

Communication Skills



Communication includes all the ways we connect with others. Communication can clarify or confuse, inform or obscure, support or discourage, deceive or clarify. This section explores ways to understand and communicate better with others.

How and what we communicate—what we do and say—is contingent on our **boundaries and relationships** with the people we communicate with, and on our own **personal style**. Examples in this section are not scripts to be memorized; they're just suggestions to help you think about and develop your own responses.



Communications Basics

Every communication has two parts:

1. The message sent
2. The message received

Good communication requires both a "sender" who sends a clear message and a "receiver" who hears what the sender intended. Sometimes you are the sender and sometimes the receiver, so skill with both parts is important.

Communications come to us in two modes: words, called *verbal communication*, and context, which

Contents

- 1** Communications Basics
 - 1.1** The Power of Words (Verbal Communications)
 - 1.2** Choosing the right words can make a big difference, even in routine communications. For example, "Can you tell me which bus goes to 13th and Hawthorne Streets?" will get you the name of a bus route, but it won't tell you
 - 1.3** The Power of Context (Nonverbal Communications)
 - 1.4** You as Sender and Receiver
- 2** Clarity in Communicating
 - 2.1** Using "I" Messages
 - 2.2** "One-way" and "Two-way" Messages
 - 2.3** Emotional Messages
- 3** Receiving Messages
 - 3.1** Listening to Spoken Communications
 - 3.2** Understanding Written Communications
 - 3.3** Emotion and Receiving Messages
- 4** Conversations
 - 4.1** Dialogues
 - 4.2** Group Discussions
 - 4.3** Party Talk
 - 4.4** Asking and Answering Questions
- 5** Conflicts
 - 5.1** Confusion in Communications
 - 5.2** Miscommunications
 - 5.3** Lying
 - 5.4** Saying "No" or

includes such elements as body language and tone-of-voice, called *nonverbal communications*.

The Power of Words (Verbal Communications)

Choosing the right words can make a big difference, even in routine communications. For example, “Can you tell me which bus goes to 13th and Hawthorne Streets?” will get you the name of a bus route, but it won’t tell you

- whether there’s a better way to go to 13th and Hawthorne,
- how frequently the bus runs, or
- where the nearest bus stop is.

Instead, “**What is the best way to get to 13th and Hawthorne Streets?**”

opens the way for more general information. In addition to the name of the bus route, you might hear something like the following:

- “You could easily walk to 13th and Hawthorne from here.”

or

- “You could take a bus, but it’s a long walk from the closest stop to 13th and Hawthorne.”

Disagreeing
5.5 Discussing and Arguing
5.6 Fear of Conflicts
5.7 Apologizing—or Not

or, if it's a Saturday or Sunday,

- "That bus doesn't run on weekends."

The meanings of words or phrases may differ, depending on circumstances. For example, in America today, "How ya' doin'?" often means "Hello".

But when your doctor says, "How are you doing?" he is truly asking about your health.

Different disciplines and professions have their own jargons. For example, when a psychologist says "APA" while talking to an energy expert, there's room for confusion because

- To a psychologist, APA means American Psychological Association.
- To an energy expert, APA means American Petroleum Association.

Cults and high-demand groups may distort or even pervert the mainstream meanings of words:

- Actual mothers and fathers may be replaced by group leaders called Mother or Father.
- "Flirty fishing" was jargon for using prostitution as a way of making converts to a group.
- The word *Christian* may be

narrowed to mean only adherents of a particular group.

Words can activate strong emotional currents. When someone says, “Go away! I hate you!” these words may trigger hurt, angry feelings—even if the speaker is four years old, hungry, and tired.

The importance of choosing the right words grows with the importance of the topic. It’s critically important to use the right words when talking about jobs, marriage, and other life-changing topics.

The Power of Context (Nonverbal Communications)

Words don’t exist in isolation, however. They come with

- Tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language.

For example, “I’ve missed you,” delivered in a flat voice, with a curt nod of the head, and hands at your sides conveys a very different message from “I’ve missed you,” spoken in a warm tone while looking at the person addressed, and with hands reaching out toward her.

- Time, place, and setting.

- Is the speaker or writer overexcited? Drunk? In pain?
- Free, or coerced?
- Under emotional stress, or calm and rational?

A restaurant owner gets two letters that say exactly the same thing: "I am an experienced waiter and would like to work for X restaurant." One is printed in crayon on wrinkled paper. The other is neatly typed on standard paper.

