Bridging the Divide: Communication Strategies

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Communication is Hard

• Communication is HARD and the degree of work determines effectiveness
• Communication is relational, so the first step is acceptance of limited control
• **Goal:** Focus on the elements over which I can have some degree of control and acknowledge what I cannot control.
• This reality is difficult to accept because we as humans like CONTROL!!
Lead with Listening, Value Relationships

• Let people tell their story. Do not interrupt with detail-oriented questions; they will emphasize what they really want you to understand.

• Reflective listening: Affirm their sharing, repeat back a few main points and use their language and phrases to let them know you were really listening.

• Use open-ended questions: “That must have been difficult for you. What do you think is the next step?”

Dangers of Assumptions

Failure to plan can lead to tension or unfulfilling outcomes

Most common mistakes:
• Wing it: “I’ll just see how things go and take it as it comes.”
• Ignore: “I will not respond to anything he or she says.”
• Avoid: “I will just not be in the same room as him or her.”
• Minimize: “Well that is funny if you think about it, sounds like ______.”

Dangers of Passivity

• Reliance on other to address the issue: “I will just follow their lead; they will control the situation because it their house.”

• Subordination: “If there is any dust-up, he or she really knows better, so I can just agree.”

• Reliance on alternative source: “If I do not know how to respond, I will just google it.”
Emotional Stamina: HALT

Be honest about your own level of emotional fatigue:

• Hungry: don’t engage tension on an empty stomach
• Angry: are you holding significant repressed anger
• Lonely: are you fragile due to relationship issues or grief
• Tired: are you sleep-deprived or dealing with extended personal or work stress

Know and Own Your Tension

• Make time for a few moments of quiet, prior to entering a potentially tense situation
• Use some mindful breathing, name safety needs and gratitude for your own agency (I can decide whether or not to react to my relative’s observation about my car).
• Reach out to a friend prior to event to name your concerns about the tension and ask for feedback – assess if your worry is proportional to the circumstances.

Poll Question 1

You are at a family party watching a holiday movie with other family members. An uncle enters the room and changes the channel to a news station, informing the group that that he wants to listen to a politician’s speech. How do you respond?
A) leave the room
B) ask that he watch somewhere else
C) leave the party
D) ask that he come back after the group completes the movie
E) go ask your aunt to tell him he can’t watch it
Implement Active Listening Skills

A person is less likely to escalate or disengage if he or she feels heard:
- Thank the person for his or her observations and feelings.
- Offer a brief summary of their perspective.
- Focus on delivering your summary in a slow manner while making eye contact, speaking in a low tone, showing a calm affect, and using minimal gestures.
- Keep it short: make one or two points, then inquire if your summary was accurate and give the person a chance to add or correct content.

Barriers to Building Openness and Tolerance

- Avoid problem-solving or giving advice. Remember the person is sharing with you as a way of establishing a connection. They are not necessarily expecting a solution or information that they could easily obtain with an Internet search.
- Acknowledge the sharing as an act of trust. Express your gratitude for the person having made him or herself vulnerable enough to share and encourage them to keep sharing with others.

Being Effective vs. Being Right

Cultivate genuine empathy
- Extend empathy toward the other person and their situation. Find an appreciation for their perspective. You may not agree, but this does not mean they are necessarily wrong.
- Be inquisitive
- Ask open-ended questions
- Ask them to explain a term or issue that you do not understand
Focus on Non-verbal Indicators

Be aware of what your body language is communicating:
• Are you sitting with your arms folded?
• Are you making good eye contact?
• Have you taken out your phone multiple times?
• Notice when your words do not match body language, e.g., when a person says he or she is fine but sits on their hands and looks at the floor.

Safety vs Situation

• **Know your degree of safety:** You can choose what to share and when to share it.
• Be cautious that peer pressure in a situation can lead to prematurely sharing personal information to match the degree of vulnerability or intensity of a current exchange.
• Breathe and check your safety level and recognize that you can affirm others without oversharin.

Mindful Breathing

4-7-8 Mindful Breathing Exercise
• Inhale through nose (4 count)
• Hold (7 count)
• Exhale through mouth (8 count)
Beware of Escalation

Respect the uniqueness of the other person's story
- Avoid over-identifying (the same thing happened to me)
- Avoid over-simplifying (oh, I was just dealing with that)
- Avoid diminishing the significance of what you are hearing (you are young and smart, you will fix it no time).
- Be cautious of the need to mirror the other person's intensity, volume, mannerisms, extreme content.

Own Your Response, Manage the Moment, Avoid a Crisis

Improve Model (Linehan, 2018)
- Imagery – take yourself to a calm or positive place in your mind
- Meaning – create meaning or opportunity for growth from this moment
- Prayer – become aware that you are not alone and connect with God for companionship and strength, ask for the wisdom of deceased loved one's (e.g., what would your grandmother tell you)
- Relax – use mindfulness techniques like controlled breathing or progressive muscle relaxation to lower bodily tension to remain calm and flexible

Own Your Response, Manage the Moment, Avoid a Crisis

Improve Model (Linehan, 2018)
- One Thing in the Moment – find one task to center your focus (how many lamps are in the room, how many colors on a painting). You can reduce the intensity of feelings and focus resources on present moment.
- Vacation – imagine a place you went on vacation. How did it look or smell? Recall a positive reality beyond the present tension.
- Encouragement – affirm your assets, recall your strength to engage the moment and not run away or self-sabotage.
Self-Regulating in the Moment

Manage the pace of the conversation
• If you observe that the person is getting more upset, create a pause: “Could you excuse me for a moment? I’m going to get some water.”
• Even a brief break can provide time to breathe and reengage the conversation at a lower level of intensity.
• Think of a manual transmission: if the other person is going to fourth gear, you have to drop down to second and stay there.

