



Choosing Your Words: Harnessing the Power of Communication

The topic for this presentation is, “Choosing Your Words: Harnessing the Power of Communication.” We will talk about the importance of clear and direct communication. Caregivers who are challenged with the stresses and demands of the caregiving role will find it important to gain the skills needed to give voice to your needs and concerns and to advocate for yourself and your loved one effectively through clear communication. We will focus attention on expanding our individual awareness of what we are communicating, what we need to communicate, and will identify the critical communication skills needed to empower you as caregivers to communicate clearly.

We will look at why clear and authentic communication is so critical and then look at what interferes with our ability to communicate what we need, and to do it in a way that is most effective. Finally, we will identify the skills that contribute to making communication clear, direct, and purposeful. Let’s begin.

The power of communication lies in its ability to reflect who we are, while also providing a bridge of connection to others. It is a voice that can define our limits and give shape to our beliefs and values. It may describe our observations or shed light on our unique perspective. Communication, like a deep spring, releases the emotions of the heart. By doing so, it provides individual healing, authentic and heartfelt connection, whether it be in spilling our sadness, sharing our desires, releasing our fears, or spreading our joy. Communication gives form to our thoughts, defines our questions, relates our hopes, and shares our requests. Our communication has the power to affirm who we are to ourselves and is the building block of connections others. It has the power to influence and inspire, challenge and change, heal and soothe, charm and enchant. Communication is a reflection of you.

What we communicate has the potential to connect us to others or create distance or disharmony. Our words can hurt or heal. Our words can create conflict and also provide a means of resolution when there is conflict. When we communicate authentically, or from the heart, with thoughtful reflection, it serves as a means of affirming ourselves, and builds a bridge of connection and understanding to others.

Given the many ways communication has the capacity to profoundly define and capture what matters most to us, how might we be confident that we are tapping its power in the most effective way? There is power in communication and it is to our benefit and the benefit of others that we harness this power.



What gets in the way of our ability to harness this power? What keeps us from sending the clear messages we need to send? What gets in the way of making ourselves heard and known?

First, we must look no farther than ourselves. Not being clear ourselves is the most important place to start. Unless we are clear ourselves, we will never send a clear message.

There are many reasons why one may not be clear. You may be so stressed or overwhelmed that you are unable to focus on yourself and as a result simply react to what is coming at you without reflection. You may be feeling so strongly or be so emotionally charged that your perspective is skewed. You may have learned that it is selfish to focus on what you feel or need, and as a result it may feel foreign to consider talking about it. Maybe you haven't been encouraged to trust in your thinking or have confidence in your ideas. You may be held captive by fears that if you communicate honestly, you will put yourself at risk of upsetting someone. You may be unclear because you have conflict within you, and it is difficult to sort out what you need.

As you can see, there are many reasons why we may send mixed messages, reactive messages, or send no message at all. If you are able to take the time and the attention to really listen to yourself and discover what is at the heart of what you really need to communicate, then clarity will follow. Your message will be clear and authentic.

We will begin today with the most essential and critical element in the process of clear communication and that is the ability to listen, first and foremost, to you! If you are not clear about what you are feeling, needing, or asking for, then you will be hard pressed to communicate it clearly and will be less likely to be heard.

Let's begin with an exercise that can support your ability to listen to you. Again, in order to be clear and congruent in your message it is critical that you are able to settle into being able to listen to yourself. What is it you are observing when you stop for a moment and listen to what you feel? Where and what are the thoughts that arise? What are you in need of? Taking even a few minutes each day to be still and to reflect, can provide needed clarity.

Let's take those few minutes now and walk through an exercise of mindful meditation. This practice of being still and focusing on our breath is one powerful way to begin to get clear and calm.



To begin, I will ask that you are seated in a comfortable position with your body supported and your legs uncrossed.

Place your feet on the floor, and rest your hands in your lap or on your thighs. If you would like to remove visual distractions and if it is safe to do so, you can close your eyes. Keep your mouth gently closed, not clenched, and let your tongue lightly touch the roof of your mouth.

Breathe through your nose, unless for some reason you aren't able. When you are settled in, we will start by taking a few deep cleansing breaths, deep into your belly, and then exhale slowly. Breathe in deeply and exhale slowly.

