

The Basics of Good Communication

In this chapter we will talk about the basics of good communication. A building or structure is no better than its foundation. Good communication involves the building of a very complex structure of ideas and patterns of communication. However, unless your structure has a strong foundation, the mastery of sophisticated ideas will not suffice. Without a strong foundation, your structure will fall apart and become dysfunctional.

The cornerstones in the foundation of good communication are: 1) accurately communicating messages (verbally and nonverbally); 2) accurately listening and hearing messages; 3) providing feedback to each other; and 4) feeling and expressing empathy or concern for each other while communicating. Each of these four cornerstones is essential to the foundation of any intimate relationship.

This chapter will walk you through the laying of the groundwork for the four cornerstones. Take the time to do each exercise as you walk through the process. Don't hurry. While these concepts seem simplistic, they are extremely important. Like the foundation of a building, they must be established as strong and firm footings that can hold up the structure through the storms and changes in your relationship.

Mind-Reading Is A Bad Idea

We all do it. That is, we all think we know what our partner is thinking and/or feeling. We are all guilty at some point of actually telling our partner, I know this is what you were thinking. I know these were your intentions when you said what you said. I know this is what you were feeling. You were disgusted with me. You were angry with me. You wanted me to simply disappear. On and on we go with our interpretations. After all, we are the center of our universe, and we like to think we absolutely know what is happening in our universe.

But of course, we don't know much of what is happening in our partner's universe at any given point in time. We see only a very small portion of what is actually happening. In fact, our intimate partner is in their own universe, seeing reality through very different lenses. Thus, if we think we know what our partner is thinking, feeling, or intending, we are very likely to be missing critical pieces.

Why is mind reading such a bad idea? Well, obviously it is a bad idea because we are only guessing, and are therefore very likely to get parts of it wrong. When we do this,

we are very likely to alienate our partner, hurt his/her feelings, and/or make him/her angry.

But more importantly, *mind reading is a bad idea because it causes us to think and act in a vacuum.* When we do this, we aren't communicating. We are simply making conclusions based on our own perceptions of reality, then acting on those perceptions. Since good communication is the pathway to intimacy, when we mind-read we cut ourselves off from our partner. In so doing, we unknowingly return to that lonely place inside ourselves. We don't intend to be cut off and lonely. We intend to be correct. But when we mind-read, we alienate our partner and cut ourselves off. Again, we become lonely and hurt.

Break the habit of mind-reading by catching yourself, admitting you are doing it, and stopping the behavior. Substitute the basics of good communication for your habit of mind-reading.

Accurately Communicating Messages, Verbally and Nonverbally

Basic communication in relationships consists of messages given and received simultaneously. We may think only one message is being communicated by one person at a time, but this is not actually the case. In fact, we are almost always communicating, whether we are speaking or simply listening. When one person is talking, the other person is reacting nonverbally. How the listener is reacting nonverbally may affect the message the speaker is formulating and sending to the listener. Thus, when two people in a relationship are communicating, both are communicating simultaneously. This fact is very important for us to remember.

Verbal Messages: Verbal messages are words. Words are symbols. That is, when we use words, we are using categories that represent a variety of things to a variety of people. Words have dictionary definitions that we learned in school. Few of us remember the exact Webster definition of particular words. Not only do we define words ourselves, in the context of communicating, but we also define words according to our own personal experience. For instance, how do you define the words love, tenderness, affection, or communication? Chances are your definitions differ from the way your partner would define these words. That's because your partner's experience is different in some ways from your own. Always try to remember that your partner will be using different definitions for some of the words you are using.

Feedback: Why is feedback important? Feedback is extremely important because, in order to communicate accurately, we have to at least define the words we are using in similar ways. The only way to know whether or not we actually have a mutual understanding of the verbal messages we are sending is to use feedback. Feedback is simply the process of the sender and receiver checking with each other, on an ongoing basis, to see if the messages being sent are actually being received with the same meanings intended by the sender.

Paraphrasing: Paraphrasing is the most basic, and most important form of feedback. When we paraphrase, as a receiver, we simply say to our partner something to the effect of: “If I understand you correctly, what I hear you saying is _ _ _ _ _.” You can’t imagine how often couples who are having difficulty are simply on different wave-lengths, hearing different messages than the ones intended. Simply learning to paraphrase will solve many of the problems that represent barriers to effective communication in intimate relationships.

Stop reading now and do Exercise One with your mate. This exercise may seem basic, but it is so very important. Take the time now to establish the habit of paraphrasing as a part of your communication process. You may not use it all the time, but if you begin using it habitually, you will recognize when you are on different wave-lengths, or getting different messages than intended. Then you’ll go back to the paraphrasing habit when you need to slow down and focus more on the verbal messages you are trying to exchange.

