

A field of yellow flowers, possibly rapeseed, with a semi-transparent text box overlay. The text box is a dark, muted yellow color and contains the letter 'B', a horizontal line, and the title 'COMMUNICATING FOR CONNECTION'.

B

COMMUNICATING FOR
CONNECTION

Loving Others Well

Building Relationship Skills for
Supportive Friendships

Student Manual

Module B: Communicating for Connection

My Neighbor to Love Coalition / Lighthouse Beginnings

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COMMUNICATING FOR CONNECTION

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1.1

LISTENING

The skill of listening is essential to being an effective support person. Listening to hear not only what another person is saying but also how they are feeling communicates value and love. This, in turn, creates a safe space and the opportunity to help shape the other's life in a way that can bring healing and transformation.

LISTENING WELL

In this lesson you will:

- Recognize the difference between hearing and listening
- Identify factors that contribute to your ability and inability to listen
- Consider the benefits of listening well

LISTENING WELL

Hearing and Listening are Not the Same

The skill of listening may be the most important topic when it comes to loving others well. Most of us think we are better listeners than we are in reality. Listening involves not only hearing what a person is saying but also how he or she feels.

**“Listening shapes us;
not feeling heard twists us.”**

- Michael P Nichols.

Hearing and listening are not the same; you can hear a multitude of messages without ever truly listening. Listening requires us to stay present and focused. There are numerous factors that influence a person’s ability and inability to listen. Let’s consider some of those dreadful distractions.

Distractions to Listening Well

There are two basic categories of distractions: external and internal.

External distractions surround us and it is our responsibility to manage them.



A major external distraction is our cell phones. When they are in view or even in our pockets, they have the potential to distract us. Ideally, when meeting with someone, avoid having your cell phone out. If you are “on call” and need to be available in the case of an emergency, you will need to consider how you will address this with the person you are supporting.

Glancing at a cell phone or a watch communicates to the other person that you have a limited amount of time or potentially worse, that whatever is next on your schedule is more important than them. Realize that in most situations there will be a clock on the wall, and if at all possible, schedule buffer time into your schedule.



Try to keep your meeting space free from clutter that might draw your attention. A stack of papers or projects that are waiting for you may cause the other person to feel as though you have too much to do and don’t have time for them.

COMMUNICATING FOR CONNECTION: LISTENING WELL

Keep this in mind with virtual conversations also. Remove pictures or objects so you have a neutral background, or choose a virtual background that will likely be pleasing to the eye. Do everything you can to make your in-person or virtual space feel warm, welcoming, and free from distractions. If necessary, get feedback from someone you trust to give you an honest opinion of how your space feels.



Internal distractions come in all shapes and sizes, and while they may not be immediately noticeable, their presence is felt. A relationship issue, such as having a heated discussion with a significant other, colleague, or friend and not decompressing before you are scheduled to meet with someone else, is an example of a pre-existing internal distraction. Waiting to receive a call regarding medical results, or having a deadline for a major project just around the corner are other examples of this type of internal distractions

As human beings and not machines, there are times when shutting off those

internal distractions may be challenging. Awareness of them will remind you to seek ways to calm yourself before a conversation and to intentionally set those internal distractions aside until after the conversation. Rather than discussing the distraction with the other person during the meeting, take time, before meeting to readjust your perspective. Acknowledge the value and worth of the other person and make honoring your time with them a top priority. Seek to be fully present in the moment, living in the now.

During the session, you may experience pop-up distractions. In that case, it's best to acknowledge them and apologize to the person with whom you are visiting. If you are anticipating an interruption during a visit, communicating that up front is always best. Your mindset should be that It is necessary for you, as a supportive friend, to submit to the needs of the person with whom you are conversing.

Consider:

What distractions have you experienced during a recent personal conversation?

What could you have done differently to avoid being distracted?

Listening as an Art

Listening is the key to a good conversation and will enable you to ask the right questions at the right time, and make the time together worthwhile. Unfortunately, most individuals experience people who are not good listeners. Nichols states, “Contemporary pressures have, regrettably, shrunk our attention spans and impoverished the quality of listening in our lives. We live in increasingly hurried times . . .”

It is important to realize that listening is a skill and must be developed through practice like any other skill. Nichols has noted that a major reason we fail to listen is because we respond without thinking and crowd out understanding. So when you are going to meet with someone, say to yourself: “It’s not about me!” Choose to focus on the other person and allow for times of space and silence in the conversation so you can thoughtfully take

in the other person’s words as though you were savoring a wonderful and delicious meal. Consider the conversation to be as a gift.

“It’s not about me!”

Seek to create a safe space for the other person to communicate. Allow him or her the freedom to voice what matters most to them. The number one thing that individuals seek from conversations is to be understood; to be known. When a person is understood, he or she feels validated and valuable. As a good listener, you are to be a witness, not a judge of the other person’s experience. Nichols writes, “Being listened to means that we are taken seriously, that our feelings are recognized, and ultimately, that what we have to say matters.”

View the one with whom you are engaged as a unique and wonderful person. Individuals can sense when you are genuinely engaged and interested in who they are. Respect that each person you encounter is resourceful, capable, and whole. Do not engage in a conversation with the goal of fixing the other person.

Listening involves far more than being able to repeat back what was said. Listening as an art includes paying attention, taking an interest, caring about and taking to heart what the other person is saying; validating and acknowledging them, being moved and appreciating. According to Nichols, this kind of listening “nourishes our sense of worth.”

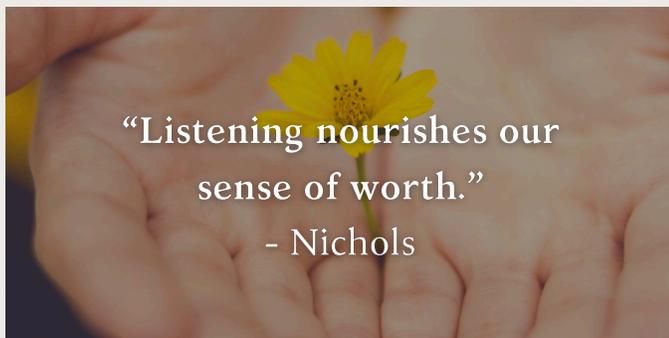
COMMUNICATING FOR CONNECTION: LISTENING WELL

Your goal then, as a supportive friend, is to hear the heart's cry; to go deep enough to allow the holy to be spoken.

Consider:

What is the goal of listening well?

What effect does listening well have on the other person?



Communication Breakdowns

Be alert to the things that will inhibit

your ability to listen and cause communication breakdowns.

1. One's own agenda

If you come to the conversation with a preconceived agenda, you will project onto the conversation your needs rather than attending to the needs of the person with whom you are meeting. Suspend your own agenda and approach the process free of expectations.

2. Time restraints

If the opportunity for a conversation is unexpected - someone drops by for a quick visit - consider adopting the practice of letting them know if you have something else on your schedule. You could say something like, “I can tell that this is an important conversation and I want to be fully present for you, but I have another commitment in x amount of time. Is it possible to schedule another time to have this conversation?”

Most people appreciate openness and honesty about your desire to visit with them and your need to honor another commitment.

3. Transference or countertransference

If you are having difficulty connecting with the other person, you may be experiencing transference or countertransference. Transference is defined as “The way in which a speaker's experience of a listener is unconsciously organized according to preestablished expectations.”

Example of transference:

A Creekside Community resident who has been raised by a hostile, angry father tends to feel negatively about one of the men who is a supportive friend. The resident finds themselves responding negatively even when this man is trying to be warm and accepting. They are transferring their negative feelings about their father onto this supportive friend.

Countertransference is defined as a situation in which “the listener has an emotional reaction that interferes with hearing what’s being said.” Another way to express this is hearing the voices of someone from your past. If the other person’s voice brings up something in you that has nothing to do with him/her, you may be experiencing countertransference..

Example of countertransference:

The supportive friend thinks their client has a similar personality to someone from their personal life, and in response to that thought, they treat them like they might treat this other person.

As a listener in the grip of countertransference, your mature responses like empathy, perspective, humor, wisdom, and concern for the other person will be distorted through the prism of your emotions. To address this issue, take time after the experience to seek out the root that caused those feelings to emerge. Ask yourself, “What brought that up in me?” This will aid you in avoiding similar

feelings in the future.

4. Preconceived notions

Make a mental note of the times when you expect a person to respond in a particular manner. Even if the expectations are based on knowing a person well, they may hinder the relationship and the other person’s growth. Approach a conversation with the desire to discover - as an adventure. Seek to learn and search out who the other person really is. You are not a mind-reader!

5. Unmet needs

It is critical that you do not come to a conversation to have your needs met. It is in those times that you may slip into advice mode - trying to satisfy your need to feel wise or important. You may not be giving direct advice but rather leading the person to where you think he or she needs to go. This does not honor the one with whom you are visiting. It also assumes that you know what is best for him or her.

