

Healthy Communication

By Elizabeth Taeubert LCSW

One of the most important aspects of a healthy, successful relationship is effective communication between both parties. This is true of all relationships, including life partners, parents, children, siblings, friends or co-workers. In almost all areas of our lives we want to have relationships in which we feel truly heard and understood by the other person and at the same time able to listen and understand what the other wants us to know. When communication is healthy we feel more connected, collaborative, and cooperative.

What is Communication? Communication is defined as a process by which we assign and convey meaning in an attempt to create shared understanding. Communication is made up of 7% words, 38% how those words are spoken (paraverbal messages) and 55% non-verbal cues. To communicate well with another person we need to account for 100% -- everything that is going on. Not only should we focus on the person's words, we should also be attentive to their non-verbal behavior. Furthermore, communication is a two-way process, so we need to be aware of how our own words and body language influence communication.

The words we use matter! Our language has a huge impact. Words that are critical, blaming, or accusatory create a resistant and defensive reaction. Marshall Rosenberg author of "Nonviolent Communication" recommends using language that describes observations, feelings, needs and requests.

Paraverbal messages are transmitted through the tone, pitch, and pacing of our voices. It's *how we say something*, not *what we say*. A statement can convey entirely different meanings depending on the emphasis on words and the tone of voice.

- When we are angry or excited, our speech tends to become more rapid and higher pitched
- When we are bored or feeling down, our speech tends to slow and take on a monotone quality.
- When we are feeling defensive, our speech is often abrupt.

Nonverbal messages are the primary way that we communicate emotions. The face is an important way we convey emotional information. A face can light up with enthusiasm, energy and approval, express confusion or boredom, and scowl with displeasure. The eyes are particularly expressive in relating joy, sadness, anger, or confusion. Body postures also communicate emotional content as well as intention. A posture of arms open gives a different message than arms closed across the chest. Facing the person when we speak communicates something different than looking away as we speak.

Healthy communication is essential for any relationship. When relationships are going along just fine we don't tend to notice how we are communicating. However, when conflict arises or misinterpretations occur it is important to examine how we are communicating. Become active in creating healthy patterns again. Choose words that are non-blaming. Listen to the tone that you use when you speak and be aware of your nonverbal messages. Ask yourself "Do I want to be heard and understood?" The answer most often is yes. How you choose to communicate will make a difference!

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