Which person is more likely to get the job interview (and the job)?

- Wordless communications—smiles, frowns, and nods, for example. Sometimes words aren't necessary; your expression says it all.

When nonverbal and verbal communications send conflicting messages, the nonverbal dominates.

- "I'm not angry!" shouted loudly, along with a scowl, communicates that the speaker actually is angry.
- "Don't do that," spoken with a smile and a giggle, sends the message that it's really OK to do that.

The meanings of nonverbal

communications may differ in different cultures.

- In the United States, for example, you are supposed to make eye contact with people you are speaking to.
- In some Asian and other cultures, however, making eye contact with a superior or an elder is considered rude.

People who have been in high-demand groups may be particularly sensitive to nonverbal communications because they are often used to express things that are unsaid and that members are expected to understand or obey.

For example,

- Whether the leader expressing frustration or issuing a command when he says, "That sinner is asking for punishment!"
- Whether the leader is speaking metaphorically, or whether he really means his followers should show up carrying dolls and riding tricycles when he says (as described in Jayanti Tamm's book, *Cartwheels in a Sari*), "We should all be seven years old!"

In both instances, the followers are

expected to guess correctly.

This sensitivity may be quite helpful in the outside world because

- People sometimes find it difficult to speak openly.
- Some people may lie about sensitive topics to avoid friction.

Noticing nonverbal messages will help you recognize when people are not comfortable with what they are saying, and you can then seek a better understanding.

Professional actors and accomplished con men are skilled at making their words match their nonverbal messages; most other people are not. If you find yourself feeling uncomfortable without any apparent reason during a conversation, ask yourself how the verbal and nonverbal communications are matching up.

You as Sender and Receiver

The sender's power. No matter how insignificant you might think you are, your words carry force for both good and ill. While this is especially true of the words of parents and teachers toward children, it is also true of all communications, from the most intimate words to one's closest friends, on down to the most informal words to casual acquaintances.

It's not true that "words can never hurt me." Words can and do cause damage if they are unduly negative or violent.

- **"Rock music is not my thing"** is not the same as
"You call that noise
"music?"
- **"That's dangerous! Don't do it again!"** is different
from "You're a bad boy!
Don't do that again!"

You can find more about harmful words in the [Abuse and Neglect](#) section.

Kind words can lift and inspire, even if they're "only" your words. A smile and a "Thank you!" to someone who holds a door for you is never out of place. And you never know how much it might mean to someone to recognize or praise her efforts, actions, or appearance.

You as receiver. Even as you receive, you are sending nonverbal communications.

- A frown or other grimace
- A shrug of the shoulders
- An impatiently tapping foot

all send negative messages to a speaker. In contrast, an open, attentive expression says, "I'm listening to what you are saying."

The following sections summarize essential communication skills. You can find a more detailed discussion and some free practice exercises at [*The Seven Challenges Workbook*](#) [*A Guide to Cooperative Communication Skills for Success at Home and at Work.*](#)



Clarity in Communicating

Good communication requires clear thinking. If you, as a sender, are careful to think before speaking or writing, you are more likely to **say what you mean** and **mean what you say**. If doing this is difficult for you, you are not alone. It is a lifelong challenge for most people.

Using “I” Messages

You will deliver clearer messages if you use “I” messages. Using *I* or *me* when framing a message will help you focus on the essence of your communication by helping convey what you think or feel when you are

- making an offer,
- giving an opinion,
- reacting, or
- complaining.

“When you frown at me like that, I feel like you’re angry,”

works better than “Why are you angry?” (which attributes to the person a feeling that may or may not be true).

“I’d like to go to a movie,”

works better than “Do you want to go to a movie?” (which doesn’t tell the person you’re speaking to that you’d like to go to a movie. By asking what he’d like to do, you’ve left out information that might make an important difference in his answer.)

“I” messages are also helpful when you don’t understand or don’t know something:

- “I don’t quite understand that. Can you explain more about it?”

or

- “I really just don’t know. I don’t have strong feelings either way.”

“One-way” and “Two-way” Messages

A one-way message expresses the sender’s intent, but offers no opening for feedback from the receiver. Examples are

- A teacher announcing a schedule: “There will be a test on Chapter 3 next Monday.”
- A supervisor assigning a task: “I’m sending you to represent the department at the sales meeting.”
- A customer giving an order: “I’ll have the tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich.”

