

Relationships

COMMUNICATION: HOW MISUNDERSTANDINGS HAPPEN



Everyone knows a
good relationship
is built on
communication.

But how well do
we do?



Every time you open your mouth, there are at least four variations:

1. What you meant to say: "Wow, you are gorgeous. I love you."
2. What you actually said: "Wow, you look great today. That dress really suits you."
3. What the other person thinks they heard: "You look great *today* in *that* dress."
4. What the other person interpreted it to mean: "You look fat other days in other dresses."

That rather extreme example shows someone "filtering" a message through what is in their head. We all have filters: our mood, our context, our life experience, our self-esteem. That is why it's so important not to react before checking what you think you heard: "Are you saying I'm fat?" He says, "Fat? No!" He could add, "Where on earth did you get that idea? Listen to me, not the voices in your head!" But he would be much wiser simply to restate his message. "I meant you're gorgeous. Especially today. And I love you." The more you know yourself, the more you can remove your filters and hear clearly. For example, "I was called Fatty at school, which is why I sometimes hear you wrongly. But I know I'm not fat, and I'm working on my self-esteem." This helps the other person know you. "Ah, now that I know that, how can I help?"

Paraphrasing

In tricky or emotionally-charged situations, it can be useful to use paraphrasing—that is, checking that you have understood by restating the message back to the speaker in your own words. If he says, "How could you leave me alone at that party with those ghastly, boring people? I've told you I hate that. And then I find you talking to an old boyfriend!" She would be wise to say, "Can I check that I understand? You're angry because you felt bored at the party, even though you feel you've told me before, and because you feel jealous of my old boyfriend. Correct?" He now has the chance to clarify anything. "I wasn't just bored. I was afraid of those backstabbers." She can now give feedback on that. "So their nastiness worries you." Now, at least he feels listened to and understood. Now it's her turn to speak. "I didn't realise they were a problem to you. I guess I figured you could tie them in knots." He might butt in: "How can you say you didn't know? I've told you before!" (Actually he should have listened to her whole story, and checked he had it clear, before swooping in on a detail.) She

could say, "Have you? Sorry I didn't get that message. But now I understand. And don't worry—that creep I went out with once is now a managing director and I want their business."

Feedback is the way to check out if you really understand, rather than assume. "You seem to be frowning. Have I offended you?" You might get, "Yes, what did you mean by . . . ?" Or, "Oh, no. I can feel a migraine coming on." You can also ask the other person to check they've understood your message, especially if you feel it's important, emotionally heavy or tricky to understand. This form of feedback may seem unnatural at first, but it works and with time will become natural.



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Are you listening to me?!

Why don't people listen? Huh? I said, why . . . aargh!

Some people never seem to hear what you say. How do you feel when it seems your words are bouncing off? Do you ever do that to people?

Here are the top few irritating attitudes:

- **I know what you're going to say.** (Message: You're predictable and boring.)
- **My answer will be.** (My reply will be more important than your chatter.)
- **Yeah, yeah, now let me talk.** (You're not really important. It's all about me.)
- **Hurry up.** (What, you have a cab waiting? Let it go.)
- **My mind is made up.** (Don't confuse me with the facts.)
- **I know what you should do.** (What, before you've really heard the situation?)
- **I don't want to know.** (I have much more important things to do. I think you're silly or beneath me.)

Good listening

Listen, it's not enough just to listen. You have to let your partner feel heard. How do you let them know you're listening?

- **Empathy.** Use your imagination to see things from their point of view and try to understand their feelings.
- **Acceptance.** Even if you don't agree with some of their ideas or actions, accept them as people, and be tolerant and forgiving of their mistakes.
- **Clarifying what you think you heard.**
- **Acknowledge what they've said, even if you don't agree.** "I see your point about Joe. However . . ." "Thanks for telling me your take on things. I see it differently . . ."
- **Keep quiet at times so they can think.** Don't tailgate their last word with your first—it's stressful.

- **Keep focus.** Your brain is faster than their mouth, even if they are a horserace commentator. If you try to time-share your brain and use the extra capacity on something else (like planning your share portfolio), you are not really focusing on them. You might be found out when they say, “What do you think about it?”, and you realise you haven’t been listening for the last two minutes.

Your listening style

How do you talk in different situations?

- **Conversational.** “And then I said to her . . .” This is for storytelling, joking, telling news and chatting. It’s safe and friendly and it helps put everyone at ease by staying on safe topics. But it does not allow deep, personal sharing about inner feelings and ideas.
- **Light control.** “I’d suggest you . . .”, “Your best bet is to . . .” This is for advice, teaching, directing or selling. It can be helpful, but can come across as pushy, as though you know better, and can create tension and power struggles, and can even suggest you are better than they are.
- **Heavy control.** “Listen, you should . . .”, “You have to . . .”, “Don’t ever . . .”, “Oh, come on . . .” This sounds like blaming, accusing, demanding, whining or warning. It can sound aggressive. It may be fine for an emergency or to bring heavy conflict into the open, but it shows little respect and shuts down communication. People who use it a lot are showing that they have low self-esteem and are trying to feel strong and good by taking power over others.
- **Open and straight.** “How do you feel about . . .?”, “I feel worried that . . .”, “My view is . . .” This is a friendly offer to tell you how I see it, and to listen to how you see it and try to understand. It makes the other person feel like a respected equal, and you like a reasonable and thoughtful human being. It allows you to keep calm, to focus only on thoughts when that is safer, and to invite people to open up their feelings where appropriate. It is not pushy, but exploratory (“I think . . .”). It is real, accepting and lessens tension. It is the “calm, sweet voice of reason” that builds honest, trusting relationships and grows real people.

