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Communication

Communication is a Two-Way Street

Communication is a bridge to building relationships and the glue that holds them together. By improving your relationships, good communication skills can enhance all aspects of your life, including your efforts to manage your weight.

Communication is a two-way street. It requires speaking and listening skills. The Building Relationships and Social Support and Asserting Yourself Lifestyle Education Series modules will expand those skills and present techniques to enhance your ability to listen to others as well as to verify that your listener is hearing the message you intended to send.

In any communication, you are the speaker or the listener, and often both. Each role requires important yet different skills. Combining good “sender” skills with good “receiver” skills will enable you to communicate more effectively, and can lessen or remove the discomfort or stress people often experience when dealing with others. Being an effective communicator can boost your self-esteem, enhance your coping skills, and help you maintain control of your life, all factors essential for successful weight management.

Message-Sending Skills

Thinking Before You Speak

If you had an important letter to write, you would think about how you wanted to express yourself before you put pen to paper. The same should be true of verbal communications. Before you would say something to another person, you would decide what the message should be.

Because messages are derived from our thoughts and feelings, the first step in developing any message would be to determine what you are thinking or feeling. The next step would be to use your assertive

tools for success

- Understand communication is a two-way process involving speaking and listening skills.
- Identify how thoughts and feelings can affect communication and distort messages.
- Implement methods, such as message screening and feedback evaluation, to reduce distortion in communication.
- Use assertive communication methods to send direct, open, and honest messages.
- Employ listening skills such as clarification, reflection, and summarization to make sure the message you heard is the message the speaker intended to send.

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communication skills (these are reviewed later) to communicate the message to the receiver in a direct, emotionally neutral, and honest fashion. Lastly, you would want to check with your receiver(s) periodically to make sure what they hear is what you meant.

Unfortunately, this process does not always happen. Too often, people have difficulty putting their true feelings into words. They end up voicing a false or distorted message. Typically the listener responds to what you said, or what they thought you said, even if it is not what you meant. This leads to misunderstandings, unmet needs, resentment, and stress. Factors that can distort your ability to clearly communicate your feelings include:

- Lack of clarity about your own feelings
- Hasty reactions to a statement or situation
- Negative feelings you express or try to hide
- Fear of the receiver's response

Information screening and feedback evaluation are two techniques you can use to minimize the amount of distortion, and the resulting stress, between you and your listener.

Information Screening—The Art of Speech Editing

Before you speak, check what you intend to say by asking yourself the following questions:

- **Content** – What do I feel or believe?
- **Clarity** – Will the receiver understand the words I've chosen? Is the wording as simple as I can make it without losing my meaning?
- **Conciseness** – Am I saying more than is necessary? Have I added unnecessary details that could confuse or distract the receiver so that he or she doesn't hear my main point?
- **Importance** – How well do I convey that the message is critical, either to myself or to the receiver?
- **Non-verbals** – Is my language appropriate? Pay attention to the placement of your hands and arms while rehearsing your statement.

Feedback Evaluation—Checking the Reception

As a sender, you should evaluate your receiver's feedback. What kind of reaction did you receive? If the feedback indicates the message was understood, continue your conversation to its logical conclusion. If the receiver's feedback suggests the message was misunderstood or if you receive an inappropriate reaction, you should modify your message until the feedback tells you the receiver has understood your message the way you intended.

What if the receiver still doesn't understand your message, despite your best attempts to be clear? Sometimes the receiver will not be ready to communicate, no matter how well you deliver your message. If this happens, politely ask to end the discussion and continue it after both of you have had time to cool off and think. If no progress is possible and the issue is a critical one, you may need to seek professional intervention. A mediator can facilitate communication in workplace disputes, and a counselor can help resolve family issues.

first & lasting impressions

Good communication skills require a high level of self-awareness. Understanding your personal style will go a long way towards creating good, and lasting, impressions with others.

Assertive Communication Skills

These techniques can help you send effective messages. There are three basic methods for communicating assertively:

"I" Statements

Empathetic Assertion

Assertive Confrontation

"I" statements are useful when expressing your desires and feelings, and have three or four parts:

1. Describe the other person's behavior or the situation that affects you.
2. Describe how the situation or other person's behavior affects your life (time, values, money, work).
3. Describe your feelings, and/or...
4. Describe what you want the other person to do.