Just as a patient would not expect to give his or her doctor medical advice, as a supportive friend you should not expect to have your listening needs met in your conversations. Make sure you have others with whom you can have your needs met such as a counselor, a coach, a spiritual director, a pastor, etc. Our role is to serve, but you can not offer what you don’t have to give. If your tank is empty, you will have nothing to offer. Also, if you find that a particular situation is bringing up unresolved feelings, you need to reach out and address this with a professional.

6. Poorly timed honesty

Honesty isn't always a good thing. Individuals may say they want you to be honest with them, but offering your honest opinion is not always beneficial. Timing is everything. Being honest when you have not built a trusting relationship may wound the other person so that he/she is no longer willing to share their thoughts and dreams. It is crucial that a person feels safe enough to share his or her brainstorm.

As a supportive friend, it is unkind and unhelpful to rescue someone who isn't desiring to be rescued. The other person needs to be ready to accept your help.

7. Interrupting

Do not finish a person's sentence or jump in to interject your thoughts. Let the other person lead the dance.

Listen, and remember the acronym WAIT ... Why Am I Talking?

WAIT...

Why

Am

I

Talking?

Characteristics of Listening Well

What makes for good listening?

1. Genuine interest

Take a genuine interest in the person with whom you are communicating. One of the greatest gifts of love we can extend to another is the art of listening. Nichols writes, "Genuine listening means suspending memory, desire and judgment - and for a few moments at least, existing for the other person."

2. Listening with your whole being

Listen with your whole being to another person's whole being. Miller and Hall suggest that one should focus on both what is said and what is not said. Pay attention to the other person's energy level, their body language, their tone of voice, and the flow of the conversation.

3. The 80-20 rule

Eighty percent of the time you should be listening and twenty percent of the time talking - more specifically, asking questions and seeking for more information.

4. Empathetic listening

Empathetic listening looks like being attentive. You are largely silent, following, not leading, and encouraging the speaker to go deeper into his or her experience. You welcome the other person to say more; to expand. Sometimes a simple "uh huh," "I see," or "tell me more" frees the other person to investigate what he or she is experiencing.

COMMUNICATING FOR CONNECTION: LISTENING WELL

Remember, the goal is to understand; empathic listening allows the other person to explore his or her depths.

As an empathetic listener, you will have to balance between thinking and feeling. Nichols indicates, “This requires a deliberate shift from feeling *with* a speaker to thinking *about* her. What is she saying? Meaning? Feeling? You are there to help the other person position herself for growth. If you only feel deeply with another person, you may be incapable of supporting him or her.

5. Being comfortable with silence

Allow the individual space to think and process. Both introverts and extroverts need space in a conversation to think. The goal is not just to keep the conversation going. Allow quiet time and

don't force continual dialogue. Recognizing the areas you need to grow in is the first step to becoming a better listener. Listening is not an easy task. It will require attention and practice but it is powerful in supporting people on their journey to becoming all they were created to be.

Notes:



DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How is listening (active listening) different from hearing (passive listening)?
2. What is the goal of listening well?
3. Think of someone you know who is a good listener. How do they make others feel heard?
4. What does it feel like to have someone actively listen to you?
5. What are some barriers to listening well? Which barriers most frequently affect your ability to actively listen?
6. What distractions have you experienced during a recent personal conversation? What could you have done differently to avoid being distracted?

PRACTICE, ROLE PLAY, OR MORE TO CONSIDER

1. Practice mindful listening:

Stop what you are doing, close your eyes, and try to see how many sounds you can hear around you and within you. Notice if there are judgments arising and try not to attach to them. Stay with the flow of sounds for the full time allotted or for as long as you can.

2. Practice through introductions

Break into groups of two. For two minutes, have one person introduce themselves to their partner. Reverse roles for the second two minutes. Then have each pair introduce one another to the rest of the group.

Discuss what made the exercise hard or easy, and explore the experience from each person's perspective (introducer; introducee)
(Credit: WorkSmart Blog. Asnawi Yusof.)

3. Practice with a partner:

One partner shares a story of something emotional that happened, and the listener will practice the following techniques:

1. Demonstrating listening through body language and nonverbal responses
2. Reflecting back the content of what the partner shared
3. Reflecting back the emotions that the partner shared

Check in with your partner after you've "reflected" back to them what you understood them to say to be sure that it was accurate.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Hearing What People Have to Say

Active listening is a communication skill that helps you understand a person's complete message. It allows you to concentrate on what is being conveyed verbally and non-verbally.

How to practice active listening:

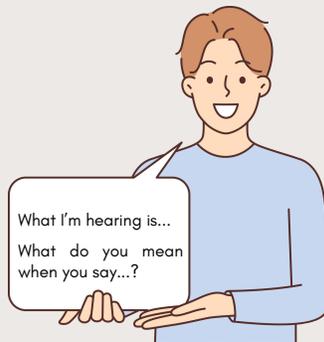
1. Pay Attention

Focus on the person who is talking. Notice their tone and body language. Ignore distractions.



3. Give Feedback

Reflect back to the speaker by briefly restating in your own words what has been said. Ask open-ended questions to clarify and make sure you understood the speaker correctly.



2. Show You're Listening

Nod, smile, and say "yes" or "uh-huh" to encourage the person to continue. Maintain eye contact.



5. Respond Appropriately

Once you have gained information and understand the other person's perspective, be open, honest and respectful in your response, even when you don't agree. Avoid attacking or putting down the speaker.



4. Be Patient

Wait until the person has finished their point before asking questions or offering your counter argument. Avoid interrupting.

Be sure you really hear what the person is trying to communicate. Active listening is not a checklist to follow, but a means of understanding a person's complete message.

Practicing active listening can increase your productivity, improve your relationships, and help you avoid conflict.

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Christ-Centered Corner

Encouragement From a Christian Perspective

Our God is One who listens well. David demonstrates His confidence in God's active listening when he writes in Psalm 17:6 "I call on You, God, because You will answer me; listen closely to me; hear what I say."

Active listening is part of God's nature; He is Elohim Shama. Shama is an active word and means to listen and pay attention to; to position yourself as a listener to serve and care for the one who is speaking. The God who listened and was moved by Hagar in her exile (Genesis 16), Hannah in her longing for a son (1 Samuel), and Daniel in His distress over a prophecy (Daniel 9) has placed His Spirit in us. He has given us "ears that hear and eyes that see" (Prov 20:12) both physically and spiritually, and He has clothed us in the humility of Christ so that we can set aside our own interests and be completely available to another person. The gift of God's full attention is fully ours, and we are to pass that gift on in the way we listen to others.

As believers, we are admonished to be slow to speak and quick to listen (James 1:19). Proverbs makes it clear that choosing to do otherwise is the mark of a fool:

*Proverbs 18:2 - Fools find no pleasure in understanding
but delight in airing their own opinions.*