Poll Question 2
You are attending a parish Bible study and the group is discussing the assigned reading. A member comes in late and announces, “Did you hear about the scandal at the neighboring parish? I think the bishop is doing a terrible job addressing it!” He takes out his phone and starts showing an article to the group members nearby. How do you respond?
A) Express support for the bishop and ask him not to criticize the bishop.
B) Ask him to be quiet and talk only about the assigned reading.
C) Acknowledge his statement and suggest this discussion can happen after the meeting.
D) Remain silent and wait for someone else to address the tension.

Always Have Plan A and Plan B
If you anticipate possible tension at a social event, take time to reflect on your thoughts and feelings, then develop a simple message that contains what you most want to communicate. “I feel this way about ___” Prepare to repeat the same phrase if others increase tension or do not acknowledge your point.
Plan B

- Respect the uniqueness of the other person's story. Try to avoid over-identifying, minimizing, or using clichés.
- Remove yourself from situation but acknowledge the other person: "Nice to meet you and talk with you; maybe I will see you in the future."
- Remember that the goal is managing the present situation and acknowledging that larger issues do not need to be solved immediately.

Boundaries: Prioritize Simplicity

- Model the way you want to be treated
- If you desire to have a serious exchange:
  - Do not look at your phone or smart watch
  - Do not leave the conversation to get food or drink
- Speak in a setting where you have basic privacy or minimal distractions (e.g., do not begin a conversation where the guests arrive and leave)
- Time awareness: be conscious of your schedule and the other person's commitments (e.g., do not try to speak with party host when he or she is trying to get meal on the table)

Own Your Boundaries

Set appropriate boundaries for the conversation.

- Avoid letting the person dictate time constraints or allowing his or her crisis to become your crisis: "I am not leaving this room until I have an answer about___."
- Instead, provide a summary of his or her concerns: "You have given me important points to consider and I am grateful for your observations.
- Reach out to me this weekend and we can find a time to talk further after I have had time to think over your concerns."
Own Your Boundaries

• Be cautious of the person leveraging the situational pressure of a holiday or social event to create the impetus of an immediate solution.
• Work to maintain the interaction as relational between you and the person. Discourage attempts to enlist others to support their perspective: “Hey, let’s ask Uncle Bill and Cousin Annetta if they agree with me.”
• Put some of the responsibility on the other person to initiate a follow up conversation. (If they are truly invested in the issue then they will need to sustain their motivation).

Poll Question 3

Your cousin approaches you at a family party because she wants to resolve a past conflict. You have not spoken in five years. She is in town for the first time in many years. How would you respond?
A) Tell her how hurt you were and are
B) Refuse to speak with her
C) Tell her you are glad to see her, but suggest talking later
D) Leave the room and get a glass of wine
E) Text her and say you won’t talk until she apologizes

Communication and Technology

• A note about technology: intentional listening is even more challenging when we are physically present with one another. Feelings of connection can deteriorate when communication is confined to the digital realm – video chat, text messages, email, etc.
• With the social isolation of the pandemic, it is important to consider it may be more stressful than we realize, to be around friends or family for an event.
• It is important to recognize the limitations of contact primarily through electronic media: “We are in touch all the time on Instagram.”

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Communication and Technology

- Electronic exchanges are often short, positive, humorous, and lacking emotion. It is important to consider that intimate or tense conversations might be more anxiety-provoking than initially expected.
- Be cautious of an over-reliance on prepackaged responses; they can result in other people feeling judged or patronized. “I watched this great documentary on ADHD in adults and you should _____.”

Focus on the Basics

- Notice others’ body language and tone
- Do not block others’ access to doorways
- When possible, sit down to be on eye level with others
- Speak more slowly and softly; anxiety will likely speed you up
- Be conscious of others’ personal space
- Be honest about your own level of safety

Modeling

- Model the response that you want to receive.
- De-escalation starts with you.
- Continue to maintain your composure and show respect.
- Avoid using profanity and comparisons.
- Humor can be misunderstood, even if it is self-deprecating
- Stick to the data of his or her content.
- Avoid responding with clichés: “Oh, don’t make a mountain out of a molehill,” etc.
Web Resources

• Anxiety Disorders Association of America (www.adaa.org)
• Anxiety Disorder Resource Center (www.anxiety-usa.org)
• National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) (nccih.nih.gov)
• The Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/consumer-health/in-depth/mindfulness-exercises)

Resources

• Rohr, R., Falling Upward: Spirituality for the Second Half of Life

QUESTIONS