

A Way of Communicating

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This article describes a way of communicating that promotes understanding between people and greatly reduces conflict. It is based on the principles from my book, *Making Happiness*, although the individual skills have been described elsewhere by others. On the surface this is a guide to communication skills; if you apply them consistently over time, however, you will find that they have a profound, transformational effect on your experience of yourself and the world. Through applying these skills we come to manifest the characteristics of genuinely happy people, including acceptance of ourselves, acceptance of others, satisfying relationships with others, responsibility, and an increased sense of agency. Through conscious, disciplined effort, these deeper benefits are an inevitable, if gradual, outcome.

This way of communicating is based on a desire to promote a genuine understanding between oneself and others such that we are most likely to actually understand another person's experience, and the other person is most likely to be able to understand ours. If our intention is other than this, such as to get our way with others or to control others, then this way of communicating will not be of much use. It has benefits for our communication and relationships with everyone, from our boss to a check-out clerk, but is particularly valuable for closer relationships such as among family members or between friends. It is wonderful when the two people who are communicating both apply the skills described here, but the benefits only depend on *you* using them.

The skills are simple in principle but endlessly difficult to master. Indeed, it is always possible to develop greater ease with these skills, and the benefits continue to increase with practice. After you finish reading this guide you may conclude, "I already know that stuff", or "I already do that". It would be very unfortunate if you believed yourself. In my professional experience, people who say things like that after reading this guide tend to be the poorest communicators and the least likely to improve. I wrote this, practice it, and am very good at it, which also means I'm humbly aware that I have lots of room for improvement.

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place. George Bernard Shaw

Meet The iCAR

No, the iCAR is not some new piece of technology, but rather tried-and-true old technology, repackaged here for your convenience. The acronym stands for:

intention

Compassion

Appreciation

Responsibility

Intention refers to what we are intending to achieve by saying what we do, and is in lower case because it is mostly an internal assessment that we may not express.

Compassion refers to how we *respond to what others say or do*. It is about entering into the other person's world with caring, reflected in how we acknowledge their experience.

Appreciation refers to the importance of us expressing things that we genuinely like about others.

Responsibility refers to how we *express our experience*. It involves fully honouring our own experience, telling our truth, without blaming others or our circumstances.

Intentions

Although I will be describing the practical "how to do it" aspects of communicating, and these are crucial, the most important aspect of communicating is really our intention. Why are we communicating with this person and what are we intending to achieve? We don't tend to give this much thought and it requires reflection and honest self-examination to find out. There is often a surface intention, such as giving the other person information, but usually also a deeper intention, such as wanting the other person to behave differently. This deeper intention may be apparent in our voice tone or body language as well as our choice of words. Since others are often sensitive to our deeper intentions, and react to what they perceive our intentions to be, communication difficulties are often related to us believing that we are communicating one thing but the other person perceiving something quite different. My personal favourite is to be expressing one thing in words while my body language and voice tone betray my impatience.

An important first step in communicating is therefore to be clear ourselves about our intentions. Usually we do not take the time to reflect on this in the moment, so it is valuable to reflect on it before and afterwards as well. If you are reading this with the intention of improving your communication within a particular

relationship, consider what you most want to achieve through your communication with this person. Are we trying to be open and honest with the other person, revealing our thoughts, feelings, and true intentions, or do we have ulterior motives and are actually trying to provide misleading information or to withhold information in order to achieve some desired effect on the other person? Are we trying to get them to do what we want? Are we trying to get them to feel guilty? Are we trying to get them to like us? Are we trying to say something hurtful in revenge for feeling hurt ourselves? Ultimately, clear communication starts with self-honesty about what we are really trying to achieve when we open our mouths, and this usually proves to be the most challenging aspect of all. I emphasize that almost any motives that we have in our communication are acceptable. There is nothing wrong with wanting someone to do something for us, to like us, or to stay with us. It is also quite normal to want to hurt others with our words, to want them to feel guilty or afraid, or to want them to feel jealous. Healthy communication just involves being more honest with ourselves and others about our intentions. It means that I actually have to tell people that I'm feeling impatient, without, as you'll read about below, blaming it on them.

Below is the first of several exercises. Although you may be tempted to skip over them, this guide will be of little use if you do. Communication skills are *skills*, and like all skills need to be practiced to get better. We don't expect to become a good pianist by reading a book on music theory, or a good soccer player by watching a game on television. Communication tends to break down most frequently when we are in emotionally charged situations, and these are not ideal circumstances for us to be trying something for the first time. Reading this guide and then waiting for a big fight to begin using the skills would be like having your first driving lesson during rush hour in a big city. Make it easy for yourself and practice the skills during non-stressful times. And yes, you will have to write, type, or speak your answers as required; thinking them in your head will not offer much benefit. For simplicity, I will just ask you to write things down, but please read this as "write, type, or dictate, etc." The more these communication skills are practiced and become automatic or second nature, the easier it will be to use them when you most need them.