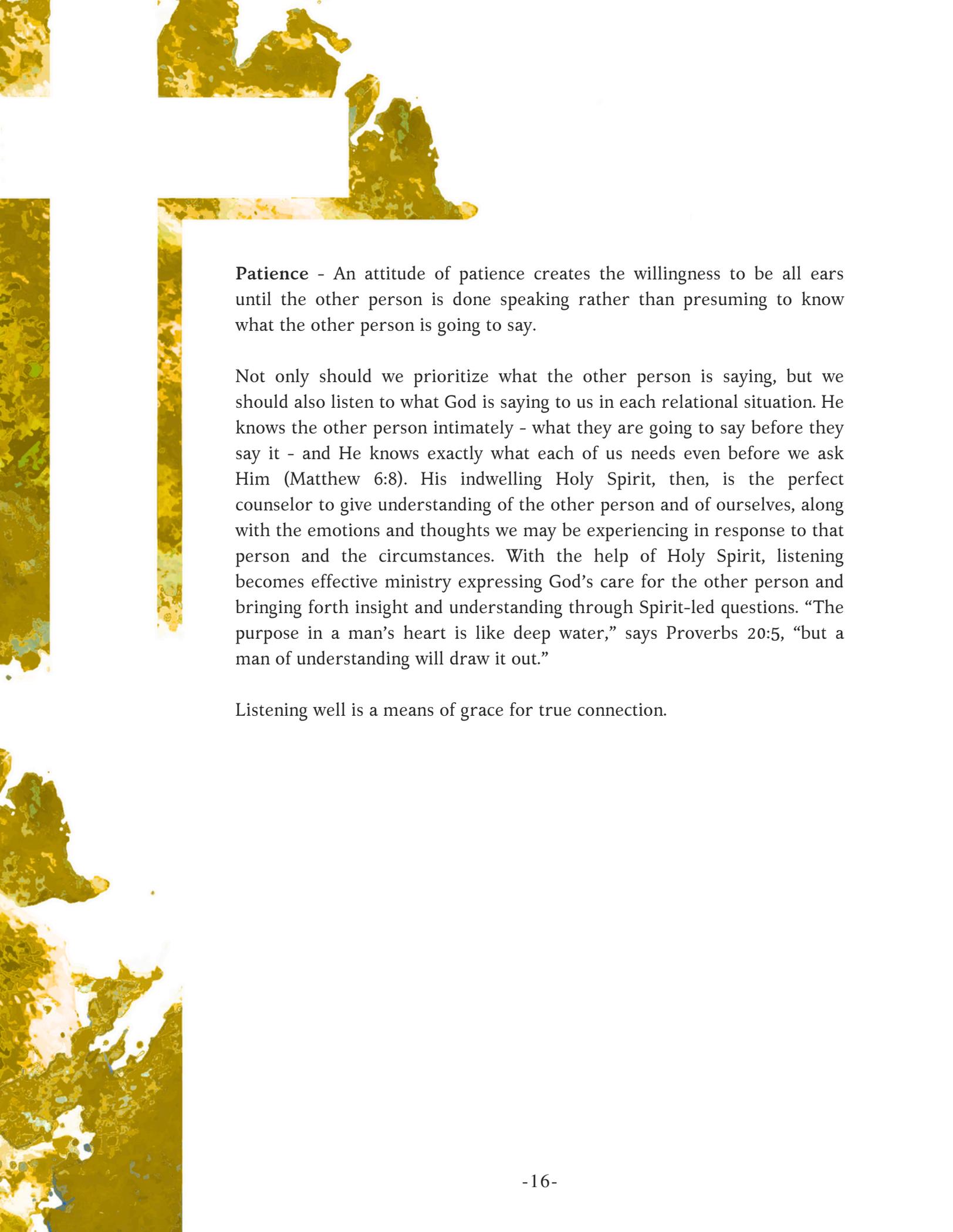
*Proverbs 18:7 - The mouths of fools are their undoing,
and their lips are a snare to their very lives.*

Proverbs 18:13 - To answer before listening— that is folly and shame.

*Proverbs 29:20 - Do you see someone who speaks in haste?
There is more hope for a fool than for them.*

The fruit of the Spirit gives us all we need to accomplish the mandate of listening well:

Love - Listening well flows out of a heart of love that recognizes the value of the other person. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Just as love to God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them."



Patience - An attitude of patience creates the willingness to be all ears until the other person is done speaking rather than presuming to know what the other person is going to say.

Not only should we prioritize what the other person is saying, but we should also listen to what God is saying to us in each relational situation. He knows the other person intimately - what they are going to say before they say it - and He knows exactly what each of us needs even before we ask Him (Matthew 6:8). His indwelling Holy Spirit, then, is the perfect counselor to give understanding of the other person and of ourselves, along with the emotions and thoughts we may be experiencing in response to that person and the circumstances. With the help of Holy Spirit, listening becomes effective ministry expressing God's care for the other person and bringing forth insight and understanding through Spirit-led questions. "The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water," says Proverbs 20:5, "but a man of understanding will draw it out."

Listening well is a means of grace for true connection.

1.2

HEALTHY COMMUNICATION

Communication touches almost every aspect of your life. Learning to communicate better will enable you to establish good relationships and model for others healthy communication that will help them in their personal and professional life.

HEALTHY COMMUNICATION

In this lesson you will:

- Learn how communication fulfills four human needs
- Learn the value of effective listening and how to “HEAR”
- Learn the importance of talking/self-disclosing
- Learn the importance of self-awareness
- Understand how emotional intelligence and mindfulness lead to better communication
- Recognize your own implicit biases

HEALTHY COMMUNICATION

Why Bother With Communication?

Communications was first considered an art form by the ancient Greeks. In the 4th century BC, which is called the “Golden Age of Rhetoric, ancient Greek philosophers and scholars such as Aristotle theorized about the art of speaking well and persuasively. Aristotle’s Rhetoric was the first real study of communications. Communication has been called the most practical of the academic disciplines.

Even though you may not have had formal training, you have already had a lifetime of experience communicating. However, it is worth learning how to be a better communicator. Communication touches virtually every aspect of our lives! Studies indicate 80-90% of our waking day involves communicating with others. An understanding of communication will help you in many ways. It will help you in your personal life, your professional life, your community life, and it will certainly help you feel better about yourself!



“Realizing the mechanics of talking greatly changes how you view the world and relationships.”

- Ana Greening

According to communications scholars, you should focus on communication to improve your:

- Employability
- Relationships
- Health

1. Study communication to improve your employability.

Most people will have many different jobs throughout the course of their lives. Communication skills make it easier to *obtain* and *keep* the kinds of jobs you most desire. Employers are often looking for skills that go beyond qualifications and experience. This includes being able to communicate with a wide variety of people and in a wide variety of contexts. Employers want the people who will work for them to be able to speak effectively and listen carefully. These soft skills are “employability skills”; they are what makes one employable.

2. Study communication to improve your relationships.

At the heart of most people’s lives are the relationships they form with others. And at the heart of a good relationship is good communication. A healthy relationship demands that both partners are open and honest with one another and that they are willing to listen to one another fully and empathically. All

relationships have ups and downs, but a healthy communication style can make it easier to deal with conflict, and build a stronger and healthier partnership.



3. Study communication to improve your health.

How likely are you to strike up a conversation with the cashier who rings up your purchases? How about a neighbor out walking her dog? Your pastor at church? Would you do so more often if you knew it would make you healthier and help you live longer?

Research suggests that there are multiple benefits that will impact your health when you are better able to communicate with others:

1. You will have a healthier social network.
2. You will feel safer and more secure.
3. You will have a stronger sense of self worth and overall well-being.
4. Face-to-face contact with others leads to richer brain activity.
5. All of these benefits contribute to improved health and longevity.

Put it Into Practice:

Think about your own life right now. In what ways will becoming a better communicator help you with your job?

Your relationships?

Your health?

What is one thing you can do today to make healthy communication matter?

The Value of Listening

How many times have you talked with someone only to later realize you couldn't remember a word of what was said? How about getting accused of not being a good listener? If the answer to these two questions causes your guilt to rise, don't be too hard on yourself: you are not alone. Although the average

person spends 45% of a day listening, listening is not often done skillfully. Though desired by employers and essential for relationships, it is often overlooked and under-taught. There is much to be gained by understanding how to be an effective listener.

This is especially important when it comes to managing conflict, which requires empathetic listening, or “therapeutic listening” in which you try to understand someone’s thoughts and feelings. Empathetic listening is respectful of the dignity of others. It requires caring and a desire to truly know and understand others, whoever they may be. This type of listening can be extremely rewarding but it can also be difficult, awkward, and uncomfortable.

Poor Listening Practices

Unfortunately, when the need for effective listening arises, we all may fall into poor listening practices. Consider whether any of the following have become habits for you:

- **Interrupting.** Can you think of times when you’ve jumped in before the other person had finished their sentence? Perhaps you’ve been passionate about the topic and anxious to share your two cents. Although interruptions are not always bad, when done mindlessly again and again, you risk losing the respect of the other person and coming across as rude.
- **Distorted listening.** This listening habit occurs when you get the order of information wrong, you hear what

you want to hear, or you “insert” material to a message. Though it is often unintentional, changing what you hear to suit your needs can lead to harmful outcomes.

- **Eavesdropping.** If you listen when you are not supposed to listen, it is a violation of privacy. Listening to a conversation that was not meant for you will cause others to lose respect for you and damage relationships.
- **Narcissistic listening.** This listening habit is a form of self-centered and self-absorbed listening in which listeners try to make the interaction about their lives, their experiences, and their opinions. A desire to empathize or feel a connection with the other person can make it hard to resist sharing but there are times when it’s more important to quietly listen. Turning the conversation to yourself takes away from the value of what the other person is sharing.
- **Pseudo-listening.** There are times in our lives when we grow bored with a conversation or struggle to find interest in what is being said. We nod, we smile, we act like we’re listening but we have no idea what was just said. It is natural at times. However, don’t let this practice become a habit. It will hurt you and the other person when a question is asked and you have no idea how to answer.

Become a Deep, Mindful Listener

It is vital, especially in moments of conflict, to become a deep, mindful listener who is detecting the other person’s needs and goals, identifying their

biases and values, and being curious throughout the conversation. One technique of mindful listening is the easy-to-remember HEAR method.

HEAR Halt-Enjoy-Ask- Reflect

1. **Halt.** Halt whatever you are doing and give people your full attention.
2. **Enjoy.** Take a breath and allow yourself to enjoy the conversation and what the other person is saying.
3. **Ask.** Ask questions. Ask yourself if you really know what they mean. If you don't, ask for clarification. Instead of making assumptions, bring openness and curiosity to the interaction. You might be surprised at what you discover.
4. **Reflect.** Reflect within yourself on what is being said, or reflect back to the other person with a reply that repeats or paraphrases what they said. This shows them that you were really listening.

