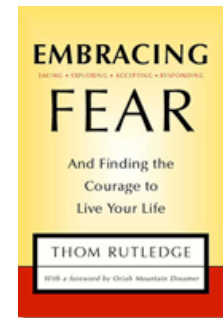


Communication 101

by Thom Rutledge, LCSW



Do you remember what it's like to learn to drive a standard shift car? Or to play a musical instrumental? Or ride a bicycle? At first the task seems impossible, far too complex to ever be coordinated from your one body and one mind. But with encouragement and lots of clumsy practice, we do begin to learn.

Even with our 20/20 hindsight we cannot identify exactly when we cross that invisible line from practice into knowing. But we do. We learn. And one day we recognize that what once seemed impossible has become natural, even automatic.

Learning communication skills is no different. Keep in mind that as we learn to act and speak differently, we are also learning to think differently. And that is much more difficult than driving a standard shift car.

Begin with Commitment

Mastering new relationship skills is not for the faint of heart. Effective communication --- especially in times of conflict --- calls for a focused dedication and repetitious practice. It calls for honest self-evaluation, humility, a sense of fair play, and a willingness to change according to the needs of the relationship. And it takes (at least) two.

Changing out-dated, ineffective communication patterns involves a great deal of "unlearning," a much greater challenge than simply filling in the blank slate. (Ever try to ditch a bad habit?) In a word, learning effective communication skills calls for commitment --- commitment to yourself, to your partners in communication, and to the relationship as a whole.

Communication Starter Kit

What follows are 7 important tools to help build effective communication. As with any tools, the first challenge is to learn how and when to use each tool. (A hammer is very important, but I don't want to use it to repair my eyeglasses.) And keep in mind that this is only a starter set. You will hopefully be adding to this collection of tools for the rest of your life.

The Tools:

1. **Take Turns.** Two separate agendas can seldom be accomplished at once. Establish some ground rules that will insure that you will take enough time for each of you to talk while the other is really listening.
2. **Give Information.** State your perceptions and your feelings concisely and respectfully. Avoid "selling your side" as the gospel truth, even when it feels that way to you. To resolve any conflict, room must be made for at least two different perspectives. And remember that emotions are subjective information, not open for debate (i.e. "you shouldn't feel guilty," or "you have no right to be angry").

3. **Gather Information.** You have a responsibility in communication to do your share of listening, being receptive to what your partner is saying, without immediately judging and categorizing. Ask questions with curiosity, like a good interviewer. And -- - here comes the radical part --- listen to the answers. Too often we ask questions not to gather information, but to make a point.
4. **Problem Solve with Benevolence.** Be certain to clarify your intention (especially in conflict communication) as seeking a satisfactory outcome for both of you. Find common ground on which to base your communication (i.e. "We each want to be heard completely and accurately," and/or "We need to make a decision about . . . ") Avoid seeking agreement about perceptions or feelings as a communication goal. There must be room for both of you to win.
5. **Future Orient to Problem Solve.** Those who forget the past are, in fact, doomed to repeat it. True. But those who won't let go of the past may also be contributing to its repetition. In conflict communication it is best to state complaints about past behaviors clearly and concisely, and then to "future orient." That is, sink most of your energy into describing and/or requesting what you want or need from your partner beginning now. You must be willing to take the chance that your partner wants to and can change along with you. (If you are not able to muster any faith that your partner is willing and/or capable of change, you are probably not working on the most serious problem in your relationship. Get some help.)
6. **Take Breaks.** Each of you must have the authority to call time out. And each of you must learn to respect time outs when they are called. Call time out when you recognize old, dysfunctional patterns of communication taking over. (They seem to have a life of their own.) When you call time out, it is imperative that you later initiate a time to talk again. Don't just leave it hanging.
7. **Backtrack.** This is my favorite tool, probably because I have had to use it so often. All progress is not forward. Sometimes the best you can do is stop mid-mistake, apologize and ask for an opportunity to try again ("do overs" I believe we used to call them). But be careful to not ask for that chance if you do not think you can follow through with some new and improved communication. If you are not ready yet, try apologizing and step back to step 6: take a break.

Keep this collection of tools handy, and make use of them the next time you experience a communication problem. Better yet, use them before you experience a communication problem. And remember: You cannot solve many problems from adversarial positions. Work to stay on the same side of the problem, and practice having conversations to "convey" rather than to "convince."