Now, without trying to control your breath in any way, allow it to find its natural rhythm and depth. Bring your attention to the rising and falling of your belly as you breathe. You are simply following your breath as you would follow a child, with watchful attention.

Observe the natural movement and feeling of the air coming into your nose, your lungs expanding, belly rising, and the gentle pause. Now, exhale.

Your breath knows what to do all on its own. You don't have to force it or control it in anyway. As it rests between breaths, relax, and trust that it will resume.

There are no expectations. There are no worries. You don't have to do it perfectly. We are just noticing and following our breath.

You may notice your mind wandering or find your thoughts may float through, distracting your attention from the focus on your breath. This will happen. This is what our thoughts will do. It's okay.

Our thoughts, like the waves in the ocean, will rise and pass. No need to control your thoughts or make them go away. Just observe them, and then guide your attention back to featuring the awareness of your breath.

Drop into the place of calm and quiet that is there beneath the surface of the ocean waves.

If there is heaviness or sadness in your heart, if there is worry or anxiety that comes to your awareness, observe these feelings with kindness and care. No need to cling to any distress or push anything away.



Simply acknowledge the feelings that rise to the surface of your attention. Be aware of them and return your attention to the simple peaceful comfort of the natural rise and fall of your breath.

You may return again and again if you wish, to this place of restoration. Your breath is always available for you as a touchstone for your attention to the present.

Now begin to slowly bring your attention back to your surroundings. As you are ready you may open your eyes. We'll take a few moments for our minds and bodies to come back to our surroundings and back to our group.

How did this feel for you? Was it difficult to keep the attention on your breath? This is natural. It takes practice to develop this attention. Did you become aware of thoughts, feelings, or physical sensations that you may have been unaware of?

Why would this practice of being still, paying attention in the present moment, be helpful when it comes to communication? This practice can be an exercise that supports the much-needed gift of attention to you. Your feelings and needs, whether you deny them or not, are being communicated; impacting you physically and emotionally, through your behavior, in how you see yourself, and how others see you. Wouldn't it be better to pay attention to them, to responsibly care for them, so that you have some say in how they are expressed? Paying attention in this way will help.

Another way this practice of mindful meditation can serve to help is it provides a place and a practice of getting calm and still when you may be tempted to impulsively react with communication that is potentially unclear or destructive.

Just think of the last time you may have approached a conversation when you were feeling emotionally riled up and reactive. It is difficult to pull back on the reins when you are chomping at the bit to make a case for yourself or to drive home the point of your perspective. However strong the desire is to launch into reacting, it rarely leads to productive outcomes, and may in fact result in making matters worse.

So, the ability to slow down, to get calm, to get clear about what you are feeling, thinking, and needing in any given situation will be tremendously powerful. It can take a lot of restraint to hold your tongue until you are sure about what you need to say. If you are able to be composed, reflective, and clear enough to respond in a responsible way, the power that you feel will be solid and no one will feel attacked in the process. For



this reason, consider taking the time, even 5 minutes a day, practicing the act of being still.

Now that we have looked at getting clear and calm, let's take a look at some further skills necessary to empower your communication. I'd like to talk about the strategy that is described as making an "I statement." This "I statement" encourages you to make sure the message being expressed is simply about you. When you make "I statement," you are taking ownership and responsibility for yourself.

It may seem obvious to only speak from your own perspective, but oftentimes, this is exactly where people get into trouble when communicating. We inadvertently begin speaking for someone or assuming what is going on with the other person. In the simplest terms, making an "I statement" is the difference between saying "I" rather than "you."

There are three components to consider when making an "I statement." The first component is to be specific. Describe the observation, the behavior, and the facts of what you see, hear, or notice. Simply describe, without adding any interpretations, judgments, or evaluations. State just the specific facts.

For example, let's say your loved one is not taking their medicine as prescribed. An "I statement" might be, "Honey I noticed you haven't taken your medicine for the past 2 days." This is opposed to making a "you" statement that could sound something like, "Honey, I don't know why you don't take care of yourself. You haven't taken your medicine again."

Another example could be if a family member is late in arriving to relieve you for a little respite from caregiving. An "I statement" may start with, "I thought that you were going to arrive at 6 and it is now 7 o'clock," as opposed to saying, "You said you would be here an hour ago."

Can you hear or feel the difference when you are describing what you have observed in an, "I statement" rather than judging with a "you statement?" When you use "I statement" with specific observations and concrete details, the person you are sending the message to will likely feel less attacked or inclined to respond defensively.

