

Every minute that you spend with someone you are communicating. Even though we think that it is easy to talk and communicate, it's actually very complicated. Have you ever had someone just not "get it" when you were talking to them? And, you were not sure why they are having such a hard time because it seems so clear to you. Or, have you ever had someone get really mad about something you said but you didn't think what you said was mean or hurtful? Sometimes the problem is that your message is not being received or understood by another person in the way that you had intended it to be. At other times it might be that the other person is not listening. A misunderstanding can happen when people are not communicating well.

What is Communication?

Communication is when two or more people share information. We might be sharing our feelings or ideas. Or, we might be trying to understand someone else's ideas or feelings. We could also be questioning something, giving information, or warning people about something. Communication comes in many forms. It can be positive or negative and verbal or non-verbal. You can be positive verbally or non-verbally, or you can be negative verbally or non-verbally. Here is how we communicate.

7 % of communication is done with words

20% of communication is done through our tone of voice

23% of communication is our facial expressions

50% of communication is through our body language or posture

Non-Verbal Communication

Just because we know how to talk doesn't necessarily make us good communicators automatically. People can express all kinds of information by the way they communicate without using words. Here are just some of the ways we can communicate non-verbally:

- The way we dress
- Waving, hand gestures
- Winking
- Interrupting
- Turning red
- Posture-slouching, sitting or standing straight
- Fidgeting-picking nails, playing with hair
- Smiling

Can you think of other non-verbal signs to add to the list? The next time you're with some people, watch what they are doing. Look for non-verbal messages that are getting communicated to someone else. Pay attention to how they are standing or sitting? Do they look interested or bored by the conversation? How do you know this? They might be bored if they are staring off into space or looking away from the person who is speaking. But, could they also be shy or uncomfortable in a group or maybe preoccupied and nervous about an upcoming test? What are all the messages they could be communicating without words?

Verbal Communication

The most common way that we communicate is through words. But other ways we verbally communicate include:

- Sighing
- Laughing
- Screaming
- Crying
- Tone of voice

Can you think of two more ways that people verbally communicate? It's important to understand how using your voice or sound can carry your message. For example, when someone raises their voice while speaking you may think they're angry or excited. By changing just the tone of your voice or the way you stress certain words you could say one thing but represent it in a totally different way.

Why is Listening Important?

Verbal and non-verbal messages are only part of the communication process. Listening is half of the communication process. We all know what it's like when someone doesn't listen to us, or pretends to be listening or, even more frustrating is only listening while they wait for us to shut up so they can talk. When you are trying to say something it is disappointing to not be heard. One of the best ways to help others and yourself improve communication skills is to practice listening. Be a model for others. By setting an example for successful listening you are non-verbally communicating and teaching what a listener should be. Here are some tips:

- Make eye contact and focus on the person who is speaking
- Let the person speaking know you are paying attention by nodding or saying uh-huh
- Ask questions if you don't understand what is being said.
- Have an interested body posture
- Summarize the main points that they've said so they know you were listening
- Avoid road blocks like labeling, judging, or giving advice.
- Listen for feelings behind what the talker is saying

Communication is something we all learned, which means we can learn to do it differently and improve as we practice using new skills. One of the keys to being successful with the tips stated above is to become aware of the ways in which you listen non-verbally. Start with these questions to ask yourself:

Facial Expression- Is my face expressing that I'm interested in what a person is saying? Does my face reflect how much the conversation means to me?

Voice and Tone- What is my voice passing on as I respond to the person speaking? Does my voice back up that I care? Does my voice change in volume or tone when I'm nervous or angry? Do I mumble? Do I laugh when I'm uncomfortable with what someone is saying? Am I sarcastic?

Eye Contact- Do I make direct eye contact when I'm talking or listening to someone? Do you stare at people? Do you stare off into space when you're bored?

Posture and Gestures – Do I stand up tall when I'm talking (or sit up straight)? Does my body say I'm interested or, do I look bored? Do I fidget with my hair or jewelry or keys when I talk? Do I slouch?

Road blocks to Communication

- Being a poor listener
- Blaming others for your problems
- Lying
- Stereotyping
- Complaining
- Judging others, being critical
- Gossiping
- Being bossy or aggressive
- Saying "yes" when you want to say "no"
- Being unaware of your verbal and non-verbal communication

Feedback

Feedback is another part of the communication process. It is a useful way to let another person know you understand something that they've said or done. When you respond, it also gives another person the opportunity to consider changing the way they act. Feedback lets us know how others are affected by what we say and do. When you ask for feedback or when someone gives you feedback, it should be to help you, not put you down. Sometimes people hide anger and criticism in their feedback and say things like, "I'm only telling you this for your own good. I didn't want to hurt you." Feedback is **only helpful** when it is constructive and is being done in a helping non judging way. Here are some pointers for keeping feedback useful:

1. Make it Descriptive, Not Judgmental

When you give someone feedback about what they've said, it's usually best to limit your reactions to descriptions from your own experience of what they spoke about or did. If you start your feedback by judging, criticizing or attacking them for something they've said you'll make them feel defensive. Instead, it may be more useful and positive to help someone recognize how their words or actions were understood by you. When you can offer someone a personal interpretation it helps them decide how they want to respond. We all know that when we feel attacked, we never recognize it as helpful.

