

You're Not Listening!

by Dr. Charles Bidwell

If you've never said or thought those words, then skip this article; you're probably either an accomplished communicator or insensitively unaware. But for most of us, clear communication is the foundation of all our relationships and we don't do it well.

Many of us have the greatest difficulty communicating our feelings. And there are several reasons for this. Regardless of the reasons, we need to grow beyond them and get better at being clear in communicating our feelings. But for the curious, I'll suggest two causes of our poor communication skills:

1. Early training in our family – As we grew up we learned from the others in our family how and what to communicate. Often feelings and emotions were not allowed to be talked about or expressed. When we did share our feelings we were told "That's not a nice thing to say." Or "You don't really mean that, do you!" or "Don't say such things about ____." We were expected to solve our own problems, lick our wounds and "be nice". When we were asked, "How are you?" we quickly learned that the proper response was "Fine", regardless of how we were really feeling. Boys were specifically trained not to express feelings and so men today can tell you what they did, but not how they felt.
2. Dogmatic parent(s) – As we were growing up, there may have been an authoritarian parent who was the boss and required that you do what they said no matter what you thought or felt. "Because I said so!" was their dictum and there were to be no further questions asked. We were not heard. None listened to us and so we stopped communicating and started denying our thoughts and feelings. There were messages that our opinion didn't count and so today we believe that what we have to say is not important. This led us to close down our communication of feelings and even to deny that we have any. In the face of dogmatic authority, many of us learned to play it safe and never communicate our opinions and feelings.

Expressing Feelings

Feelings are a normal part of living and everyone experiences them. Problems arise when we don't express them or even talk about them. Denying and ignoring our emotional experiences can lead to physical, emotional and mental health problems. Emotions trigger bodily reactions of increased blood pressure, muscle contraction and faster heart beats. If

the causative emotions are not addressed so that the body can return to a more normal functioning state, then the stress disrupts the body's functioning for a longer period of time. Built up or denied emotional stress can lead to restless sleep and decreased appetite and that can reduce the effectiveness of our immune defense system. That can lead to loss of energy and spirit and even to illness. So let's learn how to communicate our feelings – at least for our health, if not our happiness.

Communication Tips

Start from a base of telling yourself that you are important and that your concerns and feelings are worth sharing. Love yourself as you love your listener. Respect yourself as you respect the person you are sharing your ideas and emotions with.

Next, be clear about what you want to say and what you want to gain from the talk. Be direct. It's okay to say "I want ...". If you are anxious about how to express your concern or afraid that you will lose your key message because of the emotional nature of the conversation, then make notes ahead of time about what you want to say and what you want to change or gain from the talk.

Remember that communication is made up of talking and listening. How you talk will affect how they listen and how you listen will affect the success of your talk. "You're not listening!" applies to both of you.

To Be an Effective Talker:

1. *Consider the time and place.* Hold your conversation in a quiet, comfortable place and at a time that is convenient for both of you. Make sure the other person has the time and will not be rushed and distracted by needing to hurry away. Consider having you talk in a neutral place where you each have some control over ending the conversation if one of you wants to do that. A trapped listener cannot give you their full attention; they're calculating how they can get free.
2. *Be specific.* Being general and vague is not helpful. Be clear and direct about what you feel and want. Use specific examples so the other person can understand exactly what is concerning you. Make "I" statements, like, "I want you to help me keep the cat off the table." "I feel disrespected when you leave without saying goodbye."
3. *Share your feelings and emotions.* You are in control of your emotions so no environment or individual can force you to feel a certain way. Be true to your

feelings as they come from within you. Don't say "Yes" when you feel "No". Be honest and say "I feel ... (awkward, uncomfortable, anxious, etc.)"

No one should ever tell you that you do not have whatever feelings you express. If you say, "I feel exposed" nobody should discount or deny your feeling. No one should respond "No you don't; you're just ..." Don't let them speak for you.

4. *Make sure that the other person fully understands your message.* One way is to ask the listener to tell you what they heard you say in their own words. Correct any misunderstanding or misinterpretation by repeating your statements as clearly as possible. In emotional or challenging situations, practice your statements with trusted friends ahead of time and ask them to see if your message is clear and conveys your intended meaning.

To Be an Effective Listener:

1. *Make eye contact.* Look at the person who is speaking to you – unless you are driving a vehicle at the time and in that case you are not paying enough attention to the conversation and would be better off pulling over, stopping and focusing on the conversation. [See Tip #1 above.] If your eyes are wandering, then you're looking for something other than the speaker's ideas. It's a compliment and it's respectful to show your speaker that you are paying full attention and want to understand their message.
2. *Use non-verbal signs.* Not looking at them is a non-verbal sign that says "something else is more interesting" or "I'm looking for something more interesting". Nodding your head in agreement or leaning forward can show interest. Also notice the body language of the person speaking. Facial expressions, posture, gestures and other actions give clues to what they are feeling.
3. *Avoid distractions.* Give your full attention, even if you have to turn off the TV, leave the computer, stop the car, etc. Get out of a noisy or crowded space, close the door, do whatever you have to do to avoid being distracted. And don't play with things (rings, keys, hair, etc.) while they are talking; that distracts them.
4. *Ask questions.* Check your understanding by asking questions like "Are you saying that ...?" or "What did you mean when you said ...?" Their goal is to get a message to you. Your goal is to make sure you got their message. What you do with their message is another matter, but make certain that you got their intended message before you respond; it could save you both a lot of time and tension.

5. *Paraphrase what you hear.* Even if they don't ask you to tell them what you heard them say, offer to give them your understanding of their message. Tell them what you think they are saying in your own words. "What I hear you saying is ..." This gives both of you a chance to check out what got communicated and correct misunderstandings before they cause trouble.
6. *Do not interrupt the speaker.* "Silent" and "listen" use the same letters and you can't really listen if you are thinking of a reply so quickly that you barge in with it before hearing the other person to the end of their statements.

High Stress Situations Need Special Attention

If you have difficulty expressing emotionally stressful information, then take these steps:

1. Be selective in what you share; decide what is most important for your listener to know. Don't ramble on with unnecessary information; be brief and focussed and let them ask for more information if they need or want it.
2. Use simple words and speak as calmly as you can.
3. Make one point at a time. A "grocery list" of complaints is overwhelming and leaves the listener confused as to what to deal with first.
4. Again, it is helpful to make your written list of points and handle them one by one. It is even better if you list them in order of importance to you. You might want to consider handling one point now and another later so you don't overwhelm your listener and make them defensive because they feel attacked on many counts.

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