

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

REFERENCES

Medousa 1000 (2022, November 10). *Blind spots Challenge assumptions*.

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.

