



Communication Skills for Healthy Relationships

Communication is vital in creating and maintaining a relationship, whether it be an intimate relationship—such as with a partner, child, or friend—or a professional relationship—such as with a co-worker, supervisor, or client. Your communication skills affect how you solve problems, how you resolve conflict, and the level of trust you generate in your relationships. A lack of communication may result in confusion, misunderstandings, and the development of poor communication patterns. This guide provides strategies to help you foster effective communication skills.

Barriers to Effective Communication

Barriers to communication are things that prevent people from understanding a message, or understanding it the same way. Some common barriers to communication include:

- **Poor listening skills.** Many people consider speaking the most important element of communication. However, good listening skills are critical to effective communication. They help you better understand the information other people are trying to convey, improve your rapport with others, and improve your problem solving skills.
- **Language barriers.** The words you use to communicate may create a barrier to communication. This can be as basic as communicating with someone who doesn't speak the same language, or a subtle as interpreting the words you use in a different way. It can also include poor use of language by the communicator (e.g., using words incorrectly, poor grammar), a lack of understanding of the language or context (e.g., a non-technical person trying to communicate about a technical issue), using colloquialisms or jargon, using ambiguous word choices, etc.
- **Emotional barriers.** There is a greater potential for misunderstanding when emotions are involved. For example, a sender who is upset or angry may not be able to effectively communicate his or her feelings and ideas. A receiver in a similar state may ignore or distort what the other person is saying.
- **Environmental barriers.** This can include a number of factors including, interruptions, distractions, physical environment issues (lighting, noise, comfort), talking too softly, physical distance, a physical barrier between sender and recipient, etc.
- **Timing barriers.** The timing of a communication can affect its ability to be understood. For example, there may not be enough time to communicate the message fully, or it may be too early or too late in the day for someone to give the communication his or her full attention.
- **Perceptual barriers.** Each person experiences events—including communications—in a way that is unique to him or her. A sender will communicate in a way that makes sense in his or her reality. A receiver understands a communication in a similar manner. However, these two realities may not be the same, so the message may be perceived differently, hindering communication. Variables including age, education, gender, social and economic status, cultural background, temperament, health, religion, political beliefs, etc. can alter perceptions and create barriers to communication.

- **Filtering.** Think of the child’s game of telephone, where a message is passed from one person to another. In most cases, the message, as finally received, is very different from the one that was originally sent. That is filtering. Filtering occurs in a variety of ways that can be a barrier to effective communication, for example, when an assistant, co-worker or spouse takes a message on your behalf, how someone leaves a message on an answering machine, etc.

Listening

Listening involves hearing and paying attention to the speaker. However, hearing and effective listening are very different abilities. Consider the following tips to help you become a more effective listener:

- **Clear your mind** to avoid wandering mentally. Your internal dialogue—deciding what you want to say, reacting to something the other person said, other issues that may be on your mind—can distract you from actively listening to the other person.
- **Focus on what the other person is saying.** Give the other person your full attention and listen carefully to what he or she is saying. Think of this as an opportunity to learn something about the other person.
- **Don’t interrupt.** Allow the other person to talk without interruption until he or she gets to the point.
- **Use body language** to indicate your interest and attention, and encourage the other person to speak:
 - Keep up good eye contact.
 - Lean forward, nod your head, make encouraging gestures.
 - Keep your body relaxed, open and focused on the speaker. Avoid crossed arms and legs, clenched fists, turning the eyes/head/body away or being easily distracted; this indicates disinterest or opposition.
- Avoid distracting behaviors, such as playing with a pencil, drumming your fingers, jingling change in your pocket, etc. These make it difficult for you to listen and distract the speaker.
- **Use acknowledging responses** such as “uh-huh,” “I see,” “you don’t say,” “okay,” etc. These encourage the other person to speak and show that you are interested in what he or she is saying.
- **Paraphrase what you believe the other person has said.** This will indicate that you have been listening, and ensure that your understanding is accurate. At the end of the conversation you may wish to summarize the discussion, as well.
- **Ask questions.** Don’t interrupt, but at an opportune time clarify anything that seems unclear to you.
- **Pay attention to the speaker’s non-verbal messages,** by observing tone of voice and body language. This can give clues as to what the other person is thinking and feeling and how he or she is responding to what you say.
- **Respond constructively.** Let the other person know you value what he or she is saying, even if you don’t agree. Try to avoid responding negatively or directly, for example criticizing, ridiculing, dismissing, diverting (talking about yourself rather than about what the other person has said) or rejecting the other person or what they are saying.
- **Respond appropriately.** Make sure you clearly understand what the other person wants from you and respond appropriately. If you aren’t certain what the other person wants, ask for clarification. Try to avoid giving unwanted diagnosis, advice or direction unless the person specifically requests it from you. For example, if a friend or co-worker simply wants to vent about an incident that frustrated him, he may not appreciate you giving unwanted advice about how you feel he or she should have handled the situation.

