

How to Improve Communication in Relationships: 7 Essential Skills

1. Four Ears of a Message

There are “four ears” in every message:

- Fact: What I inform about (data, facts, statements)
- Self-revealing: What I reveal about myself (information about the sender)
- Relationship: What I think about you (information about how we get along)
- Appeal: What I want to make you do (an attempt to influence the receiver)

There is never the same emphasis put on each of the four facets, and the emphasis can be meant or understood differently. Try to focus on the fact of the message rather than guessing what the message was meant to say about yourself or the relationship between you and the sender.

2. Active Listening

Active listening is more than waiting for your turn to speak. Stop thinking about what to say next. Stop judging what the other person is saying. Instead, be present in the moment and truly listen to the other person. And remember:

- Show your attention (nonverbal involvement)
- Pay attention to your vis-à-vis, not your own thoughts
- Do not judge what they say
- Tolerate silence

3. Active Constructive Responding

Appreciative feedback in its nature needs to be supportive, inspiring and dealing from the strengths of the situation. Say your friend tells you she just got promoted. There are four ways you can respond to her:

- Nurturing (active constructive) “That is great! I’m so happy for you! Tell me more about it!”
- Cold (passive constructive) “Oh, that is good”
- Ignorant (passive destructive) “Sorry I don’t have time to listen to you right now”
- Hurtful (active destructive) “Really? I don’t think you do not deserve that”

Respond in a nurturing way: be enthusiastic and show genuine interest. Ask questions to allow her to relive the great moment and experience positive emotions.

4. Communication Climate

A destructive communication climate can have a negative impact on the conversation. The following six behaviors can help maintain a supportive communication climate: description (rather than evaluation), problem orientation (rather than control), equality (rather than superiority), empathy (rather than neutrality), provisionalism (rather than certainty) and spontaneity (rather than strategy).

5. Non-violent Communication

Nonviolent communication is the willingness and the ability to approach and perceive issues in a non-judgmental way. Here are the four steps:

1. Observation ≠ Interpretation/Evaluation
Communicate your observations without interpreting them
2. Feelings ≠ Thoughts
Understand your emotions and express them in a non-judgmental way
3. Need ≠ Strategy
Express your needs
4. Request ≠ Demand
Make a clear request

6. Transactional Theory, Thoughts and Perception

Good communication is an art which begins with your thoughts. The way you think of the other person may shape your conversation. Also, remember the three ego states we communicate from:

- Child State (feelings)
- Parent State (moral)
- Adult State (rational)

In complementary transactions communication flows effortlessly while crossed transactions lead to negative tension and misunderstandings.

7. Avoid Thinking Traps with Mindfulness

A thinking trap is an automatic way of thinking or responding to an event or stimuli that causes distress. So be aware of your thoughts and try to avoid awfulising/catastrophizing (“the plane must have crashed”), black and white thinking (“if he does not call today I will never visit him again”) and emotional reasoning (using your emotional reaction to prove facts). Stay in the present moment and focus on what is good in your life and your relationship.