

Family Voice Bulletin – Issue 12 – Communication (June 15, 2020)

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Communication is a topic we can all learn more about as it is something we use daily in all facets of life. Sometimes we can find ourselves stuck for the right words to say, or overwhelmed in wondering which words might spark anger. While the words used will differ in every conversation, there are some approaches we can keep in mind to bring a healthier communication style to our interactions.

In important conversations, aim to have a plan or goal, and to be present. Ask yourself some questions before the conversation takes place. What is important to you? Teach? Defend? Prepare to ask for what you need. Difficult conversations are draining, so it's a good idea to be attuned to own emotional wellbeing. If you can, choose a time when you can be fully present. Consider this for the person you are talking to as well. First thing in the morning, coming off a work shift, in a heated moment, or during periods of unwellness may not be the best times for big conversations. If the opportunity comes up, choose a time together. When you approach an important conversation, chances are you've had something on your mind for some time, so try to give the other person some space to process their own thoughts and feelings if possible. *Where* a conversation takes place can also have an influence. Aim to meet in a neutral zone where everyone feels comfortable, safe, and on steady/equal ground. Some people find it helpful to have tough conversations in a public place because we tend to be more mindful of our volume and reactions.

Listening goes beyond hearing. Listening *actively* shows the other person you are truly present. Active listening also involves body language. Our body language speaks for us even when we are at a loss for words. Caring facial expressions, opening our arms and hands, leaning forward, and nodding our head are all subtle cues that show we are really listening. It is normal for minds to wander, think ahead to next steps and lose focus on the present moment. Forgive yourself when this happens. When your mind drifts, gently bring yourself back to the present. To show a person you are approaching the conversation with an open mind and heart, do your best to reflect upon the facts without judgment. Validation is one way we can support another's experience. When a person experiences serious mental health symptoms, or is under the influence of a substance, their thinking may not be clear. Irrational thoughts are not always able to be met with reason or logic. Listen for the "grain of truth" in conversation. Sometimes this is simply the way the other person is feeling. Look to validate a person's emotions and allow yourself to explore their perspective. In moments of their wellness, ask questions such as: *How can I help? How can I be supportive in moments of difficulty for you? What works for you? What doesn't work for you?*

Keep in mind that even when you are using your "best" skills, you may come away from conversations feeling nothing has worked. This is not a failure, but rather, it could be a sign that your loved one is not in a place of change. They may be feeling overwhelmed, emotional, ashamed, or have other things

happening in their life that keeps them from fully engaging in the conversation. In these situations, continue to practice non-judgement towards your loved one and keep your own self-care in mind.

Conversation road blocks vs. curves: Suggestions for empathetic responses

- Comments such as: “I don’t know” can be met with: “Suppose you did know? You’ve gone through some tough situations before, what got you through? How did you cope?”
- When possible, give choices. Try to make conversations beneficial for both people involved.
- Try to remove the word “you” from conversations. For example, when we say something like: “When **you** don’t do the dishes, I feel upset” it can trigger shame or defensiveness and may lead to our loved one blocking us out. Instead, try this approach: “When the dishes aren’t done, I feel upset.”
- If you ever feel defensive or stuck, allow curiosity and learning to be your footing. Ask your loved one to share more with you and explore their own possible answers. This can give you a breather and allow for deeper understanding. This is also an opportunity to give your loved one more space to speak or vent – hopefully empowering them to find solutions.
- Try to imagine how you might feel if you were fearful, regretful, angry, or concerned about something. Reflecting on where the other person is coming from demonstrates empathy to the other person.
- Sometimes issues accumulate when we “choose our battles” over time and when that “final straw” arrives, suddenly there are many things to address at once. This can be overwhelming, discouraging, or disheartening. Aim to prioritize concerns and then stick to one topic or one goal.
- When emotions become heightened, it might be time to press the pause button. It’s ok to take a moment to step away and think. Agree to talk more at a later time to help avoid feelings of abandonment.
- There are times when conversations will hit a wall. In tough moments like this, a helpful path can be actively trying not to escalate heightened emotions, and keeping the other person’s dignity in tact. Safety is always essential to maintain.
- There may be times when deferring to someone else may be more effective. Requesting support allows space for another voice, one that may be less emotionally connected to the situation. Choose someone who is supportive and on equal ground for all parties.

Book recommendation: “Messages: Communication Skills,” by Matthew McKay et al.

<https://books.google.ca/books/about/Messages.html?id=bUDNZkqUt0A>