Here's an example of a four part "I" statement:

"Lately, you've been bringing home a lot of sweet snacks (1). I have learned that the sight of these foods is a trigger for me to overeat (2) and I get very upset at myself when that happens (3). I'd like you to please keep the sweet stuff at work or at least hide it when you bring it home (4)."

Identifying the concrete or tangible effect on you (2) is the most difficult part of developing "I" statements.

The "I feel" (3) and "I want" (4) tend to be among the most difficult to express. Following are some examples of these types of statements and tips for using them more effectively.

"I Feel" Statements express your specific feelings or emotions about the other person's behavior or the situation while avoiding attacking the other person. Examples include:

- "I really felt overwhelmed when you asked me to cook supper after my busy day."
- "I felt betrayed when you told Mary I'd slipped on my food plan."

When you use "I feel" statements, you clarify for yourself and others exactly what you think and how you feel. (Remember, people can't read your mind!) You also provide information others can use to make decisions about their own behaviors.

Keep these tips in mind when using "I feel" statements:

- When describing your feelings, avoid using the same feeling statements all the time, such as "I feel upset" or "I feel good." Using the same language every time you want to express yourself may prevent you from discovering your true feelings.
- When expressing annoyance or anger, first describe the specific behavior that caused your reaction. Then express your feelings. "When you don't get to work on time, I feel annoyed." This approach may keep the other person from getting defensive.

"I Want" Statements refer to a specific behavior and help you clarify for yourself and others what you really desire. Some examples include:

- "I want you to please keep the sweet snacks out of sight."
- "I'd like for you to be on time for our morning walks."

Using "I want" statements allows you to openly problem solve and negotiate if there is a conflict between your wants and the other person's wants. Sometimes, though, "I want" statements are misinterpreted as nonnegotiable demands. You can prevent these misunderstandings if you use the following strategies:

- Ask the other person about his or her preferences or willingness to do what you want. "I would like you to serve this nutritional supplement for me when the others have their main course. Would this be possible?"
- Quantify your wants on a verbal or numerical scale. "On a scale from 1 to 10, my desire to continue our morning walks is about a 9."

Empathic Assertion

When you want to express empathy for the other person or the situation, you can use “empathic assertion.” This type of message is especially useful if you’re concerned the other person may misunderstand your assertiveness.

An empathic assertion message has two parts. In the first part, you acknowledge several aspects of the other person. In the second part of an empathic assertion, you assert yourself by describing several aspects of your situation. Both include:

- Situation – pressures, difficulties, duties
- Feelings – happy, sad, mad
- Wants – time, money, work
- Beliefs – perceptions, attitudes

Try these tips for using empathic messages:

- Keep the acknowledgment part (the first part) of your statement relatively short.
- Use “and” or “yet” to bridge the two statements. This gives equal importance to both the empathic and assertive feelings you are expressing. Avoid using words like “but” or “however,” as they imply your feelings are more important.

Empathic assertion is also a good way to build alliances. Everyone, from your family members to coworkers to a passing stranger, wants to be understood. Expressing understanding of the other person’s situation while asking for something you need can help you get what you want.

Consider the following example of empathic assertion:

Karen noticed the waitress was very overworked, and several patrons were complaining that their orders were not complete. Still, she wanted some lemon for her ice tea. Karen stopped the young woman as she passed her table. “I can see how busy you are. I’m sorry to add to your tasks. When you get a chance, will you please bring me some lemon for my tea?” she asked in a pleasant voice and with a smile. “It is a madhouse in here,” the waitress admitted. “One of our waiters didn’t show. I’ll see what I can do.” Shortly, a busboy arrived with the lemon slices.

Why? Karen connected with the waitress by showing compassion for her situation and treating her respectfully.

Assertive Confrontation

Assertiveness is the middle ground between passivity and aggression, designed to minimize conflict. When conflicts do arise, such as a discrepancy between a prior agreement and a later behavior, it is appropriate to use assertive confrontation. There are three parts to this process:

1. Describe what the other person said would be done.
2. Describe what actually was done.
3. Express what you want.

Assertive confrontation does not attack the person or make him or her feel guilty or defensive. For example, when dealing with a chronically late friend, the statement “Where in the *@&! were you this morning?” is inappropriate. Instead say “We agreed to meet at 8:30 a.m. to go walking (1). It was after 9:00 before you arrived (2). In the future, please help me manage my time better by letting me know if you are going to be late (3).”