Speaking

The goal in speaking is to convey a message to another person so that the other person understands it exactly as you intended it. The following strategies can help you sharpen your verbal communication skills.

- **Make certain you have the other person's attention.** When you have something important to say to somebody, make sure you have his or her attention (call him or her by name, make eye contact) before you begin talking.
- **Be organized.** Have an objective and structure your speaking towards that goal. Think before you speak and present your thoughts/information in an organized manner.
- **Use "I" phrases** such as "I feel ...," "I need ...," or "I would like ..." as opposed to "you did ...," "you are" "I" statements focus on your feelings, are less accusatory, create less defensiveness, and help the other person understand your point of view rather than feeling attacked.
- **Speak so the listener will understand.** Avoid jargon, colloquialism, overcomplicated terminology, etc. Speak in a way that is appropriate for the age, sex and emotional state of the other person.
- **Encourage open-ended conversation.** Use open-ended questions that promote a response, such as "tell me about ..." "how do you feel about...." Avoid questions that encourage a one word answer.
- **Be open.** Share your feelings truthfully ... but respectfully. Approach the discussion as an opportunity for the other person to learn something about you.
- **Be specific and objective.** Identify the specific issue at hand and how it makes you feel. Avoid generalizing statements such as "always," "ever" or "never." Stick to the subject; try not to digress into broad personality issues or revive past issues.

- **Be positive.** Focus on the other person's positive points. Be specific, generous and public with your praise. Make sure that positive feedback outweighs criticism.
- **Respond, but don't react.** Be respectful, calm and positive. If the discussion is escalating into anger, take a short break from it. Agree on a set time to resume the discussion and be sure that you do.
- **Ask for a summary.** Find a polite way of ensuring that people have understood you. "Could you summarize what we've discussed to make sure we are on the same page?" "Could you review the major deliverables to make sure that I'm going in the right direction."
- **Try to resolve conflicts, not to win them.** If you are unable to initially come to an agreement, take a break and set a time to try again. Try to develop a solution to the problem but remember, occasionally you may have to agree to disagree.

Assertive Communication

Assertive communication is an communication style that is built on mutual respect. Communicating assertively means that you speak up for yourself, while respecting the right of others to do the same. Being assertive demonstrates self-respect because you are willing to stand up for your rights and interests, and express your thoughts and feelings. It also demonstrates that you are sensitive to the rights of others and willing to work constructively to reach a mutually agreeable outcome.

Assertiveness is sometimes confused with aggression. Assertive behavior promotes mutual respect and results in trust, acceptance and cooperation. Aggressive behavior promotes self interest at the expense of others and results in hostility, mistrust, disrespect and obstructiveness.

Being assertive enables you to:

- Act in your own best interests—including refusing a request
- Stand up for yourself by clearly expressing your rights, interests, thoughts, feelings and personal boundaries
- Demonstrate self-respect by exercising your rights and expecting respect from others
- Demonstrate respect for others by considering their needs and rights—including the right to refuse a request
- Develop and expect trust and equality in relationships
- Negotiate to a mutually acceptable compromise

Assertive communication includes both verbal and non-verbal communications. The following tips can help you communicate assertively.

- **Use confident, positive body language.** Make eye contact, smile, maintain an upright, relaxed, open posture and use smooth movements.
- **Verbalize a clear, confident message.** Use “I” statements, be specific, be objective, be positive, be calm, be consistent
- **Learn to say no.** Use the word “no” and offer an explanation if you choose to. Do not apologize and do not make up excuses.
- **Use a firm, pleasant, clear and audible tone of voice.**
- **State the issue and the outcome you would like to achieve.**
- **Stay focused,** don’t digress—or allow the other person to deflect you by digressing—into other issues, blame or judgment.
- **Validate** the other person’s feelings and issues.
- **Summarize** or restate the other person’s point of view.

Assertive communication is a learned skill. The more you practice it, the easier it will become and the better you will be at it.

Communicating About Tough Issues

Effective communication skills are particularly critical when dealing with difficult issues. Consider the following strategies for communicating about tough issues.

