

Communication in Relationships: *How am I Being Perceived?*

“A fool uttereth all his mind: but a wise man keepeth it in till afterward.” Proverbs 29:11

Joe felt misunderstood, and found himself frustrated once again. It seemed like every time he and his wife, Mary, discussed finances it ended in an argument. Joe felt strongly that they needed to make the right decisions for their family long term, but when they had conversations about that, it often ended with Mary accusing him of becoming angry. He didn't mean to appear like that; he was just very passionate about the topic at hand.

In contrast, Mary found herself avoiding discussing money matters with her husband. Whenever they did, Joe seemed to get very upset. He said he wasn't angry, but it appeared otherwise to her when he raised his voice, and by the dark look in his eyes and the clenched hands he made while talking. Even though she knew it wasn't best, it seemed easiest to just avoid having these talks at all. In fact, she frequently could not even focus on the topic being discussed because of how distracted and anxious she felt by the behaviors of her husband.

Communication is more than words.

Most often, it is not what we say, but how we say it. When studying communication, we find that only 7% consists of the words chosen, while the vast majority consists of our tone of voice and body language. Consider the difference between the words “I'm sorry” spoken in sincerity and humility as compared to being said in a flippant or sarcastic way. Identical words delivered differently send a completely different message.

As humans, we tend to judge ourselves by our intentions, but others by their behaviors. This then should make us self-reflect that others are reacting the same way to us. Our inner motives are not known by others, so they are left to interpret our communication based on the manner in which we deliver the message. Often, we are prone to our worst behaviors

in communication on issues that matter to us most, because we care so deeply.

When it comes to effective communication and relationships, it is good to remember that we are 50% of every relationship we are in. It is always easy to see how others are behaving, but are we willing to ask how we are contributing? Our behavior matters equally for the success of that relationship.



Considerations for Communication:

- Ask yourself: What do I really want? For the discussion?
For the relationship? If so, then how will I behave in the current situation?
- Take ownership of your approach to communication. Only you can control the way you engage in a conversation or a relationship. Others will perceive you based upon that. You may not be able to change who you are, but you are responsible to control who you are.
- Talk tentatively. Try to avoid speaking in absolutes like “never” and “always” as those types of words often shut down open dialogue by triggering emotions and defensive behavior. Instead, use words that encourage curiosity and openness, such as “perhaps” and “maybe.”
- Recognize and control your emotions. Emotions are normal, but don’t let them drive inappropriate behavior or decision making.
- Listen first, and encourage others to speak their views. Actively listen when they speak, rather than trying to formulate your response. Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- Consider the best mode of communication for the person, group and situation. In brief:
 - Face-to-face: for difficult conversations so body language and tone of voice is present
 - Phone call: for sensitive discussions to utilize tone and inflection of voice
 - Email: to exchange information, give an update, or ask for an opinion or decision that is not controversial; remain aware that tone of voice and body language are not present.
 - Texting/Social media: for quick updates and confirmations, greetings, or to communicate basic or casual information; as with email, voice and body language are lost.

Communication is complicated, but critical to the success of any relationship. Often with just a few simple adjustments improvements can be seen. It starts with looking at ourselves, controlling our own communication behaviors, and truly listening to others. **We may not fully get it right, but we can get it better.**