Remember these guidelines:

- Confront the discrepancy (behavior), not the person.
- Avoid jumping to conclusions or assuming the worst about why an agreement was broken.
- Find out what happened. The original understanding may have been unrealistic, unclear, or misinterpreted by either person.

Listening Skills

Most people think of communication in terms of what they want to say. Listening is the other half of communication. Making a sincere effort to understand what the other person is communicating is an essential ingredient for building strong relationships. Most of us hear, but do we really listen? The following techniques can enhance your ability to listen.

Clarifying

Sometimes there is a need to clarify what you heard. If you are surprised by something that has been said, rather than responding with hostility say something like:

- "I need you clarify what you just said."
- "I'm not sure I fully understand what you said."
- "Here is what I heard ... Is that what you meant?"

Note, these remarks focus on the message, rather than on the sender.

Restating and Highlighting

Restating and highlighting what someone has just said are ways you can show you are listening attentively. Paraphrase in your own words instead of "parroting." Keep in mind, you are not agreeing or disagreeing; rather, you are simply checking what you have understood. This allows the sender to evaluate whether the message effectively communicated his or her thoughts.

bring out the best

Listening brings out the best in other people, recognizing and valuing their experience.

Reflecting Feelings

Focus on the sender's feelings and try to mirror them. Let the speaker know you heard his or her feelings and are empathetic. You can show you recognize feelings by noting the sender's actual feeling words (happy, angry, sad) and nonverbal messages (facial expressions, tone of voice, posture). Try to think of what you would be feeling if you were in the speaker's shoes. To demonstrate your empathy, use approaches such as the following:

- "It sounds like her reactions hurt you."
- "You look like you're feeling puzzled."
- "It sounds like you're feeling angry."

Summarizing

Summarizing main ideas and feelings is appropriate for larger segments of conversation. This technique is especially important in situations involving a discussion of differences, conflicts, complaints, etc. It is also helpful in groups where prolonged discussions on a given issue can be complicated and confusing. To use the skill of summarizing, try phrases such as the following:

- "What you have said so far is ..."
- "Recapping what you have been saying, ..."

Message Distortion

Message-sending skills and listening skills can minimize distortion. There are two types of distortion: anger and passive. The following real-life examples show both types of distortions.

Example of an “Anger” Distortion:

Kathy sailed through the full-meal replacement portion of the OPTIFAST® Program pretty easily. But once she began adding self-prepared foods back to her diet, she was very tempted to gorge on sweet treats. Kathy was scared by the power of her urges and was sure she'd blow it and regain all her weight, but she did not confide in anyone. When her friend Cynthia suggested they make a lunch date for the following week, Kathy exploded. Cynthia, who had been very supportive during Kathy's diet, was understandably hurt and angry. Their conversation went something like this:

Cynthia: “Since you graduate to long-term management this week, let's plan to go out for lunch next week. We can go to the Garden Café and order the slim chicken Caesar salad.”

Kathy: “There you go again, sabotaging my success. You just can't stand it if I look good too!”

Cynthia: “You think I enjoyed eating low-fat yogurt and diet lemonade for lunch all these weeks?!? I did it just so you wouldn't feel left out or different. It's not my fault I've never been fat!”

They did not speak for several weeks until a mutual friend intervened. What do you think Kathy should have said? It would be asking too much to suggest Cynthia should have guessed Kathy's true feelings. However, she could have controlled her anger. Suggest some ways Cynthia could have responded less angrily.

Example of a “Passive” Distortion:

Ron became tense just thinking about asking someone to do something for him. He preferred to hint at his needs and hope his listener would take the bait. After a tough first week on the OPTIFAST® Program, Ron was doing well sticking with the full-formula diet, but he could not seem to get himself to take a daily walk. He wanted his wife to walk with him but rather than asking her directly he said, “Wouldn't it be nice if we could walk together each evening?” His wife, who had just gotten home from work, was fixing dinner while urging their son to get his basketball uniform in the wash and their daughter to work on her college applications. She answered distractedly, “Uhh ... yeah. But right now I gotta get the kids fed.” Ron felt let down and resentful. He knew his wife wanted him to lose weight. “Why is she unwilling to help me?” he kept asking himself.

