

Beyond the Blame Game

Lesson One: Communication Mistakes

The three biggest mistakes in communication are:

- Not communicating (avoidance or accommodating)
- Projecting blame for our own feelings
- Using blame and judgement in our language -i.e. “you”

Due to our childhood experiences, our past history with conflict situations, and our religious, spiritual, and cultural beliefs, many people avoid conflict. The problem with an avoidant approach to conflict is that the problem doesn't go away. Sometimes, the situation worsens, tension builds up, and the probable result is an explosive argument that includes insults, name calling, bringing up past wrongs, and meanness.

In addition to avoiding conflict and pretending there is no conflict, some people avoid conflict by accommodating the needs of the other person. Giving in and always accommodating the other person's needs and desires may work in the short-term; however, in the long term sacrificing oneself can lead to resentment which can poison a relationship.

Some people internalize blame, shaming and berating themselves and ruminating about what went wrong. None of the strategies above- avoidance, denial or shame are productive or effective. There is another way.

Communication that is honest, rooted in ownership of our own feelings, and free of judgement and blame can deepen intimacy, trust, and understanding.

Shifting from Judgement to Observation

Communication that is free of judgement and blame is not easy because the mind thinks in duality and in terms of right and wrong. I am right and the other person is wrong. When we think in this way, it clouds our ability to see the reality of the situation- there are two people and two perspectives and both are equally valid. To communicate without blame involves shifting from judgements into observation. Below are a few examples. The first statement is a judgement; the second an observation that is neutral and free of blame.

She's a micromanager. | She pays attention to small details and checks in on my work frequently.



He's irresponsible with his money. | He is comfortable with a higher debt load than me and his spending priorities are different from mine.

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He doesn't care about me. | He doesn't ask questions about my work or my life and he's absorbed in his work.

He is lazy and expects me to do everything. | He has a different standard of cleanliness and isn't motivated to be organized and tidy.

From these examples, you can see the difference between a judgement and an observation which offers a description of the scenario or situation (like a video recording). Communicating an observation is helpful because sometimes people are unaware of their behaviors or their language. Have you ever been in an argument where you point out what someone says and they respond - "I didn't say that?"

When we focus on a specific description and combine this with communicating our feelings, we open up the space for genuine dialogue.

Taking the YOU out of our vocabulary

When we communicate focussing on what YOU are doing wrong and the things YOU said, we are likely to trigger a defensive response. When people have to defend themselves, they erect a barrier energetically and emotionally and are unlikely to be able to engage in open, honest, dialogue.

One way to shift away from provocative language is to take the "you" out of our vocabulary and to focus on "I" statements. Below are some examples.

You never do the housework. | I'm feeling frustrated that the dishes are getting done every evening and I have to wake up to dirty dishes in the morning.

You are so irresponsible with your money. | I'm shocked that you spent so much money at a time when our finances are tight.

You need to get some counselling to get over your anger problem. | I don't know how to help you and I feel helpless. I really think it would be helpful if you considered seeing someone to support you with managing your emotions.

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You don't take me seriously. | I don't like it when you make jokes about my work problems.

You don't care about me. | You don't ask me about my work or other things in my life and these are things that are important to me.

Reflection Questions

Think of a recent or past conflict where you didn't communicate and the relationship soured. What could you have said?

What judgements did you| do you have about this conflict? Write down 3-5 statements.

Since the mind usually thinks in duality and in terms of judgement, reflect on how you can shift these statements into observations.

Now, with these new observations, write a script for how you could have communicated.

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Lesson Two: Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is learning how to feel what we feel without suppressing, repressing, projecting, exploding, or engaging in unproductive conversations rooted in blame. Emotional intelligence is based on the understanding that emotions are physical sensations that have a somatic and mental expression. In other words, most emotions activate a physical response in the body and they also often activate a mental process.

Before we can develop the first step in emotional intelligence, we must first examine many of the pervasive myths about emotions. Some of the myths about emotions are illustrated in the table below.

MYTHS	TRUTHS
Some emotions are good and some emotions are bad.	Emotions are pleasant or unpleasant at the level of physical sensation.
Emotions are inferior to logic.	Emotions have an intelligence equal to logic and rationality.
Emotions are a sign of weakness.	Skillful expression of emotions is a sign of intelligence (emotional intelligence).
Crying is a sign of weakness.	Crying is a natural and normal response to stress and releases stress hormones.
Emotions are irrational.	Emotions have a purpose that reveal something about our past and our present.
If you are on a spiritual or healing path, you don't have emotions.	If you are on a spiritual path, and pleasant and unpleasant emotions arise, you are able to understand the intelligence of emotions, and harness the energy of emotions for personal growth and intimacy and trust in relationships.

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Lesson Two: Emotional Intelligence

Reflection Questions

What assumptions does culture | religion | spirituality have about emotions? What beliefs about emotions were you exposed to as a child?

How did your parents express emotions? How has this example influenced your emotional expression?

Think of a person you admire. How do they handle and express emotions; including the emotions of anger, grief or doubt? How would you like to handle and express emotions?

Reflect on a situation where you didn't express your emotions? What was the outcome?

