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Communication 101: Five Things to Practice for Better Communication

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Listen -- actively!

1. Listen -- actively! Communication isn't only about telling other people what you think; it also involves **understanding** what ideas and thoughts other people have. If in a conversation you find yourself constantly thinking, "What will I say next?" try stepping back a bit and just focusing on what the person currently talking is saying. One way to check if you're really listening to the other person is to try to paraphrase (restate in your own words) what she or he said. For instance, consider the following conversation:

Jamie: *I just can't deal with Morgan right now. Everything I do seems wrong, and we never get to spend enough time together, so we just keep arguing!*

Pat: *Wow, so you two have been having a hard time with your friendship lately?*

Jamie knows that Pat was really listening, and this invites Jamie to confirm what Pat said as well as expand on the problems with the friendship. This sort of **paraphrasing** can be useful for making sure you understand what was said and also for giving you some time to think about your response. Active listening also involves little things like acknowledging what a person has said and asking more about things that interest you.

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Make eye contact.



Author: Anna Rafferty, college student writer

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2. Make eye contact -- and do all those other non-verbal things that are equally important! Imagine conducting a conversation with someone who won't look at you, or stares at the TV, or raises her eyebrows in a look of skepticism every time you speak. Even if the person carried on a perfectly normal conversation otherwise, the communication would probably be worse than if she used appropriate non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication involves things that might seem minor, such as making **eye contact** and focusing your attention on the person who's speaking, but it can be vital to having a conversation that feels respectful on both sides. Paying attention to someone else's non-verbal communication can also give you clues as to whether the person understands what you're saying. Using good **non-verbal communication** shows you respect the other person enough to listen to what they are saying, an important thing in any conversation.

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Express your views.

3. Express your views -- be respectful, but don't be afraid. It's easy to just agree with everyone else or to decide to stay quiet rather than talk about what you're thinking, but in the end, this can often leave you frustrated. It also means that you aren't really communicating! If you're honest about what you think and feel, people will generally have more **respect** for you, and they will certainly be able to understand you better. As you begin practicing expressing your views, you might feel uncertain, but try starting off with small things. The more you **express your views**, the easier it gets.

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Use "I" statements.

4. Use "I" statements, especially when talking about something negative. Using "I" statements can help turn an argument into a **productive discussion** rather than a shouting match. It also makes expressing your views easier because you're just talking about yourself. What is an "I" statement? Check out A and B, and guess which one is an example of an "I" statement:

A: *You make me so angry when you tell me I can't come with you!*

B: *I feel really angry when you tell me I can't come with you.*

B is an example of an "I" statement. The speaker clearly expressed what she felt and **accepted responsibility** for the feeling. In A, the speaker is blaming the person she is talking to for the feeling of anger. If you've ever been blamed for something, you probably know that it doesn't feel very good and

tends to put people **on the defensive**. "I" statements let you take responsibility for what you feel and are less likely to make the other person feel defensive. Combined with honesty, they can be extremely helpful for dealing with conflicts.

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Understand everyone's point of view.

5. Understand everyone's point of view -- where are you coming from and where is the other person coming from? Considering what causes you to feel the way you do can help you to **understand why someone else feels differently**, and it can also help you express your feelings more clearly. It also allows you to disagree with another person while still **respecting their position**. For instance, the following example shows how a person's point of view might affect what they think:

Taylor: *I wish we didn't have to go to school today.*

Dana: *Why? It's track and field day - we get to spend the whole day competing and running around while our parents cheer us on!*

Taylor: *I get really nervous in front of all those people, and my parents have to work all day so they won't be there.*

Dana and Taylor are both talking about the same event, but their perspectives are very different. In more complicated cases, a person might have an opinion because of how she or he was raised or because of his or her **personal beliefs**. Acknowledging the person's feelings and **being respectful** of those feelings can keep a conversation from degenerating. Additionally, keeping track of why you hold certain beliefs can allow you to tell those reasons to others, making your beliefs more clear and easier to understand.

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