So, use "I statements" and start with clear, concrete, factual observations such as, "I noticed, or when I hear, or when I see." Make it specific and avoid generalizations such as "always" or "never."



The next component is to identify how you feel and connect that feeling to the need that is causing that feeling to be activated.

Our culture places such a high value on the notion of independence, the do it yourself, pull yourself up by your bootstraps mentality, but this perspective can inadvertently disregard the reality that all human beings have common needs and feelings. The truest form of independence is the ability to recognize and care for your needs. Independent people are not afraid to recognize and ask for help, to recognize not only their strengths but their challenges.

This is another place where one can get tripped up and inadvertently not take full ownership of feelings by relating them in ways that blame or send the message that these feelings are being caused by another person.

There is a great description about the concept of our feelings arising from a need, by author Thomas D'Asembourg in his book, *Being Genuine: How to Stop Being Nice and Start Being Real*.

He uses the metaphor of a car's dashboard to explain the relationship between our feelings and needs. He states that just as the indicators on our car dashboard tells the driver when the car needs oil or gas, our feelings are the physical indicators of our needs that are met or not met. Whenever a feeling arises it is the result of a shared human need. For example, let's say the feeling we are noticing is anger. Well, that feeling may be an indicator of the need for safety or self-protection. Or let's say the feeling is sadness, and this feeling is arising because of the loss of love or a connection.

Our feelings then are an expression of a basic human need. They are not caused by anyone else. We all have needs, whether we express them or not, and our feelings are a red flag of the need that is behind that feeling.

Let's look at some more examples of this concept. On a basic physical level, we all share similar needs for food, air, water, rest, shelter, and touch. If we are not getting one of these needs met, we will feel hungry, thirsty, sleepy, etcetera. No one made you feel this way. These feelings arise because a need is not being met. There are other human needs that are less concrete but still human needs that we all share. For instance, one human need is the need for connection. Human beings share a need for closeness, appreciation, security, and affection. What feelings may indicate one of those needs was not getting met? You may feel lonesome, insecure, fearful, or weary. The fact is, the way that we feel is not the result or the responsibility of another person.



They may result when someone isn't meeting that need, but they are not actually caused by that person.

This can be a difficult but empowering idea to get our head around. You may have learned that your feelings are not acceptable or that your needs are a burden or a result of you not being strong or competent. You may have taken the risk to reach out to have your needs met and been turned down or ridiculed, so you don't want to run the risk again.

It really is just a human fact of life that all human beings have common feelings and we all have needs. Pretending or acting as though you don't is really a waste of energy.

It can be empowering to take ownership for your feelings and for getting your needs met because they are yours to express. You own them. You are not placing someone else in charge. Even if you share your feelings honestly or express a need to someone and they don't respond the way you hope, does not mean that you can't get them met somewhere else. Communicating our feelings and needs in a manner that expresses our ownership and that doesn't place blame on anyone else may take some practice. We will look at some tips to help make it clearer when you are taking that ownership.

To begin, it is important to make sure that when you are describing a feeling, that you are not making it a thought. This can be tricky. Stating a feeling is simple. You can use one word such as sad, angry, worried, or exhausted. It is important to be sure that you are expressing your feeling and not making it into a thought about someone else. An example might be, "I feel like you, or I feel as if you." These statements are actually expressing a thought about what someone else is doing and making them the reason for your feeling. Listen to the difference in describing a feeling: "I feel sad," as opposed to "I feel as if you are making me sad." When you say, "I feel as if you are making me sad," you are making the other person accountable for how you are feeling.

You can also inadvertently place blame when you use action words to describe how you feel such as, "I feel abused, or attacked or unappreciated." These words are describing an action rather than a feeling. These action words also give another person ownership for how you are feeling, rather than you are owning your own feeling.

Let's try to incorporate these steps. We'll begin with an "I" statement, adding an observation and then express a feeling.



We will go back the example of making an observation and add the next component of identifying the feeling. For example: “Honey, I noticed you haven’t taken your medicine for the past two days and I feel worried. This is opposed to, “Honey, I don’t know why you don’t take care of yourself. You haven’t taken your medicine again and you are making me worried.”

Again, start with an “I” statement of an observation. Simply describe what you see, hear, or observe without adding any interpretations, judgments, or evaluations.