Managing Emotions

Suppress, repress, deny, project, vent, explode, or express

Our parents, our education, our social conditioning often teach us to hide emotions and to suppress or deny them. Unfortunately, this strategy can often lead to muscle tension, gastro-intestinal problems, insomnia, not to mention the resentment or shame that can accumulate in our psyche when we deny ourselves the ability to receive, accept, honor, and feel our emotions.

Unexpressed pain, disappointment, hurt, or frustration can build over days, weeks, months or years, and explode into anger. Anger turned inwards can cause health problems and anger projected outwards can be destructive to relationships. It is better to express small frustrations and irritations rather than have these emotions build into a mountain of anger that explodes when we least expect it and even worse, when we explode with someone we love.

Suppression, repression, or denial of our emotions doesn't work. Projecting, venting, or exploding creates harm in relationships. The only strategy that is viable in the context of resilient relationships based on trust is to express our emotions in an intelligent and skillful way. Let's examine one emotion; a heavy-charged one to see how anger is an intelligent response and to learn how anger can be expressed skillfully.

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Lesson Two: Emotional Intelligence

“Anger is an integrity-protecting response to the invasion of a personal boundary. Authentic anger is specific and justified and its direct expression exposes impropriety and defends integrity in a way that benefits everyone. - Gabriel Roth

When we examine anger, we can categorize anger into:

- an affect
- an emotion
- a behavioral response

Anger as an Affect

Anger as an affect is a natural, genetically-programmed physiological response which is part of an epinephrine-driven survival alert system. It alerts us that something is being threatened and prepares us to flight, flee, or freeze.

Anger as an Emotion

Anger can be a primary emotion to signal a threat to our well-being or as a secondary Emotion. Most often, anger is a secondary emotion that protects us from:

- Painful feelings: fear, loss, grief, shame, hurt, unworthiness, anxiety, depression
- Painful sensations: physical pain, feeling rushed, overworked, disappointment, self-blame, lack of sleep, muscle tension
- Frustrated drives: being forced to do something you don't want to do or not being able to do something you want to do
- Threats: a perceived threat to your belief or values

Reflection Questions

The first step in emotional intelligence is awareness; becoming aware of our emotions and the physical and mental expressions of our emotions.

What do you feel when you feel angry? Where do you feel it in your body? What thoughts arise in your mind?

What do you feel when you feel sadness or grief? Where do you feel it in your body? What thoughts arise in your mind?

What do you feel when you feel joy? Where do you feel it in your body?

Reflect on the most important personal and professional relationships in your life. Is there any unresolved emotion(s) that is present and unexpressed?

Name or identify the emotion and think of the corresponding places in your body where this emotion lives.

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Lesson Three: Breath, Emotions, and Movement

Emotions and Breath

Breath is connected to self-awareness. The slower our breathing, the slower our thoughts, and the easier it is for us to see things clearly and respond from a creative, intuitive place. When our breathing quickens and our muscles constrict, it becomes harder to access the natural intelligence of the body and the higher wisdom that helps us to be an active and empowered participant in life; open to learning, open to grace, open to insight, and open to the dualities of life- dark and light, suffering and compassion, pain and joy.

By learning how to breathe deeply, we can use this technique in situations of stress or conflict. Our ability to breathe deeply in these situations will help us stay present, bring awareness to any physiological responses (heartbeat quickening, restriction in the chest areas, belly tightening), and respond rather than react in habitual and conditioned ways.

Emotion - Thought - Physiological Response - Action (words or deed)

Conscious Breathing

Conscious breathing is a safe intervention that creates new response patterns. For example, an emotion becomes activated. We become aware of the emotion. We become aware of the thoughts associated with this emotion. We become aware of how the body responds to this emotion/thought. Our awareness of what is happening inside the body is called interoception. Awareness of our thoughts and emotions is called introspection.

Through breathing, we can prevent the body from going into a stress or trauma response and instead, bring awareness attention to the possible opportunities that the present moment brings. Awareness in the present moment allows us to grow and evolve rather than repeat patterns from our past. Awareness in the present moment allows us to choose how we meet life's challenges. This choice can help reshape our character from who we were to who we can become.

Breathing to De-activate the Stress Response

"When we do specific breathing patterns, it changes our internal state; it switches off the fight or flight response, it switches on the relaxation response and causes our nervous system to recalibrate and this affects us emotionally, mentally, and physically." - Max Strom, author of Breathe to Heal



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Lesson Three: Breath, Emotions, and Movement

In order to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, diaphragmatic breathing is paramount. The movement of the diaphragm communicates directly with the nervous system and elicits the relaxation response.

The diaphragm is a dome-shaped muscle located below the heart. This muscle moves downward on the inhalation and upward on the exhalation and requires a relaxation of the abdominal muscles which is why diaphragmatic breathing is often called 'belly breathing.' The abdomen moves outward on the inhalation and the abdomen moves inward on the exhalation. The muscular movement of the diaphragm activates the parasympathetic nervous system which puts the body in relaxation mode and helps the brain deactivate the stress response.