Another aspect of mindful (or whole person) listening includes trying to understand not only the thoughts that are being expressed but also the other person's feelings. Listen between the lines, and hear the emotion. This requires a desire to truly come to know and understand the other person, whoever they may be, and a choice to be non-judgemental of the speaker's feelings or experiences. Body language is another important aspect of deep listening. Whole body listening uses your entire body to show that you are actively engaged in the conversation. Facing the speaker, making eye contact, and displaying appropriate

facial expressions and body language all communicate respect and interest in the conversation. Also considering the other person's body language is important to fully understanding what they are communicating. Additional mindful listening habits include making space for the other person and honoring every aspect of their message. You do not rush to fill silences with your own speech and you do not coerce a person into saying things you want to hear. When you practice mindful listening, you are entering empathically and curiously into the other person's world. Simply put, we HEAR them!

Practice the HEAR method:

In your next conversation, ask the other person to describe what's on their mind. Consciously go through the steps – Halt, Enjoy, Ask, and Reflect. When you are finished listening, consider what this process felt like for you. Consider how utilizing this listening practice more often could benefit you and others.



The Value of Talking

While becoming a better listener is critical for managing conflicts, it is also important to become a more skilled talker. There is tremendous value in willingly sharing things about yourself with others. Self-disclosure is the act of verbally or nonverbally revealing information about one's "true self" to other people. Willingness to self-disclose comes from a variety of factors including whether you are extroverted or introverted, whether you have been raised in a family and culture (i.e. the United States) that values openness, and whether you have experienced high trust or low trust in the past when sharing experiences.

Self-disclosure is very important for reducing uncertainty. Research has shown that individuals gradually become closer as they appropriately self-disclose more. The things we share while talking with others should be deep and honest, they should span a variety of topics, and they should be reciprocal, meaning the disclosure is two-way. In cases where one person is unwilling to share, then the other person should limit their self-disclosure. Sometimes self-disclosure takes time.

Knowing Yourself

Healthy communication starts with self-awareness. In order to self-disclose appropriately, you must know yourself. Self awareness is the knowledge of who we are, how we think, and what makes us tick. It is an understanding of one's unique identity. It is common for many

of us, while growing up, to have heard such comments as, "It is better to think of others than oneself." I, in fact, recall keeping a quote by Albert Einstein at the core of my own teenage years: "Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile." After all, it is selfish to spend time focusing on oneself, isn't it? The answer to that question is a resounding NO. While living with the best interests of our friends, family, and acquaintances in mind does bring benefits, it also brings a risk of neglecting self-care. Taking care of yourself based on growing self-awareness will make you better able to relate to others.

Put it Into Practice:

Think about a friendship you have developed in the last year. Do you think you have done a fair job talking? Have you self-disclosed enough about yourself? Have you shared too much? Has the sharing from your friend matched what you have shared? Is there anything you might change the next time you have the chance to talk with this friend?

Tools for Self-Awareness

1. The Johari Window

The Johari Window model is a helpful guide when seeking to know and understand yourself better. This concept, created by two psychologists in 1955, helps us understand the differences between how we see ourselves and how others see us.

	Known to Self	Not known to Self
Known to Others	1. Open	2. Blind
Not known to Others	3. Hidden	4. Unknown

1. **Open**
Traits known to self and others. Examples may include being tall or having brown hair.
2. **Blind**
Traits not known to self but known by others. Examples are someone who talks very fast or tends to interrupt others.
3. **Hidden**
Traits known to self but not known to others. Examples may include one's biggest fears and dreams for the future.
4. **Unknown**
Traits not known to self or others. Examples include where one may live in the future and how long their relationships will last.

In a self-serving bias of sorts, people often learn to ignore their less desirable habits and mannerisms. In addition, they may not know their own strengths. If you know your strengths, you can play to them in difficult situations. As a personal example, I now realize and admit that hosting gatherings at my home tends to make me nervous and irritable. With that understanding, I can decide whether hosting is worth the stress. If I do have people over, I have learned that I need to practice calming techniques like slow breathing and positive self-talk.

Put it Into Practice:

How well do you know yourself? What does your open quadrant look like - do you share enough or too much about yourself with others? Do you realize your habits and personality quirks or are you stuck in the blind quadrant? How willing are you to share things from your hidden quadrant? Should your quadrants be resized to make your relationships stronger?



EQ perform better, enjoy better relationships, experience better psychological well-being, and have better physical health than their counterparts. The exciting part is that, unlike IQ, EQ can be learned! Everyone can become emotionally intelligent.

2. Emotional Intelligence

What if there was another kind of “smart” that everyone has access to? Sometimes in life we may believe we are falling short of the world’s expectations. We tend to compare ourselves to others, including those who have had more education or who seem to know a lot about different subjects. “I’m just not as smart as they are,” we find ourselves thinking.

While intelligence is an impressive trait, it is emotional intelligence (EQ) that really matters. EQ is an awareness of who you are and an ability to understand, use, and manage your own emotions in positive ways. These emotional skills help you to relieve stress, communicate more effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges, and defuse conflict. Employers are becoming passionate about finding people whose EQ is high. They are realizing that persons with high

3. Mindfulness

One way to develop better emotional intelligence is through mindfulness. Components of mindfulness include self-awareness, non-reactivity, non-judgmentalism, and empathy. At the core of mindfulness practices is careful observation: noticing what is happening in the world around you, what is happening in your body, and what is happening in your mind. When you can describe these things in neutral terms – especially in conflict situations – it enables you to develop healthy communication habits and respond with kindness to yourself and to others.

There are many mindful practices to try. I have found great value in taking mindful walks during which I focus on each of the five senses, one at a time, considering the scents, sounds, and views of nature, and observing how the earth below me and the air around me feels on my body. This

point and what those feelings are trying to tell you.

In conflict situations, considering this emotions wheel might better help us understand and empathize with the other person. If, for example, your significant other has been acting anxious and insecure, and seeking time by themselves instead of with you, it might be that they are experiencing fear at the heart of the matter.

5. Recognizing Implicit Bias

A final part of knowing yourself is understanding the assumptions, biases, and blind spots that have shaped your life. These are part of being human, but they can get in the way of healthy communication.

Most people learn to associate with people who think like them. It makes sense! Who doesn't want a friend or romantic partner who shares their values, interests, and beliefs? What happens often, as a result, is that your thinking becomes "stuck." You begin to believe that certain things are the truth or the reality for everyone, though, in reality, these things are only your conditioned perceptions.

These reinforced ideas from your experiences and familial/social/cultural upbringings result in implicit biases toward others. You express your ideas in ways that may be tinged with unfair stereotypes, and you may unknowingly be guilty of using microaggressions in your interactions. Microaggressions are the

everyday things you do or say to others, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate negative messages to persons who are unlike yourself. Examples include telling someone who looks foreign to the U.S. that their English speaking is impressive, telling a female construction worker that she is surprisingly strong, or assuming someone who is blind or wheelchair bound needs help or reassurance.

There are steps you can take to avoid bringing your biases into your interactions:

- The first step is to be honest with yourself. It can be difficult to recognize personal biases, but developing awareness is essential. Perhaps, ask a trusted friend or co-worker for honest feedback on the assumptions you have expressed or acted upon.
- Furthermore, your biases can be combated by getting to know people on an individual level. Once you get to know others, you may be often surprised by the similarities and refreshed by the differences.
- Once you become aware of potential biases, practice self-monitoring. Find strategies for refraining from unfair thinking or words and actions based on assumptions. Try to avoid using **polarizations**, which place persons in two distinct "camps." It is never safe to assume that *all* Democrats, Christians, or teenage boys think or act the same.
- Finally, if you recognize you have made an unfair assumption or used biased language, it never hurts to

apologize. None of us are perfect, and our mistakes can become an opportunity to strengthen our relationships with others.

Reflect on your potential biases:

When you think about people from other communities, what comes to mind? Do you associate these groups with any specific physical characteristics, strengths or weaknesses, personality traits, clothing/attire, or any other traits? Do you speak up when your friends, family members, or co-workers use offensive or biased language toward others? How many people with whom you associate look and act differently than you do? Have you attempted getting to know individuals from communities unlike your own?

Conflict Basics

While there are many, many individuals who would do anything to steer clear of disagreements, avoiding this inevitable aspect of communication is problematic. Conflict avoidance can have several negative consequences in relationships. First, it can lead to resentment, frustration, and contempt. It can also cause healthy and important communication to break down and may even result in temporary or permanent distancing in the relationship.

