

Healthy Relationships/Effective Communication

Effective communication is an essential component to healthy relationships. Communication with others involves expressing ourselves and responding to someone else.

Expressing Ourselves

- When **you** are stating an opinion, making an observation, or expressing a feeling, the most appropriate format to use is called an "**I-statement**."
- You may even be already using them. **I-statements** allow us to state things in positive terms, to express ourselves directly and honestly, and to take responsibility for what we think, feel, and need while avoiding blaming or accusing others.
- In contrast, "**You-statements**" blame the other person, put him/her on the defensive, and often cause communication to be blocked.
- To simplify things, we can use a kind of "formula" for I-statements: "I feel/think/want (express the feeling/thought/desire)... When (state the behavior causing it)... Because (identify the reason)..." The nice thing about this formula is that we can decide how much of it we want to use. It can be just the first one, or the first two lines, or all three.

Responding to Others

- When **other people** are expressing themselves, it is not appropriate to use I-statements when responding. A more effective technique is called "**Reflection**."
- Reflection is saying back, in your own words, the content and/or feeling of what the other person just said.
- Reflection does not question, challenge, argue, approve, or disapprove. We can use an even simpler formula for Reflection: "Sounds like you're feeling/thinking/wanting (express the emotion, thought, desire you hear)... Because (state the reason you heard for it)..."
- Reflection requires us to listen very carefully to what the other person is actually saying. Yet we also do NOT have to be right in identifying the emotion or reason we hear because the speaker will automatically clarify it for us (and sometimes for him/her in the process).
- What we need to remember is that when we use Reflection, the other person is going to continue talking about what he/she is experiencing, so we need to make sure that we have time to listen.

When we first begin using I-statements and Reflection, it can feel artificial. It doesn't take long for them to become automatic. Experiment with them and you may find that your discussions with other people become much more productive and satisfying.

Dealing with Conflict Effectively

A major stumbling block in any relationship is settling disagreements, which often reduce to emotional shouting matches rather than caring problem-solving. Basic ground rules for effectively facing conflict in a relationship include:

- Maintain a spirit of good will - remember: you care about this person.
- Avoid attacking one another - discuss behavior, not personalities.
- Share your feelings - explore and discuss them.
- Focus on the present - past disappointments cannot be changed. Concentrate on here and now.

Specific Techniques for Conflict Management

- Choose a time to have the discussion - make it an appointment. Avoid those times when either of you are fatigued, ill, or under pressure.
- Be specific: take time to reflect on what you are upset about and focus on specific actions, feelings, and attitudes.
- Listen carefully. Allow each individual uninterrupted time to explain his/her viewpoint.
- Work on one issue at a time. Decide what is the uppermost concern and discuss it.
- Ask for reasonable change. Determine what you really want from the person, then ask yourself if it is realistic and authentic. Give the person a chance to correct the situation.
- Try to accept: be open to the other person's feelings and accept them without being judgmental.
- Be willing to compromise: avoid trying to win. Try to find a solution that is satisfying for you both.
- Realize the need to accept an incomplete resolution of a conflict. At times, completely resolving an issue is impossible.
- If you have extreme difficulty expressing your feelings, try writing them down in a note or letter.
- After the discussion is over, EXPRESS YOUR APPRECIATION for the other's listening to and discussing the issue with you. Reaffirm your respect and affection for each other. Finish on a positive note.

These strategies can help you establish an atmosphere of cooperative problem-solving. If you feel the relationship has deteriorated to a point where these methods can't be tried, you may want to consider a neutral, non-judgmental third party to mediate the discussions.

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