2. Make it Specific, not General

When you give feedback try to keep it specific. When you say something like, "You're so mean or, "You're pretty bossy" you can make the other person feel attacked and they may respond defensively. If you give examples of what someone says or does and just describe it to them, then they'll figure it out.

3. Think of both the Giver and the Receiver of Feedback

If you are only giving feedback to serve your own needs or make you feel good, then this isn't fair to the person receiving your feedback. Think about what you say and what you hear –Ask yourself how you would feel getting the same information.

4. Make the Feedback about Something the Person has Control Over

The person receiving the feedback is going to feel really awful and discouraged if the feedback is about something that reminds them of their shortcomings. If a shy person keeps getting feedback about how they are not outgoing enough, it's just going to make them feel invalid about being who they are. (There is nothing wrong with being a quiet person!).

5. "I" Statements

Making "I" statements is an important method to express what you're thinking and feeling while taking complete responsibility for your words and actions. This can be rough territory to navigate because the opposite of an "I" statement is a "YOU" statement. And, "YOU" statements are often spoken in a manner that blames others and pushes responsibility off on them. Here are some examples of how to change "YOU" statements into "I" statements.

- **"You make me so mad."**
This approach blames the other person for how you feel. It can also make the other individual respond defensively because they feel attacked. Instead, try something like "I'm so mad at you for..." In this example you are not only taking responsibility for your thoughts and feelings but also practicing how to give specific and more constructive feedback. (See #2 above)
- **"You are really stupid for saying that."**
Using a statement like this is not only critical and judgmental but hurtful as well. One way to rephrase this example into an "I" statement could be, "I don't think that was the best thing to say because..." Again, being specific in your description allows the other person to take in the information in a non-threatening way.

- **“You really bug me when you do that”**

Do you want to fight? Because that may be the only reaction you get from a comment like this. Instead try letting the other person know how you feel in a more constructive way. For example, “It really frustrates me when that happens because...”

Can you think of any past conversations that didn't turn out the way you had hoped? What could you have done differently? Could you have rephrased any “You” statements into “I” statements? Do you think this might have changed the outcome?

Assertiveness

Being assertive is a very important skill to have. It involves standing up for yourself in a self assured, calm and composed way. When you speak and act assertively you present yourself as confident and will find it difficult to give in to unwanted pressure from your peers. Assertiveness is used in decision making, prevention and communication.

The Difference between Assertiveness and Aggression

Some people confuse being aggressive with being assertive. Aggressive communication is putting people down, blaming, criticizing, swearing and name-calling. Aggressive people may win fights whether it may be verbal or physical, but they will lose friends if they continue to act with the same approach. The reason why they could lose friends is because they forget to respect other people's rights and feelings.

Indirect Aggression

Another type of aggression is called indirect aggression. As the name indicates this is when you pretend that everything is okay even when someone or something upset you, but you get back at them later. You are not being direct about the thing that upset you. An example would be if your friend stands you up for a movie night, but the next time you plan something together you stand them up. This type of indirect communication is just being hurtful to you and your friend. A more effective and honest approach would be to let your friend know how you feel right away instead of holding a resentment.

Passive

The opposite of aggressive communication is passive communication. This way of communicating can be just as harmful as taking an aggressive approach to communicating with others. Being passive is not standing up for yourself, even when you have something to say. When you are passive you are not actively involved in the communication process, you let others answer and make decisions for you. People who are passive apologize all the time, beat around the bush, and pretend that anything that you say or do is fine. They mostly say yes when they really mean no. Being passive only hurts the person being passive.

Saying “No”

Learning to say “no” can be a really difficult thing to do. Everyone struggles to find the right words to use when they are in situations that make them uncomfortable. When your friends are pressuring you to do something that you do not feel is okay, it is hard. So here are some ways to help you say no.

- Walk away
- Change the subject
- Say ...”I don't feel like it.”
- Say ...”My life is weird enough as it is.”
- Avoid the situation all together
- Use your parents or loved one as an excuse. For example, “My mother would freak out about something like this, I want to be able to leave the house before I'm 20.”
- Say...no thanks
- Give a reason like “I'm saving my brain for science.”

Points to Remember About Being a Good Communicator

1. Know what you think and what you are going to say before you say it.
2. Think about what you want to say or do before you speak or act.
3. Don't assume that people can read your mind. Say what you mean.
4. Make good eye contact
5. Have good posture
6. Try to be positive even when someone else is being negative
7. Use "I" statements instead of "You" statements.
8. Do not preach-ask someone first if they would like advice.
9. Do not yell or nag
10. Remember to respect the opinions of others even when they differ from your own.
11. Ask questions when you don't understand what someone one is saying.
12. Do not judge, blame or criticize.