Believe it or not, conflict is beneficial because it:

- Helps people find common ground

- Helps people learn how to manage future conflict
- Provides the opportunity to learn about the other person(s)
- Leads to creative solutions to problems
- Allows people to engage in an open and honest discussion, which can build relationship trust
- Encourages people to grow both as humans and in their communication skills
- Helps people become more assertive and less aggressive
- Strengthens individuals' ability to manage their emotions

Conflict, when handled with thoughtfulness, compassion, and learned skill, can make your life and the world around you better!

You've likely heard the saying, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Well, conflict is not any different! Sometimes, it helps to keep in mind that different individuals have different levels of tolerance for conflict. Those who have a **high tolerance** for disagreement can easily discuss opinions and believe that arguments are normal, whereas those with **low tolerance** feel personally attacked and devalued by opinions different from their own. Likewise, there are two basic mindsets regarding conflict. There are individuals who believe conflicts are disruptions in the normal workings of a system and should be avoided; conversely, there are individuals who believe conflict is totally natural and cannot be labeled "good" or "bad." A third point to ponder is that there are

times in which something you perceive as a conflict is not at all seen that way by others. It is extremely important to keep in mind that conflict looks and feels different for everyone!

Conflict Management Styles

Categorizing individuals according to their mindsets and tendencies regarding conflict has been done in a multitude of ways by psychologists and communication experts. One of the most basic approaches to conflict types is the framework developed by Alan Sillars and colleagues in 1982, called the ABCs of conflict management. **Avoiders** may deny, evade, joke, or stall in an attempt to not engage in a conflict. **Battlers** may threaten, blame, shout, or use sarcasm in a conflict situation. A far superior style of conflict management is demonstrated by the final group. **Collaborators** may

accept responsibility for their words and actions, show empathy toward the other(s), or concede/yield to the other(s). In part two of this series, we will examine specific ways to put conflict management to the test.

The Power of Forgiveness

Before moving on to the conflict management portion, it is worth a reminder that a little forgiveness can go a long way. Forgiveness has been defined as a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly hurt you, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her. In other words, forgiveness is *other-centered* and gracious. Yet, by forgiving others, you free yourself from negative energy. Be willing to forgive.



DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Think about a friendship you have developed in the last year.
*Do you think you have done a fair job talking?
Have you self-disclosed enough about yourself? Have you shared too much?
Has the sharing from your friend matched what you have shared? Is there anything you might change the next time you have the chance to talk with this friend?*
2. Consider how well you know yourself.
*Do you realize your positive and negative habits, or are you stuck in the blind quadrant?
What does your open quadrant look like? Do you share enough or too much about yourself with others?*
3. Spend time reflecting on your own potential biases with these questions by considering the group you are serving, or other groups within your community.
*What comes to mind?
Do you associate these groups with any specific physical characteristics, strengths or weaknesses, personality traits, clothing/attire, or any other traits?
Do you speak up when your friends, family members, or co-workers use offensive or biased language toward others?
How many people with whom you associate look and act differently than you do?
Have you attempted getting to know individuals from communities unlike your own?*

PRACTICE, ROLE PLAY, OR MORE TO CONSIDER

1. Practice the HEAR method with a partner.
Ask them to tell you about what's been on their mind lately.
Consciously go through the steps – Halt, Enjoy, Ask, and Reflect.
When you are finished listening, consider what this process felt like for you. Imagine how utilizing this listening practice more often could benefit you and others.
2. Take a mindfulness moment - either now as part of a group time, or during an action that is a regular part of your typical week. Remain in the moment, focusing on the task at hand and observing your five senses, without judgment.
What was different about the experience?
What value might you recognize in approaching more experiences in a mindful manner?
3. Practice emotional intelligence by naming your emotions.
Go to the List of Emotions on the following page and take a few minutes to circle the emotions you have experienced within the past week. Share your responses and the related situation.
(adapted from therapistaid.com)

Note: Naming emotions seems to bridge the gap between thoughts and feelings. To go from “I am this...” to “I am feeling this...” clarifies that we are not that emotion exclusively. It also reminds us that the emotion is temporary. In order to be at peace with our feelings and learn from them, we need to remember that we are greater than what we are feeling in that moment. So next time you are feeling a difficult emotion, start by labeling it: I am angry, or sad, or anxious. Just tell it like it is.

LIST OF EMOTIONS

Amazed	Foolish	Overwhelmed
Angry	Frustrated	Peaceful
Annoyed	Furious	Proud
Anxious	Grievous	Relieved
Ashamed	Happy	Resentful
Bitter	Hopeful	Sad
Bored	Hurt	Satisfied
Comfortable	Inadequate	Scared
Confused	Insecure	Self-conscious
Content	Inspired	Shocked
Depressed	Irritated	Silly
Determined	Jealous	Stupid
Disdainful	Joyful	Suspicious
Disgusted	Lonely	Tense
Eager	Lost	Terrified
Embarrassed	Loving	Trapped
Energetic	Miserable	Uncomfortable
Envious	Motivated	Worried
Excited	Nervous	Worthless

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YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tLbr0oB660.

Accessed 9 July 2024.

If you would like more information on implicit bias and the nature of human assumption, this short video is inspiring. Reflect on the quote from the video, “Living our lives with blind spots can put us in a tunnel.”

Robbins, Mel. (2011, July 29) *5 ways to listen better | Julian Treasure |*

TED. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSohjlyQI2A>.

Accessed 9 July 2024.

I have used this and other Julian Treasure videos with my classes for many years. I especially enjoy the practical strategies provided here to become a better listener.

Westmaas, L. (2022) *9.4 ABCs of Conflict – Conflict Management (ebook)*.

Ontario:Pressbooks, Creative Commons.

This online book shows tactics commonly used by avoiders and battlers, which tend to lead to unhealthy handling of conflicts. In the final section, techniques used by collaborators demonstrate better options for managing conflicts.

6seconds.org - a non-profit organization whose mission is to increase the world’s emotional intelligence. In operation for over 25 year, they have developed a comprehensive system to measure and improve these essential skills.

Christ-Centered Corner

Encouragement From a Christian Perspective

The human potential for language and communication is exceptional. It sets us apart from all other creatures and demonstrates that our Creator wired us for connection. Our communication skills are an important tool for establishing the healthy relationships He intended for us.

First and foremost, God desires that we be mindful of His Presence and able to communicate with Him. This connection has been restored by Jesus through his life, death, and resurrection. The gift of His indwelling Spirit makes it available to us when we choose to believe in Jesus and say yes to following Him. (John 10:27). Jesus also made it clear that God is a perfect Father whom we can approach with trust and without formality, calling Him “Daddy.” As we take time to be still in Father God’s Presence, sharing what is in our heart and listening to what He says to our hearts (directly or through His Word), we will discover how much God loves us. As the One who created us, He will reveal who we were created to be and how He sees us. Experiencing the reality that we are seen, known, rescued, and loved by our Heavenly Father will establish within us the Truth that our place of belonging is in Christ. (1 Cor. 3:23)

This place of security, accurate and increasing self-awareness, and mindfulness of the present moment and God’s Presence in it, is an important ingredient to better communication with others. The Bible says that “the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” As believers, our words can be infused with the love of God. Our thoughts and attitudes can be directed by Holy Spirit and enable us to express ourselves in ways that are wise and make knowledge appealing. (Proverbs 15:2)

Considering the over 120 passages in the Bible referring to the words we speak, it is clearly a priority to God that we develop our ability to communicate intentionally and well. We are told that our words have the power of life and death (Proverbs 18:12) and that “on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak.” (Matthew 12:36) By adding the counsel of God’s Word to our communication resources, and relying on the assistance of God’s indwelling, unoffendable, and teachable Spirit, we can become people whose words build up healthy relationships.

1.3

BRAVE CONVERSATIONS: MANAGING CONFLICT

Handling difficult conversations is an important communication skill to develop. With the right strategy, it's possible to turn conflict into learning conversations that allow you to solve issues, improve relationships, and come to a shared understanding.

BRAVE CONVERSATIONS: MANAGING CONFLICT

In this lesson you will:

- Learn methods for managing conflict: the Learning Conversations model, the STLC approach, and the Third Side method
- Learn how to handle specific kinds of conflict: highly emotional, distinct personalities, family, mediated (non face-to-face)
- Learn how to recognize and respond to dangerous conflict situations

BRAVE CONVERSATIONS - MANAGING CONFLICT

Approaching Conflict With the Learning Conversations Model

It was upon reading the New York Times bestselling book *Difficult Conversations, How to Discuss What Matters Most* (Stone et al.) that I first realized I had much to learn about managing conflict. Though this book was first in print in 1999, it remains a popular guide for handling tricky conversations in a skillful and healthy manner. The book begins by reminding readers that feeling anxious or uncertain during conflict exchanges is totally normal . . . but preventable! Handling conflict is a skill that can be learned. Learning the difference between unhealthy conversations and healthy conversations will improve your stress level, your confidence, and your ability to approach and manage conflict.

