

## Communication Styles and Strategies

When we are in heated conversations, the brain goes on red alert and starts to look for signs of danger, based in our past experiences where similar feelings were triggered. So rather than hearing each other, we tend to engage in fight, flight, or freeze mode – expressed as defensiveness, arguing, verbal abuse, running away, or shutting down, depending upon our response systems – and nobody gets heard. But we need to be able to communicate effectively, which can only happen if we're mindful of our communication style. There are four styles of communication – passive, aggressive, passive-aggressive, and assertive. The following exercise will help you learn how you're communicating, so you can catch yourself when your style is ineffective and impacting the message you're trying to convey.

### Discovering Your Communication Style

**Passive:** In this communication style, people hide their true thoughts or swallow their honest feelings instead of saying what they truly mean. The roots of this style include beliefs such as *I'm not worth loving. My words will never be heard. My feelings will get me in trouble.* One of the root causes for such type of thinking is low self-worth and pervasive verbal abuse (either in childhood or as an adult). The checklist below will determine if you have this style.

#### Passive Communicators Often allow others

to infringe on their rights  
refuse to assert themselves  
stuff their feelings, needs, or opinions  
tend to apologize when it isn't needed

make poor eye contact and adopt a defensive physical posture when upset  
soothe themselves in unhealthy ways

#### Negative Consequences of Passive Communication feeling

anxiety and fear because life seems out of control  
feeling resentful that personal needs are not being met  
feeling depressed, numb, stuck, and hopeless

feeling unbalanced and unsure because personal feelings are ignored

#### Passive Communicators Act on the Basis of Beliefs Such As

I don't know what my boundaries are  
I can't stand up for myself  
no one ever respects me

I'm unable to take care of myself  
people walk all over my feelings

**Aggressive:** People with this style express their thoughts and feelings in ways which overwhelm and intimidate others. They can be narcissistic, dominating, verbally abusive, and possibly physically abusive. The root cause for this is low self-esteem due to unresolved early childhood experiences, unhealed emotional wounds, and possibly feelings of powerlessness. The checklist below will determine if you have this style.

Aggressive Communicators Often use control tactics and anger to try to manage others criticize their significant other use attacking language & blame others have a low threshold for tolerating frustration and other difficult feelings speak in a loud voice, interrupt, or use other attention grabbing tactics make demands

- refuse to allow the other person to speak
- cannot tolerate any criticism or perceived criticism

#### Negative Consequences of Aggressive Communication

keeping loved ones at arm's length being emotionally isolated inspiring fear and frustration in others

staying stuck in anger and attempts to control people intimidating people

feeling guilty about blaming and attacking

#### Aggressive Communicators Act on the Basis of Beliefs Such As

my way is the better way I know more than you do I'm entitled you owe me

I'll get my way it's all your fault  
what I have to say is more important  
people walk all over my feelings

**Passive-Aggressive:** People with this communication style appear serene on the surface but feel the lava of resentment bubbling underneath. They may smile on the outside while inwardly seething. They act out their anger in indirect ways. They believe

that they are not equipped to deal directly with people when feeling challenged or hurt. Instead, they express their anger by subtly undermining other people. The checklist below will determine if you have this style.

Passive-Aggressive Communicators Often hide their true feelings use sarcasm and tell mean-spirited jokes deny, deny, deny that they are upset with you

apologize to smooth things over while feeling anger inside ruminate on how unjustly they've been treated

use other methods to get back at people, such as financial or sexual retaliation

Negative Consequences of Passive-Aggressive Communication

pushing others away staying emotionally stuck and disempowered developing addictions and other health problems sabotaging self and others

Passive-Aggressive Communicators Act on the Basis of Beliefs Such As

everyone sees me as a weakling, so I will get back at them

I'm powerless to tackle difficult conversations face-to-face, so I'll use other tactics to get revenge

I'll appear agreeable, but I'm not

My anger's unacceptable, so I'll hide it and attack people in other ways

**Assertive:** This communication style is very healthy. It allows people to openly and truthfully state their want and needs, feelings, and thoughts while respecting the wants, needs, feelings, and thoughts of others. Assertive communicators value themselves and empathize with others. Assertiveness allows us to take care of ourselves while promoting good mental health and loving relationships – this is a critical part of establishing boundaries and taking ownership of our experiences, rather than expecting others to take care of our needs. The checklist below will determine if you have this style.