Now, back to the exercise regarding our *intentions*. Pick a person with whom you would like to have better communication and answer the following questions. What I most want in my relationship with _____ is:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Next, reflect on the last time that you had a difficult or conflicted interaction with that person. To the best of your recollection, write down the words that you spoke to him or her.

Now, put yourself in the other person's shoes and reflect on how you would likely feel if you heard those words spoken to you. Write down your response:

If you're lucky, you'll recognize a disconnect between what you say you want in that relationship and how you would feel hearing your own words. You would be lucky because you now have important information about how your way of communicating is not moving you towards what you want in relationship with this person. The skills that you learn in the next sections will allow you to bring how you express yourself in relationships more into alignment with what you actually want in those relationships.

Take a few minutes now and reflect on what you are most commonly trying to achieve when you speak with people. Possible examples include: giving them information they asked for, impressing them with how much I know, making them feel better, winning an argument, getting them to do something I want, getting to know them better, making them feel badly about themselves, getting them to understand my experience, getting them to agree with me, making them like me, helping them with their problems.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

As noted earlier, these communication skills will not help you to control others, because controlling others will not contribute to genuine happiness for either you or them. They will similarly not help you if your goal is to provoke others into feeling badly about themselves or for you to feel superior to others. They will, however, be tremendously helpful if the intention behind your communication is to find out if the other person would be willing to do what you would like them to, to promote their understanding why you would like them to do it, to find out possible reasons they might not want to, to speak up for your desires, to express your truth, to learn about others' feelings and desires, to promote cooperation, etc.

You may or may not choose to share your intentions with others as part of your communication. Here are some examples of how intentions can be shared.

Flora: I'd really like to understand what you'd like from me.

Jessica: This may sound nosy, but I really want to hear about your marriage.

Rachid: I just want to vent for a minute.

Casper: I don't like to admit it, but I really want you to feel guilty about this.

Harvey: I'm telling you this 'cause I really want you to stop doing it 'cause I'm beginning to think you're a jerk.

Mary: I REALLY want you to tell me I'm right on this.

George: To be honest, I don't want to talk about it, I just want you to do the dishes.

In most instances we do not need to express our intention. If you want someone to pass the salt then a simple request will do, and a deep discussion of your intentions would be pretty pointless. There is, however, a lot of room for us to make simple expressions of our intentions in everyday conversations in ways that are appropriate and sound natural. Again, the first focus needs to be on us becoming increasingly aware of our intentions, but as we become more skilled at this we can begin to include brief statements about them in our everyday conversations. A statement at the office like, "You screwed up on the Robinson file." (which of course is only intended to provide the person with information!?) can instead be, "I'm feeling really frustrated that you forgot the numbers in the Robinson report and I don't want this to happen again."

Compassion

Compassion refers to how we *respond to others*, to what they say or do. It involves us entering into the other person's world with caring, attempting to see the world through their eyes, to take a walk in their shoes. It involves us being genuinely *with the other* person in their experience and conveying that we understand their experience, not by telling them that we do, but by showing them. It is, emphatically, not about being nice, so not about praise, reassurance, or pity.

Our compassion is conveyed primarily by acknowledging what the other person has expressed to us. We do this by capturing their *words* in our own words, by acknowledging their likely *experience* or feelings, and by finding the *truth* in what they have said.

Their Words

A tremendous amount of conflict and distress in relationships happens because people believe that the other person did not hear, understand, or care about what they said. This is a problem whether or not they actually were understood and is easily remedied when we tell the other person what we believe they said. At its most simple, this involves repeating back what we heard, almost word-for-word.

Jane: I'm fed up with you leaving your clothes and garbage around the house.

John: I get that you're feeling fed up with me leaving my clothes and garbage around the house.

Raj: If my teacher picks on me once more I'm never going to school again.

Mom: So if your teacher picks on you anymore you're never going to go to school again.

This word-for-word repeating back what the other person said is valuable in relationships in which there is a lot of conflict and misunderstanding because in repeating back what the other person said so accurately, there is little room for misunderstanding. However, this can also sound quite stilted and silly in relationships in which the level of conflict is lower and in situations in which communication is likely to be clearly understood. You probably don't need to say, "So you'd like me to pass the sugar?" In lower-conflict situations it makes sense to simply paraphrase what you have heard, trying to capture the essence of what the other person has said, particularly any feelings they expressed.

Jane: I'm fed up with you leaving your clothes and garbage around the house.

John: I get that you're annoyed with my messiness.

Or, John: Finding my stuff around really bugs you.

Raj: If my teacher picks on me once more I'm never going to school again.

Mom: So you're feeling pretty bad about your teacher picking on you and don't want to have to deal with her any more.

Or: So if she picks on you any more then you're never going back to her class.