Too often, we enter into difficult conversations with unfair assumptions, emotionally charged language, and a focus on blame. Rather than solve issues or improve relationships, this approach pulls us apart. In the Learning Conversation method, curiosity is key.



This method requires you to admit you may not truly understand the other person's perspective. You must also be willing to have an open and honest dialogue, as well as a goal of reaching shared understanding instead of being right or scoring a "victory."

A Learning Conversation does not mean giving up your stance or replacing your ideas with theirs; it simply means that you willingly consider their ideas and your ideas as equally important. I have condensed the work of Stone and colleagues with the following steps to consider for a learning conversation variation:

1. Understand your own story better. Consider what you are feeling and be okay with those feelings. Remember from the emotions wheel in part one that our feelings are often quite complex; instead of quickly naming the first thing you're feeling, consider secondary feelings, also. Be willing to share the full spectrum of your feelings – without labels or judgment – in the learning conversation.

2. Eliminate assumptions. Remember that much of our thinking is automatic. We reach conclusions but don't always pause long enough to admit that such conclusions may not be true. Human nature is to favor our own perspective; likewise, we quickly interpret the other's perspective in a negative and twisted way. For example, your friend

hasn't reached out to you lately, so you assume their intention is to hurt or unbefriend you. Before you make assumptions, you should ask yourself, "What else could be the reason?"

3. Do not place blame.

Wasting time trying to decide who's at fault does not lead to a healthy conclusion. Instead of putting energy into the blame game, engage in empathetic, two-way dialogue in which you aim to figure out where the problem or issue stemmed from and what can be done about it.

4. Get on the balcony.

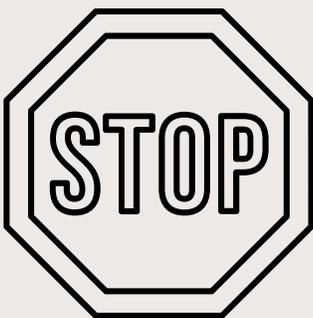
Work together to take a bird's-eye view of the conflict. Once you have spent time dialoguing about each of your feelings and each of your contributions to the issue at hand, exchange your focus on "me" for a focus on "we." Brainstorm creative ways to satisfy both of your needs. Don't rush the process, and don't settle for a short-term solution. Reaching a long-term solution that you each can feel good about takes time but is worth it!

Put it Into Practice:

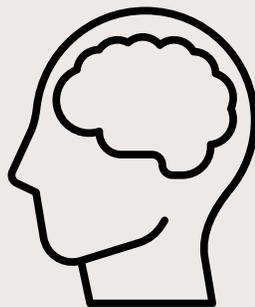
Have fun turning a well-known conflict into a learning conversation. Consider the main conflict of a popular fairytale such as "The Three Little Pigs," "Little Red Riding Hood," or "Cinderella" being retold with the four steps suggested in the learning conversation explained in this section. In what way(s) did the outcome change by using this approach?

Approaching Conflict With the STLC method

In the interpersonal communications classes I teach to my high school and community college students, I explain the STLC conflict management method. Personally, I find it much easier to remember acronyms; hopefully the four letters of STLC will stick with you as you find yourself faced with a challenging conflict situation.



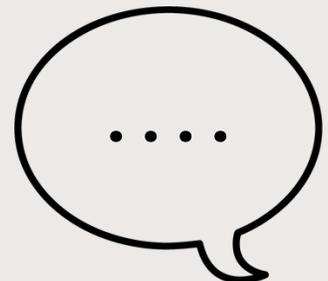
Stop



Think



Listen



Communicate

Stop. Physically and/or mentally take time to be fully aware of what's going on. If you feel overly tense or emotional, take some deep breaths or a quick walk alone before entering a conflict discussion.

Think. Similar to a learning conversation, it is important not to jump to conclusions or place blame. Carefully consider the origin of the conflict and what each person involved is communicating - consider possible causes of each person's feelings and actions, and consider outcomes.

Listen. Remember the poor listening practices from part one? Avoid them at all costs! No distorted listening or interruption; the goal here is to suspend one's judgment in order to accurately interpret the other's message.

Communicate. In this model, the communication step is deliberately last as it is dependent upon the successful completion of prior steps and is also usually the hardest component of conflict management. It is important at this point to keep in mind the impact of not only your words but also your body language. Avoid using a sarcastic tone, rolling your eyes, or crossing your arms in a closed-off, guarded stance.

When utilizing the STLC method, it is also suggested that you take the time to reflect afterwards. What do you feel now that the conversation is over? Do you feel like you understand the other person's perspective? Do they understand yours? Do you need to plan for further conversation, or has the issue been resolved?

If you consider what went well and what may have gone better, you can plan for improved future conflict conversations!

Approaching Conflict With the Third Side Model

One of the more inspirational approaches to conflict resolution is William Ury's The Third Side approach. It is especially effective for conflicts within a large group of people because it utilizes the collective power and strength that comes from considering different perspectives and different ways of doing things as described in the African Proverb that says,

“When spider webs unite, they can halt even a lion.”

The Third Side is all about going to that balcony mentioned in the discussion of Learning Conversations. When you approach conflicts from this perspective, you enter like a mediator. At the heart of mediation is getting to the root of the story. With this model, you approach the conflict like a mediator seeking a peaceful cooperative negotiation. All parties must be heard from and the full stories of all involved must be uncovered with the goal of reaching a shared perspective. You can have natural sympathies for one side or the other and still choose to take the Third Side which will benefit everybody within the larger community.

Taking the Third Side involves:

- Seeking to understand all sides of a conflict. Use questions like “Why are

you feeling this way?” “What are you hoping for?” “What are your ideas?”

- Encouraging a process of cooperative negotiation using neutral, fair, and unbiased language.
- Supporting a wise solution – one that fairly meets the essential needs of all parties and also of the surrounding community
- Finding a wise solution that meets the needs of all parties and the surrounding community.

The Third Side has been successfully utilized in local, civil, and global conflict as an alternative to hostile or violent solutions. It works when participants honor equal power distribution (no one involved should have more weight or value than anyone else); it works when participants search for common ground; it works when participants find a solution that is right not only for them but for the greater community; it works when all those who are exposed to conflict choose to take the Third Side and honor the whole.

Extend an invitation to everyone who needs to be involved in the conversation. A request for a cooperative sharing-listening-discussing meeting can be sent via letter, text, phone call, or face-to-face meeting. The process will demand time and cooperation.

How to Handle Highly Emotional Conflicts

The next few parts of this section discuss

how to deal with unique conflict situations. We will begin by discussing how to handle highly emotional conflicts. Not only is there a high likelihood you will face several emotionally charged conversations at times in your life, but it is also the type of conversation at which there is more at stake. If you are not especially careful when emotions are heightened, you can permanently damage relationships. First and foremost, it is imperative to remember that everyone's expression of emotions is different. Non-expressive individuals sometimes have difficulty experiencing, identifying, and showing emotions. They might interpret expressive individuals who display much emotion in conflicts as “irrational” or “unreasonable.” Whether one or both persons involved is emotional during the conflict, there must be an attempt to defuse or lighten high emotions and reach a safer, leveler starting point. Let's explore three techniques.

1. Paraphrasing. Acknowledge the emotions at play, and try putting into words how the other person is feeling.

- It sounds to me like you are...
- That must be... (be empathetic and consider how you would feel in their shoes)
- That sounds like...

2. Validating. Recognize that the other person has a right to be feeling this way and take ownership for your part in the matter.

- I can see you are feeling very...
- I can understand why you feel this way.
- I know my behavior has caused you to feel this way.

- I am sorry my behavior has caused you to feel this way.

Pretend you are involved in one of the following conflict scenarios:

(#1) Person A is extremely neat: they make their bed every morning and like things in place; Person B is a rather messy roommate whose untidy behaviors have Person A at their wits end.

(#2) Person A used their hard-earned money to buy a new pair of shoes; Person B borrowed them without asking and got the shoes very dirty and scuffed up, which infuriated Person A.

With a partner, play out the scenario with one or both persons using the paraphrasing, validating, and questioning techniques. You can also imagine or write out how the scenario could play out with these techniques.

