

Better Communication Improves Relationships

by Betty Kellow

We all value our close relationships and really want them to go well. Often in our most intimate relationships with extended family, partners and spouses, and now with children, misunderstandings occur which just don't make sense to us and leave us all hurt and confused. We have been communicating successfully for years and do not understand how we can "miss" each other so frequently and with such negative outcomes.

Even the best of us go unconscious in our communications and can use reminders and practice to be aware of others and the impact we make on them. Good communication skills can enhance any relationship. Most of us take them for granted, but in fact we can all improve both our self-expression and our listening skills.

Let's start with an often overlooked but valuable quality: good listening. We may not think about it until we spend time with someone who seems to really listen and care, and then we find we so appreciate these opportunities to be really heard. We feel better, close to the listener, and understood. Being truly heard evokes feelings of warmth and acceptance of ourselves and others.

Here are some tips for good listening:

- You must want to hear what the other person has to say. You cannot always be available and it is important to say if you are or if you need to choose another time. When you are ready then let everything else go and attend to the speaker.
- Genuinely want to hear what the other person has to say.
- Genuinely accept the other person's feelings, whatever they are.
- Trust the other person's ability to handle his feelings and find solutions. Only offer ideas for solutions if you are asked or if you ask and the person consents.
- Keep in mind that feelings can change quickly, especially in young children.
- Feelings are real, not good or bad, right or wrong, but simply real.
- It is important to see the other person, whether child or adult, as separate from you and worthy of respect as an individual.

There are two kinds of listening: active and passive.

Passive listening is quiet, not engaging in conversation, just listening. It can communicate acceptance. Here are some ways to show good passive listening skills:

Body signs – eye contact.

Posture – leaning forward, relaxed.

Door openers – "I see," "Hmm," "Really," "Is that so," "Tell me about it."

Active listening is sending back the other person's message. Often what goes wrong in communication is that the person receiving the message misunderstands it, but neither party is aware that the misunderstanding exists. Have you ever found yourself in an argument where you repeat the same thing over and over? Usually that is because you consciously or unconsciously believe the other person hasn't really heard what you are saying. Nothing gets resolved under these circumstances. Active listening helps clarify the message for the listener and also for the speaker. Try to identify the feeling the person is conveying and then describe it to her.

You can do this by:

- **Paraphrasing** – summarizing what you think the other person is saying, and asking if that is correct. For example: "I hear you saying that....Is that right?" "So what happened was....Is that true?" "Let's see if I understand you...." "In other words, what you mean is...."
- **Perception checking** – asking the other person whether your perception of how the speaker is feeling is correct. This gives permission for the speaker to share information about his feelings. For example: "It seems like you are feeling....Is that true? You sound kind of...(state a feeling). Are you?"
- **Questioning for information** – this is an effective way to clarify or explore an area further. Be careful not to lead the conversation into what you, rather than the speaker, want to talk about, to divert the focus of attention onto the question, or to try to get the speaker to see something by careful questioning.

The flip side of listening is expressing our feelings to someone else. Often when we are upset or having a problem we resort to blaming the other person. We say things like, "You do this to me" or "You make me feel bad."

There is a much more constructive way to express ourselves when we are feeling upset or have a problem. This approach tends to de-escalate the situation, to encourage the other person to pause and listen, and clears the air without hurting anyone's feelings. It is not magic, and does not always work perfectly. There are times when the other person wants to inflict pain, and under these circumstances, it is not a good idea to expose ourselves. However, in a relationship where there is good will, this is a way to foster intimacy. It requires honesty and it takes courage.

What we need to do is to get in touch with what we are feeling and simply and honestly tell the other person that. It is helpful to phrase it something like, "When (the behavior) happens, I feel...because...." Be careful not to put "I feel" in front of what are really "you do this" messages. Also be careful that "I feel" doesn't mean "I think." If it does, it is probably an accusation. Watch out for "I feel that...." It almost always means, "I think."

Sometimes the assumptions we have about how to be supportive are very limited. We may think what is helpful to us would also be helpful to someone else. We often make the mistake of giving others what we want and assume they'll know what we want in return. Since support means different things to different people, use good listening skills to find out what kinds of support other people want instead of making assumptions.

There are many ways that good communication skills can improve our lives and our relationships with others. Practice some of these skills with the important people in your life and invite them to practice these skills with you.

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