As these examples illustrate, there is not one correct way to capture what you think the other person is saying. The important thing is the genuine intention to do so. Indeed, it doesn't even matter if the other person says you misunderstood, since it gives them an opportunity to clarify it for you, and you get a second chance to see if you got it.

Wanting a sense of connection with others is a fundamental human desire and this desire underlies our wanting recognition and acknowledgement from others. People are often astounded at how positively others react to simply having their experience mirrored back to them in paraphrased statements. Indeed, it reduces defensiveness dramatically and promotes others sharing their experience much more openly. It may be easier to appreciate if you put yourself in another's shoes and imagine how relieving it would feel to have an expected adversary transformed into someone who is actually capable of seeing the world through your eyes. This is a crucial aspect of intimate communication and one that must occur in an ongoing way, not just at times of potential conflict.

In the next exercise, practice indicating that you have understood what the other person is expressing, first repeating back almost word for word, and then paraphrasing to capture the essence of what was expressed. Write each of these down.

Mary comes home from work exhausted and says, "I can't take that job anymore. If I have to go in another day I think I'll lose it with my boss."

Almost word for word: _____

Paraphrased essence: _____

Shahir just won the lottery and you are the first person he tells, looking stunned but elated. “I can’t believe it. After ten years of buying tickets I actually hit the jackpot.”

Almost word for word: _____

Paraphrased essence: _____

You are late getting home and your partner has been at home taking care of the children. Now your partner is going to be late for an important meeting. Your partner says, “Where were you? You left me high and dry and now I’m going to blow this account and we won’t have enough money for our holiday.”

Almost word for word: _____

Paraphrased essence: _____

Against your wishes, your teenage daughter has a party while you are away and there is a few hundred dollars worth of damage. She tells you, “I’m really sorry about stuff getting broken but there was nothing I could do. It was Jimmy Parker who did most of it and he was really drunk and wouldn’t leave.”

Almost word for word: _____

Paraphrased essence: _____

Your five year old son comes in crying and tells you that his friend hit him. “Jessica hit my arm really hard. She’s mean. I’m never playing with her again.”

Almost word for word: _____

Paraphrased essence: _____

Their Experience or Feelings

Just acknowledging what the other person has told us is a tremendously powerful way of reducing conflict and creating a sense of connection with others. We can still go further, however, and be even more deeply compassionate. This involves expressing our hunch about others’ likely feeling and experience, and by acknowledging the truth of what they have expressed. Sometimes others tell us about their feelings and experience and, as discussed above, all we need to do is acknowledge their words. Often, however, they will not tell us explicitly how they are feeling or what they are experiencing, and if we are able to capture that in our own words they will experience being deeply understood. Although it is great when we are perfectly accurate, even if we aren’t, our attempt still serves as an invitation for others to share their experience on a deeper level.

Jane: I'm fed up with you leaving your clothes and garbage around the house.

John: I imagine you're pretty frustrated and exasperated having to pick up after me all the time.

Stan: Two voicemails and three texts isn't enough to get your attention!?!

Rosy: Oh Stan (sympathetically). You must have thought I was ignoring you. (*before* explaining that her phone was broken, turned off, or lost)

Raj: If my teacher picks on me once more I'm never going to school again.

Mom: I imagine that going to school feels pretty lousy when you get picked on.

Or, Mom: You're feeling pretty mad and fed up with him, hey?

Francine: (leaving tearfully) Okay, I'll see you later.

Fraser: Francine, I imagine you're really hurt and disappointed that I'm cancelling at the last minute.

The Truth in What They Said

The third, and most challenging, level of compassion is to acknowledge the truth in what others are saying, especially if they are being critical of us. When people are saying negative things about us, expressing things that we disagree with, our inclination is to defend ourselves. Simply acknowledging what they are saying in these situations is a tremendous accomplishment in itself. Taking the extra step of acknowledging their likely feelings requires us going the extra mile. And to actually acknowledge that what they are criticizing us about holds some truth is the ultimate triumph of our desire for connection over our egos, our need to be right. As my mentor, Bennett Wong, was fond of saying, however, “Most people would rather be right than happy.”

Acknowledging the truth in what other people say does not mean that we completely agree with them. Indeed, we may largely disagree with them but still manage to see and agree with a grain of truth. Recognizing that our wife feels angry because we have not understood her, and in this have indeed failed her, does not mean agreeing that we are a terrible husband. Finally, it’s important to think in terms of agreement and disagreement rather than right or wrong or ultimate truth. As explained in *Making Happiness*, all we have is our opinions and our experience.

Your child is upset and says to you: “You’re mean. I hate you! You’re the worst mommy in the world!”

Parents typically respond to situations like this with some form of retaliation. Grabbing her and spanking her while saying “I am not a bad mother, you are being a mean, disrespectful daughter! Now go to your room and think about what you just said!”

One step up from this would be something like, “But honey, we just had such a good day together, and I bought you an ice cream cone and read you a story. I don’t think I’ve been a bad mommy.”