3. Questioning. Before you reach your own conclusions about how the other person is feeling, about the cause of their feelings, or about their needs; consider asking questions. Remember the need for curiosity in a Learning Conversation? It is important to gather as much information as possible in an attempt to find clarity. There are two types of questions to ask:

- **Closed-ended** questions require a specific answer such as yes/no or agree/disagree. Ask this kind of question when you need to check facts.
- **Open-ended** questions require a longer, less prescribed answer. Ask

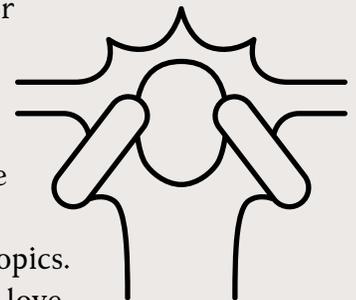
this kind of question when you want to allow the other person free expression, perhaps to better understand their perspective or get clarity on the issue at hand.

How to Handle Conflicts With Different Personality Types

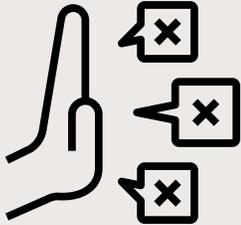
Let's face it: there are people in our lives whose idiosyncrasies can make even light conversations feel like hard work. In an article featured in the December 2023 edition of Reader's Digest titled "How to Get Along with Anyone," writer, author and journalist Rosemary Counter provides tips for dealing with particular personality types. I have taken her advice for conversations with complainers, contrarians, and chatterboxes and added my own suggestions.

Complainers, in a nutshell, don't ever stop complaining about how bad they have it or about everything in life that is unfair for them. Counter's suggestions for reducing or preventing conflict in conversation with this type of person include showing empathy and simply listening and allowing them to share what's bothering them. Essentially, if you provide a safe space for them to vent for a while, your kindness may rub off and they will be more receptive to discussing more pleasant and positive topics.

Contrarians, in short, love to argue. It seems instinctual for them to disagree with whatever anyone else says. There are a few ways to deal with this



type of person. First, you can agree with them! Okay, maybe not about every ridiculous thing that comes out of their mouth, but it can be helpful to tell them, “I agree with you about this part.” Other options are to use the questioning technique so you can better



understand where their thinking stems, or you can do your best to change the subject. Generally, it is not worth hashing it out with contrarians; however, if it is someone close

to you, you might want to calmly tell them how you feel when they disagree with you.

Chatterboxes prefer talking to listening, which can lead to frustratingly one-sided conversations. I have, myself, been guilty of playing this type, and I blame family genes! In all seriousness, for some chatterboxes, the habit is not so much about their personality as it is about a deep-seated need to be heard. One suggestion is to listen calmly for a while



and ask questions, then in a straightforward way, tell them, “I would like to tell you/ask you about...” If you are on a time constraint and feel comfortable doing so, you

can even tell the other person “Since I need to leave in three minutes, I was hoping to share...”

Frenemies are those people in your life who are hot and cold. One minute they act like your closest companion, and the next they treat you like an opponent. If a

frenemy has found their way into your life, you don’t always know if they’re on your side; you just know it hurts when they are not. Often, according to Counter, a frenemy acts confident and competitive when they are actually insecure and distrusting deep down.

If you choose to keep this type of person in your life – perhaps because you do not have a choice – it is best to be open with them. Tell them, using “I state-



ments” instead of judgment or blame, how you feel. For examples: “I do not like it when I’m talked to in this way” or “I value our friendship but don’t always sense you feel the same way.”

How to Handle Family Conflicts

Successful management of family conflict requires prioritizing the love and care you have for one another. Kindness, compassion, forgiveness and understanding must be priorities in order to avoid unhealthy patterns of handling arguments that cause stress and long-term issues. Adopting any of the following techniques can foster healthy conflict management in your family:

- **Planning regularly scheduled family meetings.** You can take one of two approaches with family meetings. The first option is to pick a repeated time (i.e. every Sunday evening or the first and third Mondays of the month) at which all family members go around and share how they are doing. When family meetings are the norm, sharing becomes

the norm and meetings feel less like a response to dysfunction and more like a healthy routine. The second option is to ask for a family meeting once a conflict has arisen. It is vital to find a time that works for all members. Additional suggestions are to create and share an agenda in advance to eliminate discomfiting surprises, and to clarify agreed-upon rules such as “no raised voices” and “one at a time until all individuals are heard.” Striving for a solution is a good idea, but if it’s taking too long, agree to table the meeting for a short time. Try to finish family meetings on a positive note. Individually or collectively, celebrate what was good and what worked during the time together.

- **Allowing green-light brainstorming**

If your family is faced with a single issue, green-light brainstorming has the potential to evoke a lot of creative ideas. This is a technique I have often used in my classroom in order to give everyone a voice. The approach is simple: in a completely non-judgmental manner, produce as many ideas as possible. One person should write them down on a large sheet of poster board or dry erase board. At this point, family members can say whatever comes to mind and can let one idea trigger another. The only rule is that no one can express, verbally or nonverbally, any objections or insults to what is said until all ideas are exhausted.

- **Create a family contract.** For issues that keep coming back up, a contract can help to minimize conflict. In the *Difficult Conversations* book, Stone and colleagues discuss the fault in thinking, “I’m the

parent; my children should just do what I say.” The problem, they remind us, is that what should happen and what does happen are often two different things. In order for parents to diagnose why they are not getting the desired results from their children, they need to engage in two-way conversation by listening to a child’s true thoughts. The family contract will be an agreed-upon set of steps or rules with clearly laid-out consequences for breaking them based on talking through what everybody wants or thinks should happen. It is signed, dated, and printed if possible, and should be revisited frequently. If your child acts unhappy about this process, assure them that you are teaching them responsibility and fostering their independence!

Putting a family plan into practice:

Issues that commonly require a plan include use of technology, first-time driving, dating, curfew, and sharing of household duties. Acknowledge your children’s feelings and concerns, then work together to create a list of rules that includes desired behaviors and non-negotiables. The creation of a contract will eliminate arguments and teach your children accountability.



How to Handle Mediated Communication Conflicts

We have witnessed substantial change among society and culture in the past two decades that have influenced the ways individuals communicate. The rapid evolution of computers, the internet, and new media has transformed everyone's interactions in both positive and negative ways. Today, computer-mediated communication includes email, text, social media platforms, online learning, and videoconferencing (e.g. Zoom & Google Meet). It is no wonder, then, that there is a high probability of facing challenging conversations or conflicts in those settings. Conflict management handled for computer-mediated communication requires great care and thoughtfulness. Let's consider tips for three types of digital dialogue:

1. Texts and Emails

Since this type of communication lacks nonverbal cues like tone of voice and facial expression, it is more difficult to judge one another's feelings. To minimize conflict, use language that is explicit and specific. Choose your words carefully for words and phrases can have multiple meanings. Don't hesitate to ask for clarification throughout the conversation. Emails and texts are also non-synchronous and require waiting for the response. In the process of waiting, don't allow frustration to cause you to jump to conclusions or respond too quickly. Choose mindfulness, non-reactivity, and non-judgmentalism over worry. Giving the other person the benefit of the doubt

AND having patience with email exchanges will make your communication more effective.



2. Cell Phone Calls

Most communication experts encourage picking up the phone rather than sending a text or email when it's not possible to meet in person to handle a conflict. The phone allows for hearing the other person's tone of voice which is beneficial when the conflict involves a sensitive issue. Of course, this can also become problematic when emotions are running high. To help the other person defuse their emotions and be less reactive during the conversation, send an email or text ahead of time describing the conflict you want to address. This allows them time to think through their own feelings and be prepared for the phone conversation. During the conversation, practice empathy. Be clear about your own emotions; and ask about and acknowledge the other person's emotions. Conflicts over the phone benefit from a balanced give and take in which no one is dominating the conversation and interruptions are kept to a minimum.

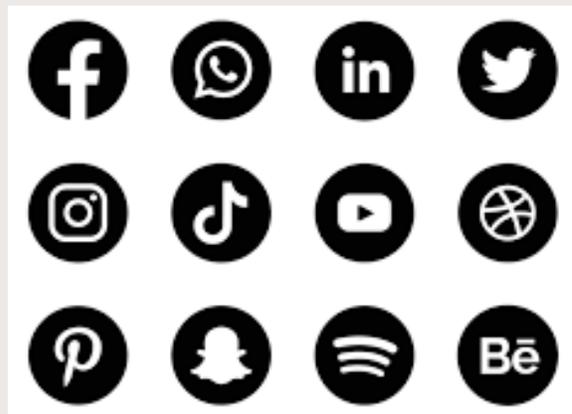


3. Social Media

In today's world, many people have several social media accounts. Facebook alone has over 3 billion active users which is more than twice the population of the entire continent of Africa! Although these platforms have the potential to open doors and inspire people to come together, a close examination shows it to be one in which individuals often seem less likely to present their opinions in a balanced open-minded manner and more likely to use offensive language and criticism. No wonder social media is ripe with contention.