Listening: What are you trying to achieve?

Why do you talk? Unless you are on a mission to set the world straight (in which case check your self-esteem), you communicate because you want to know people and be known, and want to like and be liked. But how deeply? It’s useful to think of levels of communication, and the level you use depends on the occasion, the person and the stage or type of relationship.



1. Clichés

For example, “Nice day” or “How are you?” This type of chat recognises another person and lets you size each other up without any commitment—you can tell a lot about a person from two words if you’re paying attention to tone, body language, facial expressions and so on. You can decide whether to keep talking.

2. Facts

For example, “The meeting is running overtime” or “We’ve won the cricket.” This is suitable for everyday business. It may lead to more conversation, but it’s still safe and impersonal so no-one is committed to talk more or wear their heart on their sleeve and risk rejection. Many men feel safest at this level.

3. Opinions and judgements

For example, “I love Robin Williams’s movies.” This is starting to reveal more about you. This is a risk—if they disagree with an opinion based on your core values, will that feel like a rejection of you? Many marriages get stuck here. Talking at this level still feels fairly safe, but couples who do not venture deeper into feelings will eventually find themselves bored with “nothing left to talk about”. Of course you need to go carefully past this point so that each feels understood and able to be honest.

4. Feelings

For example, “I’m disappointed with the marks I got”, “I’m so proud of my son’s award” or “My boss is driving me nuts.” This is getting near your heart, revealing your struggles, victories, fears, anxieties and highs. If the listener acknowledges your emotions, you will feel understood. If they miss the point or disagree, you may feel a little hurt, and want to cover up. Even in a world of celebrity bare-all interviews, sharing real feelings is a risk—but the reward is you will know another person, and be known yourself. One writer has described heaven as the place where we “know fully and are fully known” and loved.¹



5. Needs and inner self

I might have been a bit stupid.

[Accept me.]

They’re planning cutbacks at work and I’m really worried.

[Understand my fear.]

I hate seeing children in pain at work.

[Comfort me.]

I live for my children and my music.

[Know me.]

This is the real you. It reveals your strengths, weaknesses, beliefs, moods, traits. The more you trust your partner, the more you can open up and get really close to the person. If you’ve ever been really listened to and understood, you know how good it feels. It also feels good to be able to give that to the person you love, and see them relax and shine. It takes time and patience. This is intimacy. There is no need to hide or put an emotional fig leaf over some part of yourself you think is unlovable. In the old story of love in paradise, Adam and Eve are totally naked together “and they knew no shame”.

Obviously you are allowed to keep some secrets if you choose. There are some things that no partner should have to deal with, and which can destroy a relationship:

- “Truth is your fat is off-putting and your skin is blotchy. You’re not very desirable.”
- “I only married you because my parents pushed me.” One writer said the ideal is “speaking the truth in love”². Obviously even if those statements are true, there’s not much love in them. For successful conversation, we need the ability to move from one level to another as appropriate to the occasion. Some relationships will never get very deep, and that’s fine. It’s hardly expected that you’ll walk into a sales meeting and get straight to level five. A man might never get past level three with a friend he has known for years. A woman might go straight through level three opinions to level four feelings after 10 minutes with a new hairdresser. In a marriage, a lot of everyday conversation might be at levels two and three. But if you get stuck there, you will feel lonely and bored.

It is well known that most women find feelings easier to discuss than most men do. Yet men who become emotionally intelligent and competent are more likely not just to have happy relationships across the board, but also to achieve more highly at work and be generally happier. Having a high “EQ” (emotional IQ) doesn’t mean you are more emotional and sob down your sleeve whenever you see a daisy. It means you can read other people’s emotions as well as your own, and are comfortable dealing with them.

Getting to level five is a challenge to be real. Most of us have learned from childhood to cover up parts of ourselves that we don’t think people will like. When we’re attracted to someone, we’ll hardly walk up to them and say, “Hi, I’m Danny and I’m a bit grumpy, bossy and irrational at times.” We show our best self. Some of us form a relationship hoping that it will change us, dreaming that we can suck in our stomachs, control our tempers and become the handsome prince or beautiful princess. This false self is not convincing for long. When initial infatuation and the sexual starburst fade to a steady glow, we really see who we’re with and show who we really are. That can be scary, but the opportunity to know and be known is our real chance to love and be loved. This is the aim of communication in marriage.



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Application questions

- What are the main miscommunications you've had so far? What filters do they reveal in you? In your partner? Have you talked these over?
- Ask your partner to make up some heavy, emotional speeches. Practise paraphrasing them. (It will feel funny at first and you might laugh, but you are learning an important skill.)
- Do you ever experience any of the non-listening attitudes? Why?
- Which listening style do you usually practise? What does that say about you? About your partner? Could you change it if you wanted to? Be really open here: How happy are you with the usual levels of communication in your marriage? How happy is your partner—really? Do you ever get stuck anywhere? Why? What could change that

Handy hints for couple communication

- Let love be the motivation for all interactions
- Be interested in each other's interests and concerns
- Remember to restore the intimacy to your relationship when one of you has had to travel away for periods of time
- Lay aside regular time for each other
- Look up facts on your partner's favourite topics
- Use communication times to ask questions, explore options and ideas, and build better understanding
- Respect your partner's feelings and opinions, even if they differ from yours
- Avoid interruptions. Allow each other the same amount of time to talk
- Forgive mistakes and do not dwell on them. Work towards solutions
- Highlight and focus on the positives



REFERENCES:

1. 1 Corinthians 13:12, The Bible.
2. Ephesians 4:15, The Bible.

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