One big step up again might be, “Oh, Honey! You really hate me now. And you think I’m the worst mommy in the world.”

If we want to reach the top of Everest, however, it would look something like this: “Wow Sandy, you must be really mad at me right now. You think I’ve been mean to you and that I’m a bad mommy. And I have to agree with you because you feel like that I haven’t understood how you feel, and that’s my most important job as your mommy.”

Your wife says: “You’re such a lazy bum. I should have listened to my mother and not married you!”

You could reply: “Ouch. That’s hard to hear but I understand how much you’re resenting me. And I’ve got to agree that you’ve been doing the lion’s share of the housework and making our meals.” (Note that he can say this even if he doesn’t see himself as being lazy and has been working 14 hour days at the office. He can responsibly express this later. His first job, if he wants a close relationship, is to be compassionate with *her* experience, not to defend himself.)

Your friend says: “I can’t believe how cheap you are. For your birthday I gave you that beautiful watch and for mine you give me a scarf.”

You could reply: “Oh, Julia... I hear how disappointed you are with my gift. I guess it leaves you wondering about how much I value you as a friend. And for sure, this watch I have been enjoying so much cost a lot more than the scarf.” (Again, acknowledging our friend’s experience is most important, and the fact that she has much more money than we do, that we spent weeks researching and finding her family tartan/crest and ordering the scarf with that on it, or that we wove the scarf ourselves from rare Tibetan llama wool, can come later.)

Your client says: “I’ve had nothing but crappy service from you. From now on I’m going to take my business elsewhere and warn others to do the same.”

You could reply: “I can see how upset you are and I’ve clearly let you down. We were late finishing the job, two days later than we agreed upon, so I can easily understand your frustration.” (It doesn’t matter if he changed his mind about his order three times, that a supplier was a week late getting things to you, or that you warned him a week ago that the job would be two days late. You *may* let him know this *after* you have acknowledged his experience.)

Curious Invitation

Finally, our compassion for others is conveyed by letting them know that we are open to hearing more about what they have just expressed. This will often be reflected in some tentativeness or questioning in our voice tone. “Oh, so you really felt hurt when I did that”, serves as an acknowledgment of their experience, checking out if we got it right, and an invitation to say more.

We can also make our curious invitation more explicit using words such as:

Is there more you’d like to let me know about it?
Is there more about that?
I’m all ears. Tell me more.

When talking with others, especially when conflict is involved, most people feel the pressure to express their experience, their side of the story. The result is that

the other person doesn't experience being heard, that we are genuinely interested in what they have to say. In turn, they experience that much more urgency to press us to understand them, and are therefore much less likely to really hear us. The curious invitation, in voice tone or in words, leaves the other person with no doubt about our interest in and compassion for their experience. They then become more receptive to hearing ours.

Be All WET!

In sum, responding to others with compassion requires our willingness to be all WET. Particularly when in conflict we are called to acknowledge:

Their *Words*
Their *Experience* or feelings
The *Truth* in what they said

Appreciation

Expressing appreciation involves letting other people know things that we genuinely like about them or what they have done. It is not about being nice, not about saying things that aren't true for us, and it doesn't involve backhanded compliments. It can involve small appreciations, such as over something someone has just done, or a larger appreciation about some characteristic they have. It is important to express appreciations generally in our relationships and particularly valuable to share them at times of conflict, even when we are feeling resentment.

As John Gottman's research found, couples relationships can withstand conflict and criticism, but only if expression of appreciation is abundant. The problem is that there may be lots of things that we appreciate about the other person, but if we don't express it, or express it infrequently, they will not know. We may withhold expressing appreciation due to resentment towards others, as if our appreciation would somehow discount what we are unhappy about. We may fail to express our appreciation to others because we believe that what they did is "expected", so somehow doesn't warrant appreciation. Of course the result is that others will be left with the impression that we don't like them, don't love them, or even hate them, when these things aren't true. It is pretty obvious that if someone mainly tells us about the things they don't like about us, that we are going to believe that they don't like us.

By regularly expressing our appreciation towards others, we make ourselves increasingly aware of the many things we *do* appreciate, which contributes to our experience of gratitude.

“Thanks for taking out the garbage.”

“I really appreciate you taking care of your homework without being asked.”

“You’re looking particularly attractive tonight.”

“I really appreciate you being on top of all of the kids activities.”

When someone has been critical towards us, expressed resentment, or been provocative, it is particularly valuable to find something to appreciate.

“That must have been hard to let me know but I’m really glad that you did.”

“I appreciate knowing where I stand with you.”

“While I’m sorry you feel that way, I’m really glad that you told me.”

“I appreciate that you don’t beat around the bush.”

“Yeah, I suppose I was a bit of a jerk. I hate to admit it but thanks for calling me on it.”

Responsibility

Responsibility refers to how we express *our* experience to others. It has nothing to do with blame but rather involves telling our truth and fully honouring our own perceptions, beliefs, desires, feelings, boundaries, and limits.