Ron began to walk even less and managed to “forget” a few of the errands he was supposed to do on his way home from work that week. Tensions built between the couple. Ron lost weight but refused to exercise. His wife, who knew exercise was an important tool for maintaining the weight loss, felt Ron was trying to fail. During a family and friends' night at the OPTIFAST clinic, the truth of Ron's situation came out, and the couple began to understand each other more clearly.

How should Ron have phrased his request for a walking partner? Why did Ron's wife not recognize he was asking for help to stick with his exercise routine? Why did Ron assume his wife was trying to be unsupportive?

Practice, Patience & Perseverance

Many people report that they feel calmer and less stressed by using new communication skills, even when their message does not produce the response they want. Good communication skills require practice, patience, and perseverance. Like other habits, you didn't learn your current communication style overnight, and you aren't going to master new techniques instantly, either. The following exercise is designed to help you identify your main communication roadblocks and implement the suggested strategies in this module.

Sharpening Your Assertive Communication Techniques

Practice using the most difficult of these techniques, "I" statements and assertive confrontation. Remember: Avoid attacking the other person; focus on the behavior or your feelings.

"I" Statements

Think of a situation in which you could use a 4-part "I" statement to effectively communicate your feelings. Briefly describe the situation as you see it. Then, using the cues provided, convert it into a 4-part "I" statement. Refer to page 3 for guidance.

Situation:	
1	Describe the other person's behavior or the situation:
2	Describe how the other person's behavior or the situation affects you:
3	Describe your feelings:
4	Express what you want the other person to do:

Assertive Confrontation

Think of a situation in which you could use assertive confrontation to effectively communicate your feelings. Briefly describe the situation as you see it. Then, using the cues provided, convert it into a 3-part assertive confrontation statement. Refer to page 4 for guidance.

Situation:	
1	Describe what the other person agreed to do:
2	Describe what the other person actually did:
3	Express what you want:

5 Conversation Mistakes

Communication is the most important part of any relationship. This module emphasizes ways to improve communication skills. Following is a list of common communication mistakes. Consider your communication style. While reading these statements, jot down alternate ways of getting the same point across without putting your listener(s) on the defensive. Having trouble? Imagine yourself as the receiver of these types of messages and decide how you would feel if statements were directed at you in this manner.

- **Commanding/Ordering** – Even though you may truly be in authority, you can use more effective ways to express yourself rather than giving orders. An example of commanding or ordering is, “Go back there and tell her you’re sorry!” Or, “Don’t say that!”
- **Threatening/Warning** – This is similar to commanding, but it also carries a threat of negative consequences. For example, “If you don’t listen to me, you’ll be sorry!”
- **Criticizing/Blaming/Shaming** – These are related behaviors that convey something is wrong with what the person has said or done. These behaviors are expressed with statements like, “It’s your own fault.”; “How could you do such a thing?” and “Didn’t you know that would happen?”
- **Sympathizing/Reassuring** – What’s wrong with consoling someone? You may think you are simply helping the person feel better. However, it can be a roadblock to effective communication because it’s not effective listening. It actually interferes with the spontaneous flow of communication when you say things like, “Don’t worry, you’ll be back on track in no time.” Nobody needs a quick fix. They need an empathetic ear rather than a solution. Using empathy such as, “I can see this is really hard for you. How can I help?” is a good way to show support.
- **Distracting/Humoring** – This is an attempt to take the person’s mind off of the topic he or she wishes to discuss. It diverts communication and undermines the person’s true feelings. Examples include “You think you’ve got problems, let me tell you...”, “That’s not so bad! It reminds me of the time...”, or “Let’s talk about it later.”

Being aware of these roadblocks is half the battle of keeping a relationship together. Intimate relationships involve two-way communication, with both partners sharing their inner lives with each other. Sharing mutual thoughts, feelings, values, interests, and affection may be quite difficult for many, but intimacy is essential for a relationship to flourish.

key goals

Using the tips in this module, develop 2 – 3 goals to work towards.

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