Nonverbal Messages: Nonverbal messages, simply put, are messages communicated by other than verbal means. You are probably not aware of your nonverbal messages. In fact, nonverbal messages are largely communicated on a subconscious level. Because they are communicated without thinking, we say nonverbal messages are spontaneous. Since nonverbal messages are communicated spontaneously, without thought, we tend to believe them, especially when they contradict verbal messages. Let me state that again for emphasis. ***When nonverbal messages contradict verbal messages, we almost always believe the nonverbal instead of the verbal.*** Because nonverbal messages are so believable, they take on a greater importance in the communication process than do verbal messages.

One of the main reasons nonverbal messages are so powerful is that they primarily communicate feelings vs. thoughts. Think about this fact, because it is very important. We primarily express our feelings nonverbally. This means that we are subconsciously, without thought, expressing feelings nonverbally while we are speaking. Beware! Feelings are far more powerful than words. ***If our feelings contradict what we are saying, the listener may hear the words, but he/she may be reacting primarily to the feelings that are coming through nonverbal channels.***

The six main channels of nonverbal communication are 1) the voice (vocalics), 2) the face (especially the eyes), 3) gestures, 4) posture, and 5) space (or proxemics). There are others mentioned in the literature, but these are by far the most influential. Of these four, the face and eyes are the most influential.

1). **The voice** always goes with the spoken word. Qualities of the voice that change during communication are volume, pitch, and duration. We might speak softly or loudly to emphasize a point. Again, we might speak loudly to intimidate, or express excitement. The pitch of our voice changes at times. For

instance, our voice might rise in pitch to ask a question. We sometimes pause for a long time to allow a point to sink in. On the other hand, we might speak rapidly if we are excited. The voice is a very powerful element of nonverbal communication, partly because it can be so expressive, and partly because it is always there as a part of any verbal message.

2). **The eyes**, we say, are the windows to the soul. Just a simple role of the eyes, or narrowing of the eyes can produce very powerful results in the communication process. Professional poker players wear sunglasses for an important reason. They do not want their eyes to give away the quality of their hand. When we are excited, our pupils dilate. When we are afraid, our pupils constrict. Very good poker players read the dilation of the pupils. Of course, we can't control such subtle nonverbal movements, but they convey powerful messages just the same.

3). **The face** houses the eyes, and surrounds them with additionally powerful expressions. A simple curling of the lips, raising of the eyebrows, or subtle, quick smile can convey extremely powerful emotions. When we look in the mirror, we get a false impression. We make faces at ourselves when we look in the mirror, but we are not spontaneous. Thus, we have very little idea how our faces look when we are actively communicating. You cannot see yourself while you are spontaneously communicating with your partner. But your partner sees and reacts to all of the changes in your face. Sometimes we are surprised by our partners' reaction to facial expressions of which we are totally unaware. When this occurs, we may tend to argue with our partners' perception, truthfully denying that we made such a powerful expression. That's because we can't see our own face while we are communicating. Take your partners' reactions seriously. He/she is probably picking up on a subconscious feeling you are communicating.

4). **We gesture** when we talk. Some of us gesture more than others. But these gestures augment and illustrate what we are saying. Of course, we are all familiar with "the finger", as we call it. Some gestures are more overtly expressive and more powerful than others. While some gestures are more intentional and conscious than others, many occur without thinking. Try talking with your hands behind your back. You'll feel constricted by your inability to illustrate words without hand movements.

5). **Posture**, or the positioning of our bodies primarily conveys whether or not we are involved or interested in what our partner is saying. If our body is oriented toward our partner, we send the message that we are connected. If our body is oriented away from our partner, we send the message that we are disconnected.

6). **Space** (Proxemics) refers to how close or how far away we are in relation to our partner. This is a fairly complicated nonverbal channel that is very culturally specific. That is, some cultures are more comfortable with less space between communicators than are other cultures. However, between couples, distance usually indicates a lack of connection or involvement. Closeness, to a degree

indicates connection, but only to a point. If we “get in someone’s space”, or get too close, it can be perceived, as well as intended to be threatening.

Nonverbal messages often tell us how to take verbal messages. In other words, whether or not we are conscious of the process, we monitor nonverbal behavior to find out how to interpret what our partner is saying. For instance, do we take the message literally? Do we take it facetiously, as humor? Is our partner asking a question? Is our partner angry, sad, feeling guilty, or fearful? While nonverbal messages are, by nature, ambiguous, we rely on them greatly to tell us how to interpret verbal messages.