Responsibility for Our Experience

As much as we might like to believe that our views reflect some ultimate reality, we can never be 100% sure of this. We can, however, be sure about *our experience* of the world and this is what we can communicate with others. Healthy communication therefore involves taking responsibility for our perceptions, attributions, impressions, interpretations, etc., often reflected in the use of “I” statements. “I think...”, “For me...”, “My impression...”, “I believe...”, etc.

Rather than, “That’s a beautiful painting.”

Instead, “I think that’s a beautiful painting.”

Rather than, “The team’s old uniforms looked much better than their new ones.”

Instead, “I liked the team’s old uniforms better than the new ones.”

Rather than, “It’s stupid to focus on that issue.”

Instead, “I’d rather focus on another issue.”

Or, “I don’t think it’s useful to spend our time on that issue.”

Rather than, “She was being such a bitch to him.”
Instead, “In my opinion she liked him feeling like crap.”
Or, “My impression was she wanted him to leave.”

Rather than, “You’re lying.”
Instead, “I’m wondering if you’re lying.”
Or, “I think you are trying to mislead me.”
Or “I don’t believe that.”

We are generally more comfortable using “I” statements regarding matters of opinion and feel more entitled to make pronouncements about matters that seem to us to be matters of fact, such as: “It was raining all morning.” “Grandma is coming for dinner.” “Whales are mammals.” We are much less likely to get into communication difficulties when discussing matters of fact that most people agree on, and it can get ridiculous to try to turn everything into an “I” statement. However, there are times when what may seem to be a clear fact to you may not appear to be a clear fact to someone else. Further, even when others disagree with us, they will be less defensive if we have expressed information as our opinion rather than stated it as a fact. If we have acknowledged in our words that our view is simply our opinion, we leave room for others to have their opinions, something that is missing if our statements come across as proclamations. As my writing illustrates, it is not necessary to use “I” statements with every sentence. The more we use them, however, the more that we will experience our responsibility in how we experience the world, and the more our communication will promote connection with others.

Try making the following statements more responsible:

“He’s the best one on the team.”

“You’re just trying to make me feel guilty.”

“The green one should go next to the blue one.”

Responsibility for Our Feelings

The next skill is accepting responsibility for our *feelings*, a concept that can be difficult to grasp. When someone hits us, we feel pain. When someone we love

dies, we feel sadness. It is therefore not a big leap to conclude that the other person or the event made us feel as we do. The problem is that there is an intermediate step, the “us”, that we are not taking responsibility for. Consider that even if 99% of people in that situation would feel the same way that you do, there is still the other 1%. If another person, even one other person, would feel differently in that situation, it illustrates that you must play some role in developing your feelings. No one can “make” us feel anything without our cooperation. Also consider that regardless of how “normal”, “healthy”, or “predictable” your reaction is, it is *your* reaction. Responsibility for our feelings involves us realizing that when we feel something that it is *us* who is feeling it and that someone else in the same situation may feel differently. Of course this also involves realizing that others are responsible for their feelings. Although we may want another person to feel something and we may behave so as to promote this feeling in them, we can’t *make* them feel anything.

Accepting responsibility for our feelings eliminates a whole lot of statements that get us into communication difficulties. “You made me feel...” statements are a common example. “You make me so angry.” “Stop making me feel guilty.” “You’re hurting my feelings.” Healthy communication requires that we not attempt to blame others for our feelings, however tempting this may be. Responsible communication involves simply stating the relationship between some event and your feelings, such as, “When you... I felt...”, or actively stating our responsibility such as, “When you... I make myself feel...”.

Rather than, “You’re making me feel guilty.”

Instead, “I feel guilty.”

Or, “I think you want me to feel guilty, and I am.”

Rather than, “You should be more careful when you’re lighting a fire.”

Instead, “I’d like you to be more careful when you’re lighting a fire.”

Or, “I’d feel better if you made sure the children were further away when you’re lighting a fire.”

Rather than, “You make me mad.”

Instead, “I get so mad when you don’t tell me where you’re going.”

Or, “I make myself so upset and angry when I don’t know where you are.”

Rather than, “You scare me.”

Instead, “I find your laugh a bit frightening.”

Or, “I get scared when you laugh like that.”

Rather than, “You’re hurting my feelings.”

Instead, “I feel really sad when you talk to me like that.”

Or, “I feel really sad when you’re disappointed with me.”

Rather than, "You are so irritating."
Instead, "I am feeling very irritated with you."
Or, "I get very irritated when you talk during the show."

Rather than, "You make me feel so happy."
Instead, "I am so happy being with you."
Or, "When I'm with you all my worries seem to go away."

Rather than, "Stop bugging me."
Instead, "I'm finding that really irritating and I want you to stop now!"
Or, "When you keep pushing me for an answer I feel very frustrated and I want you to stop now or I'm going home."