In order to reduce and manage conflict while using social media, it is extremely important to put into practice healthy communication practices and conflict resolution skills. Many of the strategies presented earlier can be utilized. For example, the STLC approach in which you stop, think, listen (in this case, read thoroughly), and THEN communicate in a respectful and mindful manner can lead to a more favorable outcome than an impulsive and insulting post. Additionally recalling the Third Side basics, in which you remind yourself that not everything

is black and white, allows for a more empathic social media conversation. Other helpful strategies are asking for clarity, striving to reach common ground with the person at the other end, and NOT ENGAGING in public exchanges that are hurtful or demeaning. If you wish to further a sensitive conversation started on social media, you can request to do so in a more private manner such as Facebook Messenger. Finally, when conversations escalate beyond what is reasonable and safe, protect yourself from harm by reporting a thread or blocking the individual from reaching out to you. Be smart and post smart!



Put it into Practice:

Review your habits with online communications . . .

Is your writing clear or can it be easily misinterpreted? Have you been guilty of jumping to conclusions? Replying to messages too quickly? What are 2-3 changes you could put into action for healthier digital dialogues?

DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Is conflict always a bad thing?
2. What is your usual way of handling conflict? How has this conflict style been working for you - are you satisfied with the outcomes?
3. Think of a time when a simple disagreement escalated to a conflict. What happened? Why did this escalation occur?
4. What are some of the common blocks that get in the way of effective communication during conflict?
5. What are the possible outcomes when conflicts are handled positively?
6. Why is communication so important in conflict resolution?
7. Think of a recent interpersonal conflict that went badly. How could you have implemented the STLC Model of Conflict to improve what happened during that conflict?

PRACTICE, ROLE PLAY, OR MORE TO CONSIDER

1. **The Orange Negotiation**

Divide the group into two teams; the facilitator of the activity takes the role of the keeper of a rare orange; the last of its kind. Both teams are supposed to buy the fruit and they need to convince the facilitator that they are the team that deserves the fruit. Team A will be informed that the rare orange rind can be used to invent a new element; Team B will be told that the pulp of the orange cures a disease.

Take 5-8 minutes for each team to brainstorm and present why they should get the orange. Then take 5-8 min for the teams to talk together to try and find a satisfactory solution that both agree on

2. **Turn a well-known conflict into a learning conversation.**

Have fun retelling the popular fairytale “Little Red Riding Hood” using the four steps suggested in the learning conversation model:

- Each party considers all they’re feeling and is willing to share
- No assumptions are made; each party asks the other for their reasons
- No blaming; a 2-way dialogue is used to determine each party’s part in the problem and what can be done
- Brainstorm creative ways to satisfy both parties’ needs.

In what way did you imagine the outcome(s) changing by using this approach?

**See Appendix A as a resource for this exercise*

3. **Choose one of the following conflict scenarios to role-play using the paraphrasing, validating, and questioning techniques:**

- a. Person A is extremely neat: they make their bed every morning and like things in place. Person B is a rather messy roommate whose untidy behaviors have Person A at their wits end.
- b. Person A used their hard-earned money to buy a new pair of shoes; Person B borrowed them without asking and got the shoes very dirty and scuffed up, which infuriated Person A.

In a group setting, select a partner and one or both of you apply the techniques for defusing emotion in the conflict as you role play.

As an individual, imagine or write out how the scenario would play out using these techniques.

APPENDIX A: THE BIG BAD WOLF'S STORY

I'm the wolf. You may have heard people refer to me as "The Big Bad Wolf," which, as you can imagine, isn't a very pleasant nickname to have. It all started one day when I was cleaning up the garbage that some people had left behind – you see, they come to the forest and have a wonderful time and then they just leave a huge mess! The forest is my home and I care about making it nice! Then I heard footsteps so I leapt behind a tree because I know that sometimes people can get scared when they see me, even though really, I'm a nice guy. I saw a girl coming down the trail holding a basket. She looked suspicious to me because she was dressed in a strange red cape and she had her head covered as if she didn't want anyone to recognize her. She started picking flowers right from my own flowerbed and trampling all over the little trees that I had just planted! To make it worse, she ate a chocolate bar and threw the wrapper on the ground! Naturally, I came out and asked her as nicely as I could to stop and be more careful, but she gave me this long sob story about how her grandmother wasn't well and she was going to visit her and wanted to bring her flowers and a basket of goodies, so I let it go.

Well, as it turns out, I remembered that I knew this girl's granny – she's an old friend of mine. I sped over there and talked to her about her granddaughter's behavior, and together we decided that we would teach Little Red Riding Hood a lesson. Granny hid under the bed, and I dressed up in her nightgown.

I was just going to give her a little scare, but as soon as she came into the room she said something very nasty about my big ears. I've always been a bit sensitive about my big ears because the other wolves used to make fun of me when I was a cub, but I tried to make the best of it by telling her that my big ears were better for hearing her with. Then she made a really insulting remark about my bulging eyes. This was harder for me to blow off because she sounded so mean! Still, I made it my policy to turn the other cheek, so I told her my big eyes helped me to see her better. Then, you won't believe it, but she insulted my big teeth, and that really got to me. I've never been very confident about my looks and she was just tearing me apart! I should have had better control, but I leaped from the bed and growled that my teeth would help me to eat her.

Now, come on, I was never going to eat her or do her any harm! I would never! But Little Red Riding Hood started freaking out, screaming and running around the house. I tried to catch her so I could tell her that it was all a joke but the woodsman who lives nearby must have already heard her. All of a sudden, the door came crashing open and there he stood with his ax. I knew that I was in big trouble and I didn't have time to explain the situation to him, so I just flew out the open window and ran home to the forest. I've had to remain in hiding ever since – everyone is out to get me – they think I'm a horrible evil bloodthirsty wolf! There are terrible rumors going around the forest about me. None of my friends will even talk to me anymore. I'm so broken up about it. I heard that poor little Granny has been very disoriented and confused lately, so she can't even corroborate my story. I don't know what to do! My whole life is ruined.

RESOURCES

Moddes, Wendy. "Which Style Are You? Discovering Your Communication Style quiz." College in the Schools Introduction to Communications, Brainerd High School. Class handout, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sBnzz_j54r6BW8p9xrGggQtD3qxH_zwDt/view?usp=sharing.

(I have assigned this self-awareness quiz in my classroom for many years. Your results will indicate whether your conflict management style is passive, aggressive, or assertive—it is a close equivalent to the ABCs of conflict mentioned in part one of this unit: avoiders, battlers, and collaborators.)

Moddes, Wendy. "The 10 Commandments of Conflict Management." College in the Schools Introduction to Communications, Brainerd High School. Class handout, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1s3wxL8KJdbn8wgQt5GHLyIOnuPPnpNxY5fpKZvqTvVM/edit?usp=sharing>.

(This is another handout I have shared with students in my communications classes. It includes a set of guidelines to ensure that difficult conversations are handled with compassion for self and other.)

Ruby, Kathleen. "12 Steps Handout. Planning for a Difficult Conversation." Washington State University. Handout, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1S3lVS6WXf2MfAwO8UjRNodZHqsIlaym8/view?usp=sharing>.

(This step-by-step process for preparing to manage a conflict was modeled after the Difficult Conversations book by Stone and colleagues. It provides a succinct reminder of how to navigate through difficult topics and reach a satisfying outcome.)

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Christ-Centered Corner

Encouragement From a Christian Perspective

God calls His people to be peacemakers. We are told in Hebrews to “Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.” (Hebrews 12:14), and again in Romans to “Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.” (Romans 12:18 NLT) This is not done by avoiding brave conversations but by developing the character and the skills needed to handle conflicts in a manner worthy of the Lord.

Our Heavenly Father has not left us alone in this endeavor but has given us His Spirit. This results in a God-given desire for peace that can motivate us to read and listen to recommended sources (including the Bible) on communication skills for conflict management. We can depend on the Lord to give us opportunities to practice those skills.

In addition, Paul credits Holy Spirit for providing the wisdom and understanding that is needed to discern God’s way in every circumstance of life and bring forth godly results. (Col 1:10) In difficult conversations, we can pray for God to fill us with the knowledge of His will that comes through His Spirit, just as Paul did for the Colossians.

Many of the attitudes that are necessary for healthy conflict management are found in God’s love. This is the love that has “been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit”. (Romans 5:5). Mindfulness of God’s love enables us to exchange “we for me” and seek the solution that satisfies both parties rather than insisting on our own way. It gives us the patience, kindness and self-control to avoid rude language and blaming. God’s love rejoices in truth and positions us to be curious and interested in learning the other person’s perspective rather than seeking to be right and favoring our perspective.

In conflict management, we should not lose sight of the ultimate assignment God has given us - the ministry of reconciliation.(2 Cor 5:18) Every brave conversation we enter into is an opportunity to be Christ’s ambassador. May our behavior and our words always be appealing to the other person, and be used by God to stir a desire in them for a restored relationship with God through Jesus.

