Did I respond to yours?)

Did we end the conversation feeling OK about our relationship?

Does the process work for both of us?

Is it okay if only one of us got our needs met fully?

Is there a pattern (healthy or unhealthy) to our communication?
What do we need to change?
Am I (are you) willing to make changes?

Effective communication happens only when both of you have your needs met well enough and both of you feel satisfied with the communication process. Till next time, keep communicating.