- **Talk early.** People—especially children—often become aware of an issue sooner than you think. By dealing with an issue sooner rather than later, it is easier to maintain your objectivity and self-control, prevent the issue from escalating, and avoid frustration, stress, and misinformation.
- **Talk privately.** Set up a time to talk in a private place, where you won’t be overheard or interrupted.
- **Initiate the conversation.** You may need to be the one to start the conversation. This can be uncomfortable for many people. Consider saying something such as “I’d like to get your input on something that I think will help us work together more effectively,” or “I need your help with something. Can we talk about it (soon)?”
- **Think ahead of time about what you want to say and how you want to say it.** Be specific about what the issue is and give concrete examples of things you have observed and the impact they have had. If you feel uncomfortable discussing an issue, you may want to practice what you would like to say ahead of time or even role play the conversation with a trusted friend or colleague.
- **Explore the other person’s thoughts, feelings and beliefs.** This will help you understand how the other person perceives the issue, which can help you address your concerns in a way that takes into account his or her perspective. In addition, allowing the other person to express his or her point of view and be heard will help him or her feel valued, reduce feelings of defensiveness, and encourage the other person to reciprocate by being open to hearing what you have to say.

- **Talk about your own feelings and be personal.** Statements such as, “I’m worried or concerned,” “I would like” and “I feel,” can ease tension and help the other person learn more about your point of view.
- **Be open.** It is critical to develop a relationship in which the other person feels comfortable expressing his or her feelings and concerns and asking questions freely.
- **Tailor the message.** Different people need different information, have different sensitivities and require a different vocabulary. In most cases, however, it’s usually best to keep explanations short, simple and straightforward.
- **Be encouraging, supportive and positive.** Don’t try to avoid topics because you are uncomfortable, unsure of the answer or don’t have time to discuss them. If you can’t address a question or if you don’t have an answer, be honest about it, but say you’ll try to find out, and make certain to follow through.
- **Listen.** Listening, and responding to what the other person is saying, can help you get a feel for what he or she thinks or feels about an issue, what he or she knows and can be a path to discussion.
- **Be honest.** Give straightforward and honest information and address all the issues. Honesty builds trust. Avoidance, in whole or in part, may lead to continued—or escalated—problems or to the person having to seek information elsewhere and being misinformed. You don’t have to give every single detail, but cover the important points.
- **Be patient.** Allow the other person to set a pace that’s comfortable for him or her, formulate his or her thoughts and put those thoughts into words. In some cases, the other person may need some time to absorb and reflect on what he or she has learned. In this case you may need to continue the discussion later and address any lingering questions or issues.

- **Be prepared for a negative response.** Remember that the issue may be difficult for the other person to deal with. You cannot control the other person’s reactions, but you can anticipate them, and be emotionally ready.
- **Take a step back.** If the discussion is escalating into hostility, take a short break from it. Agree on a set time to resume the discussion and be sure that you do.

Developing Opportunities for Face-to-Face Communication

Finding opportunities for in-person communication can be a challenge. In some cases, however, it is important to set aside quality, face-to-face time together to promote communication. Consider the following:

- **Be available.** Keep the lines of communication open. Make sure those who may need to contact you know how to reach you, e.g. work phone, cell phone, etc. When you are together take time out to talk, ask questions and have meaningful conversations.
- **Make a commitment to your relationships.** Make your relationships a priority. A relationship is a work in progress. It needs attention and effort to grow. No matter how busy you are, make time to spend quality time together, even if you have to schedule specific time slots on your calendars.
- **Build structure.** Part of being able to communicate effectively is making time for meaningful conversations in a setting free of distractions. Schedule time for face-to-face communication. Set a regular weekly meeting to catch-up and discuss any issues that have arisen. Consider making at least one dinner a week mandatory for all family members, allowing no telephone interruptions or visits from friends. This gives family members a chance to talk about what’s going on and to focus on each other.

- **Seize the moment.** Catch up with whenever you have an opportunity, though this may require some spontaneity. Being in a car together is almost always a good chance to talk; ordering a pizza to share when you have a quiet night at home is another way to catch up.
- **Eliminate distractions.** Cutting down on distractions, such as the computer, the phone, radio and television, sets the stage for conversation. Try not to bury yourself in e-mail, the paper or a book when it's possible to have real communication.
- **Reschedule and follow through.** If someone wants to discuss something at a time when you can't give your full attention, explain why you can't talk, set a time to talk later, and then carry through.