A two-way message expresses the

sender's intent and encourages feedback from the receiver. Using this approach in the above examples, the words might be

- "Now that we've reviewed Chapter 3, are you ready for a test next Monday?"
- "How do you feel about representing the department at the sales meeting?"
- "What do you recommend? I'm inclined to order the tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich."

Note that because the sender's intent is different the messages are different, even though the words of both the one-way and the two-way examples are almost the same.

Emotional Messages

Emotional messages are necessary and legitimate, but it's important to prevent the emotion from clouding the communication.

Highly emotional expressions are self-defeating. Even when the message is positive, extremely emotional speech will evoke a negative reaction.

Product reviews posted on the Internet, such as "This stuff stinks! It's the worst I ever tried! Why don't you go out of business before the cops come after you!!", leave us wondering what's wrong with the reviewer, more than what's

wrong with the product.

But gushing positive reviews, like “This is absolutely the best there is! It works like a charm! The price is amazing! I’m telling all my friends about it and I’ll never use anything else!”, leave us wondering whether the reviewer is on the company payroll (or is perhaps the seller’s spouse).

Negative messages call for extra attention because everyone is sensitive to rejection.

- Careful nonverbals may take the edge off negative words: A regretful tone of voice may soften, but will not mislead: **“I’m sorry; we can’t offer you the job.”**
- A conditional rejection, **“I can’t come on Wednesday, but could we get together next week?”**, conveys cordial intentions.
- Combining a positive with a negative message doesn’t fool anyone. The negative outweighs the positive: **“The dress is great, but isn’t it a little tight?”**

Impulsive remarks may be driven by genuine emotions but can have regrettable consequences:

- Well-meaning, but vague commitments such as “I’ll do anything to help” are open to all sorts of misinterpretation.

- Extreme oaths or undertakings like “I’ll never set foot in that place again” may cause regret, even anguish, down the line when feelings are calmer.
- Casual assertions not necessarily based on facts. Remarks like “She’s only after his money!”—can do untold harm to others.



Receiving Messages

All of us who receive even a simple message filter it through a personal interpretation based on our own thoughts, feelings, and experiences. For example, consider this simple message:

“This is Dr. Wuttle’s office. The doctor is very sorry, he has a personal emergency and won’t be able to keep his appointment to see you tomorrow. If you call next week, we can reschedule.”

If you’re a new patient seeing Dr. Wuttle for the first time, you might think,

“Hmm... I wonder what’s going on; I wonder if this happens a lot.”

If you’ve been seeing Dr. Wuttle regularly and have been getting excellent care from him, you’re more likely to think,

“I hope he’s OK!”

If you suffer from depression, you might think,

“Oh, he can’t see *me*. I’m not important enough for him. He’s probably cancelling my appointment to make room for someone else.”

It’s important to hear what other people actually say—no more, no less; or, if you’re dealing with an email or other written communication, to read what is actually there. You can use these skills both to receive communications from others and to gauge how others are receiving your communications.

Listening to Spoken Communications

It helps to pay attention, even when

- You think you know what’s coming. Experienced travelers tend to zone out when the flight attendant begins, “Please prepare for landing.....” But it doesn’t hurt to listen, even with “half an ear,” in case there’s something added such as “Due to unpredictable conditions, this may be a rough landing.”
- The speaker is droning on and on. Unfortunately, many people make rambling, repetitious speeches that convey little information.

- This is not to suggest you must sit forever listening intently to a boring and unproductive lecture; but communication is improved if you pay at least minimal attention to someone else's remarks, no matter who.
- Sometimes people ramble because they're not sure what they want to say. When it's your turn to talk, you may be able to help them figure this out—but only if you can refer to some of the things they said.

Listen to the whole remark. Hearing is a faster process than speaking. Sometimes our brains react to the beginning of a remark and immediately start preparing an answer, rather than listening to the whole message. This can result in

- People talking *past* each other, not *to* each other
 - Anna: "We have no business to be fighting foreign wars when people at home are going hungry!"
 - Bernie (heard part 1, but not part 2): "We have to defend ourselves!"
 - Anna (ignoring Bernie): "There's no reason for anybody in this country to

have to be hungry.”

- Bernie (ignoring Anna):
“There are just times when
you have to stand up and be
counted!”

Anna is talking about hunger, and
Bernie is talking about a war.
Because they aren't listening to
each other, both are becoming
agitated.

- The listener jumping to a
conclusion
 - Anna: “We have no business
to be fighting foreign wars—”
 - Bernie (thinking): “She’s
going to try to get me to
volunteer for some peace
organization!”
 - Bernie (speaking): “You
know, I really admire your
efforts, but I don’t have time
to volunteer.”