As I hope is apparent in these examples, healthy communication is not about being "nice", but rather about being responsible and honest. If we don't like something about someone, healthy communication isn't about sugar-coating it, but about accepting responsibility for the fact that while I don't like it, I recognize that someone else might.

Blaming others for our feelings, or otherwise placing the source of our feelings and impulses outside of ourselves, is contributed to by a lack of self-acceptance. It also perpetuates a lack of self-acceptance. If we have a deep, inner conviction that our feelings are always acceptable and "OK" (the core of self-acceptance), then we are more inclined to just accept and express what we feel, without a need to justify it in terms of what happened to us. If our self-acceptance is more shaky then we become more prone to looking for a solid justification to rationalize our feelings: "I'm angry because you...", "You embarrassed me!" Conversely, the more that we practice just expressing our experience and feelings without defending or justifying them, the more we will gradually convince ourselves that our feelings and impulses are alright. It helps to realize that feelings are always valid, acceptable, and OK, although what we choose to do with our feelings will have consequences (positive or negative) for both ourselves and others.

Try making the following statements more responsible:

"You're frightening me."

"You're hurting my feelings."

“Stop making me mad!”

Feelings and Beliefs

It is important for responsible communication to know the difference between our feelings and other aspects of our experience. Our feelings refer to emotions and motivations such as feeling angry, sad, surprised, scared, embarrassed, hungry, sexually aroused, happy, thirsty, elated, etc. Feelings include feeling we like something or don't like something. Our feelings are ours and are never right or wrong, they just are. If I feel hungry, it is pretty ridiculous for someone else to agree or disagree with whether or not I am, although this certainly does happen: “You're not hungry, you just ate an hour ago!”. Only you can know your internal experience, which is what feelings refer to.

The confusion between feelings and beliefs or judgements becomes a problem when we make a statement about our beliefs and disguise it as a statement about our feelings. “I feel that you were inconsiderate.” is not a statement about a feeling but rather a belief or judgement about another person. “I feel this is a bad idea.” reflects beliefs about the idea being a poor plan. “I feel judged.” is actually a judgment about the other person (that they have judged you) that disguises your true feelings: perhaps hurt, inadequate, or resentful. This type of feeling/belief confusion muddies the waters in our communication because someone who disagrees with our belief is put in the position of appearing to disagree with our feeling.

Rather than, “I feel that you're a jerk.” (*a belief, not a feeling*)

Instead, “When I found out that you had left and hadn't told me, I thought that you'd been extremely inconsiderate of my feelings (*responsible statement of her belief*) and I felt furious (*responsible statement of her feelings*).”

Rather than, “I feel this is a bad idea.” (*a belief, not a feeling*)

Instead, “I have a bad feeling around this idea but I can't put my finger on why.” (*responsible statement about a gut feeling where specific beliefs aren't clear*)

Or, “I think this is a lousy plan and I think we're going to regret it big time.” (*responsible statement of his beliefs*)

Make up some statements that improve upon these feeling/judgement confusions.

“I feel you should go.”

“I feel that our company will do well this year.”

Some Final Pointers

Check It Out

Above I discussed *curious invitation* as a part of compassion, and *check it out* expands on the importance of asking others about their experience. Much difficulty in relationships occurs due to our rather arrogant beliefs that our perceptions, interpretations, and judgements are correct, and that there is therefore no reason to get the other person’s perspective. We carry on, having our feelings and behaving without considering that perhaps we were mistaken, or at least that there may be additional valuable information. There is *always* valuable information to be gained from checking out the other person’s perspective, even if it only confirms our perceptions and judgements (which it rarely will).

Rather than, “Why do you treat me like crap all the time?”

Instead, “When you call me names I feel lousy and assume that you want me to feel lousy and don’t really care about me. Is that what goes on for you?”

Rather than, “You’re always such a grouch.”

Instead, “You seem pretty angry?”

Rather than, “I’ve told you a million times to do it this way but you’re so pig-headed you won’t listen to anyone.”

Instead, “I’m feeling really hurt and frustrated that you again didn’t do what I asked. Is it that you forget, that you can’t stand not to do it your way, or what?”

Rather than, “You selfish bastard!”

Instead, “You don’t seem to care about what I want. Do you?”

Or, “What was going through your head when you took the last piece of cake?”

This simple step of checking it out is both extremely valuable and extremely difficult. It is extremely valuable because the difficulties that we have in

relationships are largely due to our unique patterns of persistently judging others in the same mistaken ways. As discussed in *Making Happiness*, the deeper roots of this relationship difficulty are in our early experiences of the world, usually with our parents, and we quite unconsciously continue to make judgments about others based on the expectations we developed in childhood. It is only through persistently checking out our judgements that we will ever be able to correct them. Unfortunately, we are least inclined to check out the judgments we most persistently make, both because they are so automatic that we are least aware that we are making the judgements, and because we often don't really want to have our negative judgements confirmed. Believing that someone we care about is inconsiderate or otherwise doesn't care about us is painful. To have it confirmed would be that much more painful. It would, however, be rather important information to have.