Assertive Communicators Often express their thoughts and feelings openly and respectfully use "I" versus "you" statements avoid making assumptions that create misunderstandings actively demonstrate their respect for others listen closely without interrupting or stealing the

spotlight feel in control and do not need to control others speak in a calm and clear tone of voice avoid attempts to control, threaten, get even, or manipulate other people avoid blame and shame  
stand up for their rights in ways that respect the rights of others

Consequences of Assertive Communication feeling connected

to others feeling in control of outcomes without controlling others being able to resolve issues and problems as they arise

creating a respectful environment in which others can grow and mature

Assertive Communicators Act on the Basis of Beliefs Such As it's okay to agree to disagree while expressing ourselves respectfully

I can learn things from others, and my thoughts are equally important

I'm confident and open

I have choices and options in my life

I speak clearly, honestly, and directly while respecting you

I can't control others but I can control myself

I respect the rights of others

I'm not a victim; I have choices

**Share your communication styles with each other.**

**TWELVE STRATEGIES OF COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION**

1. Relax: Most of us will agree that the best time to have a conversation is when we're relaxed. Exhaustion can slow down the circuits in the brain, particularly compassion.
2. Stay Present: Be mindful of what is actually happening and how you're feeling. Ask yourself if what you're thinking is real or imaginary, a part of the past or the present. If it's the past, accept it and let it go, because there's nothing you can do to change it. If it's the present, *focus on the immediate goal you want to accomplish versus the problem that's bothering you*. Think about your motivations for what you're trying to say and whether or not the other person can hear you without becoming upset. If the answer is no, then put your thought aside for a moment, until you've had a chance to think it through and word it appropriately, to get the result you want, instead of just making your

point. It's important to always pause-think-then speak versus just speaking without thought.

3. Cultivate Inner Silence: Our inner dialogue never stops. So observe it, without judging it – it'll generate a calmness you never imagined.

4. Increase Positivity: When it comes to positivity and negativity, the brain has an on-off switch which allows only one of those to be present at a time. So focusing on positivity automatically keeps negativity at bay, which includes anger – more important than you might realize, because thing of anger is, the angry party generally doesn't realize how angry they are, but the anger gives them a false sense of certainty and confidence, while shutting down the logic and reasoning centers of the brain, not to mention, generating a constant flow of stress hormones which harm both parties. Beyond that, keep in mind that negative thoughts and words increase anxiety, positive thoughts and words decrease it; which also works with how we view ourselves – i.e. if we see ourselves in a positive light, we'll see the good in others, whereas a negative self-image inclines us toward suspicion and doubts towards others, because a self-critical voice will stimulate error-detection circuits whereas a self-reassuring voice will stimulate compassion and empathy circuits.

5. Reflect on Your Deepest Values: Think about what's important to you – if it's your relationship, think about its actual value versus what's bothering you in the moment. Beyond that, ask yourself, how it fits your secret desires and happiness? When people share their personal, relationship, and communication values with each other before discussing a difficult issue, they are more likely to remain emotionally calm and centered. It also allows for mutual respect, by observing the Golden Rule: Speak unto others as you would like them to speak unto you, and listen to others as you would like them to listen to you. This allows each party to honor the others core values. If you feel unaligned, think of the other party's challenges/pain and connect with it – it'll allow you to look past their exterior.

6. Access a Pleasant Memory: Make sure you have your go-to memories ready for recall ahead of time, since it can be hard to recall those in a heated, negative moment. To generate heart-felt positivity that's geared toward someone in particular, focus on a positive feeling/image you have involving them *before* you're about to engage in a conversation. Positive imagery is so strong that it can even help us rescript unpleasant childhood moments – so if you have those, amplify all feelings around them (positive

and negative), experience them, then let them go while visualizing a successful outcome. You don't need to repeat those scripts in your relationships for real to overcome that – that can make the trauma worse.

7. Observe Nonverbal Cues: Without gazing intrusively, try to look at others warmly, with the positive memory in mind – it'll decrease cortisol levels and increase oxytocin levels in both of you, causing bonding versus aversion. To learn more about reading facial expressions, visit [www.paulekman.com](http://www.paulekman.com) – the site for the world leader in micro-expressions and knowing when to trust, when not to.

8. Express Appreciation: There's nothing like sincere affirmation to nurture a relationship – but it needs to be sincere and heart-felt.

9. Speak Warmly: Drop the pitch of your voice and speak in a pleasant tone, ensuring that your thoughts match the warm feeling you're trying to convey, since nothing destroys trust faster than incongruence between your tone & expressions.

10. Speak Slowly: It allows you to think about each word before you say it, and it eliminates distracting clutter which only confuses the mind since it's irrelevant – meaning, greater comprehension. Beyond that, it conveys calmness, and allows you to stay focused versus letting past hurts influence your current conversation.

11. Speak Briefly: Observe the 30 second rule. If we aim to speak for 20 seconds and no more than 30 seconds at a time, we end up focusing on getting the most important facts across, sans the extraneous stuff that nobody cares about, while limiting our ability to express negative emotions. This allows the other party to get our point and keep the conversation going back and forth.

12. Listen Deeply: It allows the brain to mirror the activity in the other person's brain, so we pick up the subtleties of what they're feeling and are better able to empathize with them.