Since feelings are such powerful parts of any message with an intimate partner, we need to be aware of, and to acknowledge them in our communication process. Later chapters will continually emphasize this important point. For now, let’s just begin to make ourselves more aware of the nonverbal elements inherent in our communication with each other.

Stop reading now and do Exercise Two with your mate. This exercise will help the two of you begin to get a feel for the nonverbal elements of your communication process.

A Few Basic Differences Between Men and Women

Subsequent chapters will speak in much greater detail about how we are different. From the start, however, we need to have some basic knowledge of our differences. Otherwise, unrealistic expectations will lead to frustration and failure in our efforts to successfully connect.

One way the literature describes our differences is to say that men are vertically oriented and women are horizontally oriented. That is, men primarily want to know who is in charge, what do we need to do, and how are we going to get it done. Women, on the other hand, want to know how we are connected, how close or how far?

Men tend to orient to logic, hierarchy and words. In fact, men often vie for verbal control of the conversation. Men want to seize “the floor” and hold it. To this end men often talk loudly, talking over women.

Women, on the other hand, are much more oriented to connection, and do not think so much about controlling the conversation. Women tend to be much more aware of the nonverbal than men. *Women produce a lot of nonverbal and verbal cues designed to let their partner know they are listening and connected.* Men tend to be oblivious to the need to demonstrate connection. *Men assume they are connected through the context*, i.e. we are talking aren’t we? Therefore, we are communicating!

Some therapists will describe women as much more attuned to “process”. This means that women tend to be more aware of the way we are communicating. Differently stated, *women tend to be very much affected by how it feels to be*

communicating in particular ways. Men on the other hand are often clueless about process and focus exclusively on the cognitive or left-brain messages being communicated. Because of this difference, men will often say or do things in the “process” of communicating that create a toxic atmosphere, or climate in which the communication is occurring. *Once the climate becomes toxic, it doesn’t matter what logic we are using.* Positive communication is not possible in a negative communication climate. Thus, *both men and women need to learn to be aware of, and attend to the climate they are creating and maintaining while they are communicating.*

Communication between men and women, of necessity, must accomplish the dual purposes of solving problems and connecting. To that end, we need to learn to appreciate and accommodate our differing ways of perceiving the purposes of communication. Importantly, however, power (assumptions of a hierarchy) between intimate partners seriously undermines our ability to establish and maintain bridges in relationships between men and women. For more information about power and intimacy, read the chapter on this subject.

The following basic conclusions will go a long way toward bridging gender gaps in communication:

1. Men orient toward problems and solutions.
2. Women orient toward connection.
3. Power, or hierarchy doesn’t work in intimate relationships.
4. We need to learn to recognize and appreciate our differing needs and assumptions while we are communicating.

Stop reading now and do Exercise Three with your mate.

Empathy: What Is It, And Why Is It Important?

You probably have heard the word, but you may not have a clear sense of what it means in action. Let’s look first at the dictionary. The dictionary defines empathy simply as “the capacity to identify with another person or object”. Maybe you have heard the old Indian adage that empathy is “walking a mile in another person’s moccasins”. Or maybe you have heard the admonition: “don’t criticize the one who limps”. “They may have a thorn in their moccasin that you don’t know about.”

These definitions all point toward empathy as the ability to take the other person’s perspective, to walk in their shoes so to speak. Now that’s a very difficult task. We tend to be so caught up in our own thoughts and feelings that, in all fairness, we only occasionally and partially accomplish any empathy at all. Our general lack of empathy creates two basic barriers to communication, and therefore intimacy.

First, without empathy, we really don’t understand our partner. To truly understand our partner, we have to think as they think, and see the world through their

eyes. If we are honest with ourselves, the capacity to step into another person's world requires a tremendous and concentrated effort. Most of the time we are caught up in the process of formulating and defending our own perceptions. It goes without saying, then, that we have little mind space to objectively consider our partner's perspective. But how can we truly understand without allowing ourselves to leave our own worlds behind, if only for a few minutes, and walk in the shoes of our intimate partner?

Second, without empathy we cannot connect with our partner on the level of their feelings. Feeling connections provide the most powerful bond in any communication process. That is, when someone truly connects with what another person is feeling, they automatically feel bonded with that person. We draw a great deal of comfort from feeling bonds when they are generated. In fact, these feeling bonds are necessary for our survival, and inherent in our nature as human beings.