Try to imagine some ways to improve upon these statements, including responsibly stating your beliefs and checking them out.

“You’ve never liked me so why don’t you leave.”

“You’re just trying to make me feel guilty.”

“You always think you’re better than everyone else.”

“Just the Facts, Ma’am”

The higher the level of conflict in a relationship, the more that communication needs to have a basic foundation upon which each person agrees. This can be challenging because, as I discussed above, there are no pure facts and two people can disagree about some event they have each just witnessed. However, there are some types of statements that are more likely to be agreed upon than others. Particularly when communicating with others in conflictual situations, it is valuable to begin with statements that are fairly close to your sensory experience (your five senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch). Begin by stating what you saw, heard, smelled, etc. with as little interpretation of the event as possible. “I thought I saw you take my beer.” “I believe you said that you wanted me here by eight o’clock.” “I’m smelling something rotten.”

Rather than, “You are a selfish pig.”

Instead, “When I saw you take the last piece of cake (*what he thought he saw*) I figured that you weren’t thinking about the rest of us...(*his belief or judgement*)”.

Or, “When I saw you take a piece of cake (*what he actually saw*), which I assume was the last one, (*his interpretation*) I thought that you weren’t thinking about the rest of us (*his belief or judgement*).”

Rather than, “You don’t love me anymore!”

Instead, “I heard you get out of bed early (*what she thought she heard*) and I imagined that you wanted to get away from me (*her interpretation or belief*).”

If we begin with statements that each person is most likely to agree as being “the facts”, from here we can each discuss our different interpretations and feelings about an event. Staying close to sensory experience is valuable because it gives us a shared foundation upon which to base our communication. We may not agree that I am a selfish pig, but we are more likely to agree that I took the last piece of cake. However, realize that all of our experience is individual to us, and that even basic sensory experience may be open to interpretation, as athletes and referees can attest. Even in the first example, we may be surprised to find out that it was not the last piece of cake, that there are more pieces of cake in the refrigerator.

Keep it Brief

When communicating around conflict, keep your statements relatively brief. It often takes more words to be clear and responsible, but if we go on and on then the other person will have difficulty remembering all the points we are making and we are not giving them an opportunity to respond.

One Issue at a Time

Particularly in higher conflict situations, we can be tempted to bring out a trunkload of past resentments or evidence to bolster our case. It’s hard enough to communicate well around one issue or event and nearly impossible to cope with a barrage of them. Keep it simple.

Stay Connected, Even at a Distance.

At times we may not be able to compose ourselves enough to think straight or to communicate responsibly. At these times it is reasonable and advisable to take a break, a time-out until you are ready to re-engage. However, just walking away in a huff is not a responsible way of taking space, and it often trigger’s our partner’s anxiety over being abandoned, or anger over being rejected. Quite

simply, leave some type of verbal lifeline that indicates you are taking time out but intend to reconnect. “I’m too upset to talk about this now. I’ll be back in about ten minutes (or an hour, or ten hours) and we can talk then.” Or “I want you to know that I love you but I just don’t know what to make of all this and I’ll need some time alone to sort it out. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

A Conversation

Jerry: I am fuming so bad my head may explode. When you took my car through that cruddy carwash at the garage it scratched the paint all to heck. I told you never to use that thing and now the paint-job I just did last month is ruined. I figure that you just don’t care about things that are important to me. Give me a minute to calm down and then I want to know why you did it.... Okay, go ahead.

Sasha: Jerry, I get how furious you’re feeling. You’ve just finished putting all that work into your car and now it seems ruined. I’m really sorry that the paint is scratched. I remember you telling me not to take the car to the carwash at the station but I thought that you meant the one down by the supermarket and I took it to the one up by the highway. I actually thought that you’d be pleased to have your car washed. I could have been more careful though, like double-checked with you first.

Jerry: I hear what you’re saying, but I could have sworn that I mentioned Smith’s service station. I don’t know. It just seems to me that my things keep getting ruined, broken, or misplaced.

Sasha: I get that you thought that you mentioned Smith’s station. I don’t remember hearing it. I realize that you often seem to feel as if I don’t care about your things. All I can tell you is that I care about you and your feelings, and I realize that your things are important to you.

Jerry: I feel relieved hearing that. I realize that I should know from all the things that you do for me that you care about my feelings. I’ve always been sensitive about my stuff, as far back as I can remember. I’m still really upset about my car though.

Any conversation can go many different ways. Why would one that starts off with as much conflict and distress as this one go like this, leaving them connected? Let’s take another look. Notice the use of the **iCAR**, with the relevant letter in bold, below. Also notice the elements of compassion (*WET*), and some of the Final Pointers, capitalized.