Breathing, introspection, and interoception or body awareness are incredibly powerful tools in managing stress, trauma triggers, and re-setting the body's natural capacity to relax, integrating the sensory experiences of our day, assimilating the mental and emotional content of our relational experiences, so that we can learn, grow, and evolve.

1. Diaphragmatic breathing is the key that helps us to shift the nervous system from the sympathetic mode to the parasympathetic mode.
2. Introspection is defined as the awareness of one's own mental and emotional processes. Another word for introspection is self-awareness; awareness of our inner state, our thoughts, and our inner experience.
3. Interoception or body awareness is being tuned in to what we feel physiologically- in our muscles, joints, skin, and body.

Sometimes slow deep breathing isn't possible in the context of emotions that are overwhelming and have a strong charge. In this case, movement; including any type of exercise is recommended.

Movement

Movement, whether it is exercise, dancing, or simply going for a walk can be helpful in dissipating strong emotional energy and help to regain balance and get clarity on the situation and the best way to move forward. Movement can help to interrupt mental rumination and obsessive thinking and release the muscular tension that accompanies stress and conflict.



Reflection Questions

Do you exercise regularly? If yes, how does exercise or yoga help your mental and emotional state?

If no, think of an activity that you enjoy. How do you feel afterwards?

Describe your personal experience with deep breathing. What do you notice are the impacts/effects of deep breathing?

Deep breathing, introspection, interoception are all helpful strategies when we are emotionally activated. Which of these come easily for you and which would you like to focus on improving?

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Lesson Four: The Root of Conflict

According to Non-Violent Communication, a communication style developed by Marshall Rosenberg, at the root of conflict is an unmet need. We all desire to be loved, to be accepted, to feel purposeful, to be effective, to be supported and trusted. For some of us, we value fairness, consistency, security, and validation. For others, what is important is creativity, beauty, autonomy, independence, spontaneity, fun and play. Whatever our needs and values are, knowing ourselves and what is important to us is the first step in communicating effectively.

Reflection

Reflect on some of your most enduring friendships. What do these friendships offer you? What values and needs are important in a friendship?

[For example, feeling valued, appreciated and understood is important to me.]

Reflect on some of your intimate partnerships in the past or present. What did or what do these partnerships offer you? What values and needs are important in a partnership?

Needs Unfulfilled

Often, conflict arises when our needs are unmet and there is an assumption that our friends, our parents, or our partners will fulfill them. Sometimes the person we are in relationship with is able to meet us where we are at and fulfill our core need. Sometimes this isn't the case and no matter how hard we communicate, the other person is not willing or not able to be the person we hope them to be. In this case, it is helpful to understand that ultimately, we are responsible for fulfilling our own needs.

For years, I desired sensuality in my life and hoped and wished my partner would be more romantic. Eventually, I became more communicative about my needs and desires. For years, my partner tried to be more romantic but eventually, his efforts were shortlived and we would be back to square one having the same conversation UNTIL, I took responsibility for bringing sensuality into my life. I began to buy myself flowers, book spa dates with girlfriends, and look for opportunities in my life where I could engage my senses more deeply.

Reflection

Reflect on a past or current conflict. What are the core needs or values that are important to you? How could you communicate your core needs and values to the other person? [Use the chart below to identify your core needs].

Review and reflect on the chart below. Circle the top five needs that are important to you. Reflect on five of your primary relationships and whether or not your needs in these relationships are fulfilled.

FEELING	UNMET NEED
judged	acceptance
attacked	support
embarrassed	credibility/reputation
blamed	seen as competent
singled out	fairness
picked on	consistency
unfairly treated	equality
controlled	independence
micro-managed	autonomy
trapped	to be trusted
isolated	connection
excluded	belonging/inclusion
threatened	safety
intimidated	security
scared	reassurance
misunderstood	empathy/understanding
misinterpreted	accuracy
minimized	being valued
dismissed	being heard/seen
anxious	reassurance
worried	certainty

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Lesson Five: The Dance of Dialogue

Effective and skillful communication involves a balance of speaking and listening; expressing, and seeking to understand. Often in conflict situations, we tend to monologue instead of dialoguing. We are upset and angry, and we begin to rant and express how we feel and blame the other person for what they are doing wrong.

Monologuing rarely solves anything and usually goes nowhere. Most people, when faced with a monologue or rant, will not know how to handle the barrage of verbiage and will deny, defend, or go into silent mode. Monologuing is rarely effective and usually doesn't help us feel any better.

The dance of dialogue involves:

- Emotional expression. Expressing how you feel, your core needs and values, your wishes and desires.
- Engagement. Inviting the other person to engage with you.

Engaging the other person involves a very important and simple skill- the art of asking open-ended questions. Some examples of open-ended questions are: "what's going on for you?", "what are you thinking?", "how did you arrive at that decision?" From asking open ended questions, we can learn more about the other person; their motivations, their core needs, and their perspective.

Once we practice engagement as a strategy and technique, we learn that there is no right or wrong view, only differing perspectives.

Reflection Questions

Reflect on a past or present conflict scenario. What are three open-ended questions you could ask the other person.