Once you state how you feel, you then would state the need that is connected to this feeling. If you do not express or communicate your needs directly you most likely will not get that met. Further, if you communicate needs indirectly it will most likely sound like an evaluation, criticism or judgment of the other person.

We may have become accustomed to hinting around or assuming others should just know or figure out what we need. We may think to ourselves, “What is wrong? They should know what I need. Why should I have to say it?” We may evaluate or judge others for not meeting our needs while at the same time, we are not fully expressing what those needs may be. This can invite defensiveness rather than understanding on the part of the listener. Let’s look again at our examples and describe what it may sound like to make an “I” statement with an observation, feeling and need.

“Honey, I noticed you haven’t taken your medicine for the past two days and I feel worried because I really want you to stay healthy.” Think of how this sounds, as opposed to, “Honey, I don’t know why you don’t take care of yourself. You haven’t taken your medicine again and you are making me worried. You must not care about being healthy.”

We can also look at the example of the late family member we talked about earlier. “I thought that you were going to arrive at 6 and it is now 7 o’clock. I have been feeling anxious waiting because I needed some time away so desperately,” as opposed to saying “You said you would be here an hour ago. I feel as if you don’t care about what this is like for me.”

Consider if your needs have been hidden in self-defeating criticisms, judgments, or interpretations of others. Let’s look at more examples. Not expressing your needs directly may sound like, “You know I have been crazy with work. Why can’t you be more supportive?” as opposed to directly stating your needs such as, “I am having such a demanding time at work. I really need your support.”



Let's try some more examples. An example of being indirect is, "I can't believe you left the dishes in the sink again even though I have asked you a million times not to." A more direct approach might be, "I feel frustrated when you leave the dishes in the sink when I have asked you not to because I need to have order in the house to feel calm."

Another example of an indirect approach might be, "You didn't get your work done. How am I supposed to count on you?" versus the more direct approach of, "I see that you have not completed your work assignment on time. This is disappointing because I need to be able to count on you to get the job done."

We've covered a great deal so far.

Finally, let's look at how to make a request. Typically, when we are communicating an observation, a feeling, or need to another person we are looking for something or requesting something of them. The final step of a communication message then is to state the request. What is it we are asking or looking for in a response? When we communicate directly, we would make the request known. We would ask for something specific. So, using the previous examples:

"I thought that you were going to arrive at 6 and it is now 7 o'clock, I have been feeling anxious waiting because I needed some time away so desperately. Can you call if you are going to be late so I can know where I stand?"

"I feel frustrated when you leave the dishes in the sink when I have asked you not to because I need to have order in the house to feel calm. Would you clean up the dishes?"

In making a request you would be most likely to be successful if you are clear and state specifically what you are requesting. Also, it is most helpful if you request what you want as opposed to what you don't want.

When you are asking for what you want, you aren't leaving it up to the listener to figure it out. For instance, instead of saying "Please don't be late," try making the request for what you do want. "Can you call next time if you are going to be late?"

We have covered a good deal of material. It can feel overwhelming to think about shifting the way you have been communicating. We want to make sure that you recognize that this is something that takes a bit of practice. After all, we all may have gotten into habits of communicating that may feel comfortable but are not the most



effective or the most direct. If we can stick to the main principles that we have covered today, you will be well on the way to making your words count. Let's review those skills.

First, slow down and listen to yourself. Next, find a sense of calm if emotions or stress levels are high.

Then, use "I statement." State what you observe, see, hear or notice. Be specific and nonjudgmental. Express only the concrete facts without assuming any one's motives.

Share how you feel using a one-word description. "I feel sad, angry or frustrated." Stay away from "you statements" or using verbs instead of emotions, such as abused, attacked, or unappreciated.

Next, state what exactly you need as a result of your emotion. For example, "I feel lonely and need to spend time with you."

Finally, when making a request, make it clear and specific. State what you want, not what you don't.

Taking any of these steps is going to move your communication in a positive direction. Practice them and pay attention to what you notice. What you communicate is a reflection of you. If you are harnessing the power of direct communication, you will experience the gifts that come when your words are clear, honest, and from the heart. The more you are able to use your words in a manner that is authentic, the more your ability to feel connected to yourself and to others will expand. So, choose your words and let the world know who you are. We are here to listen.