A Conversation: Slow Motion Replay

Jerry: I am fuming so bad my head may explode (*Responsibly expresses Feelings*). When you took my car through that cruddy carwash at the garage it scratched the paint all to heck (*Statement of facts, could have been closer to sensory experience*). I told you never to use that thing and now the paint-job I just did last month is ruined. I figure that you just don't care about things that are important to me (*Responsible statement of Experience*). Give me a minute to calm down and then I want to know why you did it... Okay, go ahead (*Checks Out his judgements*).

Sasha: Jerry, I get how furious you feel (*Compassionate acknowledgment of Jerry's Experience*). You've just finished putting all that work into your car and now it seems ruined (*Compassionate acknowledgement of Jerry's Words*). I'm really sorry that the paint is scratched (*Responsible expression of own feelings without taking on blame*). I remember you telling me not to take the car to the carwash at the station but I thought that you meant the one down by the supermarket and I took it to the one up by the highway (*Responsible expression of Sasha's interpretation of events*). I actually thought that you'd be pleased to have your car washed (*Responsible expression of her attributions about Jerry's feelings*). I could have been more careful though, like double-checked with you first. (*Compassionate acknowledgment of some Truth in Jerry's experience.*)

Jerry: I hear what you're saying (*Compassionate, though minimal, acknowledgement of Sasha's Words*), but I could have sworn that I mentioned Smith's service station (*Responsible expression of his Experience*). I don't know. It just seems to me that my things keep getting ruined, broken, or misplaced (*Responsible expression of his Experience*).

Sasha: I get that you thought that you mentioned Smith's station (*Compassionate acknowledgment of Jerry's Words*). I don't remember hearing it (*Responsibly expressing her Experience as contrasting with his, not trying to claim either was right*). I realize that you often seem to feel as if I don't care about your things (*Compassionate acknowledgment of his Words*), and all I can tell you is that I care about you and your feelings, and I realize that your things are important to you (*Compassionate acknowledgment of Jerry's Experience and Responsible expression of her Experience and Feelings towards him*).

Jerry: I feel relieved hearing that (*Responsible expression of his feeling*). I realize that I should know from all the things that you do for me that you care about my feelings (*Responsible reflection on his Experience, Appreciation*). I've always been sensitive about my stuff, as far back as I can remember (*Responsibility for Feelings*). I'm still really upset about my car though. (*Responsible expression of Feelings*)

Emotionally intense discussions like this can easily go badly, into blame, resentment, and hostility. This one worked because both Jerry and Sasha followed the principles of the iCAR. They Compassionately acknowledged the Words, Experience, and Truth of what the other expressed, they spoke Responsibly, and were able to express Appreciation. Their intentions were apparent in their willingness to be compassionately present with each other and responsible in how they expressed themselves. Most people in Jerry's position would have wanted to blame Sasha for ruining the paint on his car (taking the position of the victim) and most people in Sasha's position would have become defensive and hostile over being attacked when she was simply trying to do something nice for Jerry ("he never appreciates my efforts and only complains").

Communication Worksheets

We don't become Jerrys and Sashas without dedicated effort. Fortunately, life is very generous in offering us opportunities to work on our communication skills. We can find them both in the future and in the past! There are often situations that we anticipate being difficult for us and we can use those to work on our skills before we arrive in the situations. We can learn from the past whenever we have conversations that don't go well. They offer us a golden opportunity to practice how we would have liked to communicate with others. We will very likely have similar opportunities in the future where this practice will pay off. I encourage people to work on these worksheets daily, but only until your relationships are harmonious and conflicts are easily resolved ;-). As said at the beginning of this article, we can always become better at applying these skills, and the benefits are always worth our effort.

Communication Skills Practice: Future Situation

Consider an upcoming interaction that you are worried about.

i: What am I really hoping to get out of this conversation? What are my true *intentions*? Is that alright with me? How can I share it with the other person?

What do I expect the other person to say?

C: How can I respond with *compassion* to their likely:

Words:

Experience or Feelings:

Truth in what They Say:

A: What do I *appreciate* about them, in what I expect them to say to me?

R: What words can I use to express my experience and feelings *responsibly*?

Communication Skills Practice: Past Situation

Reflect on a difficult interaction. Write down the most important thing they said and the most important thing you said in response.

Their words: _____

How did you *respond* to this: _____

i: If I put myself in their shoes, how would I likely feel? _____

C: How could I have *compassionately* acknowledged their:

Words: _____

Experience or feelings: _____

Truth in what they said: _____

A: What do I genuinely *appreciate* about them that was reflected in what they said to me? How could I have expressed that?

Write down the words you used to express *your* experience.

When you look at what you said and how you said it, what does this say about your intentions? What are you really trying to achieve by what you said?

Was this a *responsible* expression (or did it blame others, my circumstances, etc.)?

R: Write out words that you could have used to express your experience and feelings *responsibly*.