As you will discover in the chapter on communicating with yourself, women tend to do a better job of expressing empathy than do men. Men often focus on tasks to the exclusion of feelings. Consequently, men depend on their relationships with women for empathy, but women often have to go outside their relationships with their husbands to find any empathy. This is not a healthy dynamic, in that it creates an inherent imbalance in gendered relationships. When we seek feeling bonds outside our intimate relationships to make up for what we are not getting inside our relationships, we invest our most intimate thoughts and feelings somewhere else. At best, our relationship with our intimate partner becomes perpetually impoverished. At worst, we engage in competing relationships that sometimes result in emotional and sexual unfaithfulness. Then our relationships are destroyed and we have to start all over again, looking for another intimate relationship.

The disaster of separation, divorce, and the destruction of the family structure can often be prevented by learning to establish and maintain empathic connections. So, without any further adieu, let's practice.

Stop reading now and do Exercise Four with your mate.

Exercises for Basic Communication

Exercise One

You and your partner need to sit facing each other. Turn off the TV, telephones, etc., so that you will have no interferences. If you have children, wait until they are in bed or elsewhere. You will be taking turns speaking and paraphrasing.

1. One person begins by sending a message to the other. You may select any topic. However, make sure that your message is not too long for your partner to remember and paraphrase. When you have put a message into your own

words stop talking. This is very important. Most of the time we say too much before allowing time for our partner to think about what we have said, much less to give us feedback.

2. The listener then says back to the receiver something to the effect of: "What I hear you saying is _____, paraphrasing back to the speaker in his or her own words the message received.
3. The speaker then gives direct feedback by responding either a) yes, that's what I meant, or b) no, that's not quite what I meant. If the answer is b), the speaker explains to the listener in different words what he/she meant. Then, the listener repeats step 2, and so on, until you both agree the message is mutually understood.
4. Switch the roles of speaker and listener, letting the former listener now formulate and speak a message, and the former speaker listen and give paraphrased feedback.
5. Continue this exercise, switching roles, until you feel that you both have the idea firmly in mind.

Exercise Two

1. Sit back to back with your partner. Do not turn your heads. Begin having a conversation. Talk for at least five minutes. Notice how different it feels to be having a conversation in which you cannot see your partner.
2. After five minutes turn face to face. Talk about how this experience was different from the way you are accustomed to communicate. Describe to each other the elements of nonverbal communication that were eliminated from your communication process. Describe how it felt to each of you to not be able to see the nonverbal messages.
3. Which nonverbal channel could you still observe? That's right, the vocal element, i.e. changes in volume, pitch, and duration of sounds. The vocal element is always there when we are speaking words. Did you depend on the vocal channel more while back to back? How did you use the changes in vocal qualities in your partners' voice to interpret his/her message?

Exercise Three

1. Pick a topic from your recent experience.
2. Begin a discussion of this topic. During this discussion, reverse gender roles. That is, the man is to focus on connecting through words and nonverbal means, avoiding any focus on problems or solutions. The woman is to focus on the basic questions of a). What is the problem?, and b). How can we fix it?
3. Give the discussion at least 10 minutes of your time.

4. After the discussion, share with each other how it felt to be on the other side of the gender gap. If you do this well, you will discover empathy for your intimate partner when you are solely in your opposite gender roles.
5. Try the same discussion again, this time in your natural gender roles. This time, the man is to focus on the problem and solution, but at the same time, he is to work on using verbal and nonverbal means to establish and maintain a connection with his partner. The woman is to assume her natural role, but at the same time she is to try to appreciate and include her partner's need to solve a problem.
6. Remember how it felt to do Step 5. This is where you want to be in on an ongoing basis, in all of your future discussions.

Exercise Four

1. Think of a topic you would like to discuss with your partner. Make sure your topic is one that seriously involves some of your own feelings.
2. Decide which one of you will talk first. The first person to talk is to take all of the time necessary to tell the other not only what you think, but most importantly how you feel about the topic.
3. The listener is to try, throughout the partner's explanation, to simply wipe your mind clean and keep it clear of your own opinions or thoughts. During this time the listener is to try very hard to simply understand and feel what the partner is thinking and feeling. Use both words (paraphrasing) and nonverbal expressions (face, voice, posture, etc.) to let your partner see and feel your empathy.
4. When the talker decides they have fully expressed their perspective, and the listener has practiced empathy sufficiently, stop, reflect, and give feedback. In particular, the speaker is to tell the listener whether or not they truly felt their partner understood and felt what they were thinking and feeling.
5. Now switch the roles of speaker and listener, and complete the exercise again. This exercise will give you a beginning experience through which you can measure your capacity for empathy, as well as practice and develop the skill.