Stay focused. Notice how the
communication improves as Bernie’s
focus increases:

- Anna: “We have no business to be
fighting foreign wars when people
at home are going hungry!”
- Bernie (thinking): “...what’s for
dinner... Do I need to go to the
store?”
- Bernie (speaking): “Sorry, I missed
what you were saying about being
hungry?”

If Bernie had listened to all of Anna's remark, he could have responded with something like this:

- Bernie: "So, you see a connection between foreign wars and hunger here in America."
- Anna: "Yes! Think of all the money we're spending on those wars! It could be going to feed people!"
- Bernie: "It could, but would it?"

Now they are talking to each other.

Clarify. If the message wasn't clear to you,

- You can clarify with a statement: "It sounds like you're saying that we shouldn't be fighting overseas if people here are going hungry."
- Or you can frame a request: "I'm not sure I get the connection you see between people going hungry and the war overseas."

When you are clarifying like this, use a "just checking" tone of voice.

Remember that you're not answering.

You may be totally in agreement, totally in disagreement, or anywhere in between; but right now, you're just checking.

Watch nonverbal communication. All messages have context.

- When you and the speaker can see

each other, your position and facial expressions will signal attention or inattention, concern, boredom, disagreement, and other emotions.

- In a telephone call, your tone of voice can convey interest or boredom, absentmindedness, thoughtfulness, or impatience.
- You may answer a letter or email promptly or after a long delay; your response may seem well written or slapdash.

Avoid interruptions. Remarks like “That’s not how it happened!!” or “That reminds me of...” take away the speaker’s control and may distract from the point or distort the meaning.

- Even though you may have a valuable contribution, hang on to it until the speaker has finished.
- Sympathetic nods of the head, or responses like “**um-hum**” or “**I see**” don’t disrupt the speaker’s flow of thought and might encourage him to enlarge on the thought.

Understanding Written Communications

Written communications depend heavily on the bare words to convey their messages, and the words of a careless or unskilled sender may be confusing or even misleading.

- “Can’t go with you next Sunday. Something has come up.” lends itself to doubt and misinterpretation of the writer’s situation and reasons for cancelling. If these words were spoken, the tone of voice or the speaker’s expression would convey information about his state of mind that would clarify the message.
- **“Sorry, there’s a family emergency, and I won’t be able to join you on Sunday.”** is longer, but much more clearly conveys the writer’s situation and reasons for cancelling.

Understanding written communications may call for the same attention, focus, and clarification you give to receiving spoken communications. You may not have to respond instantly to a written message—an advantage if the message arouses an emotional response. In brief:

- Pay attention to the *whole* message. Read it through carefully even if you think you know what it is going to say.
- If you don’t understand any part of the message, clarify.
- Try not to jump to conclusions about the writer’s mood or intentions if the words of the message do not actually support those conclusions.

Emotion and Receiving Messages

Whether spoken or written, communications may arouse very strong feelings in the receiver, intentionally or unintentionally. For example, a conversation may accidentally trigger memories of a bereavement. Or a sibling may skillfully and deliberately try to shame or embarrass you.

When this happens, emotions surge and overwhelm your ability to think. But reacting instinctively from a whirlpool of powerful emotions may cause unnecessary and regrettable harm.

If you learn to notice when an emotional tide is rising, you can postpone a response while you calm yourself, control the emotional surge, and think about your response.

Recognizing emotional surges is not as hard as it sounds. Emotions trigger bodily reactions. For instance,

- **Anger** makes some people feel hot. Others may notice their hearts beating faster, or their breath speeding up, or their stomach tightening.
- Sorrow may bring a lump to your throat or tears to your eyes.

If you notice such responses happening during a conversation, it may be time to say,

- **“I need to think about this and get back to you.”**

or

- **“I can’t talk about this now.”**

You can then end the exchange: Leave the room, take a walk, do some deep breathing—whatever helps you calm yourself so that you can get some perspective on the topic and plan a response. If you are particularly angry or hurt, this process may take days. You don’t need to avoid seeing or talking with the person who upset you. Just avoid this particular topic. If it comes up, you can simply say that you’re not ready to talk about it quite yet.

If a written communication arouses powerful feelings, the same precaution will help you to postpone a response until you’ve regained your self-control.

Even happy emotions, such as a surge of elation when you get a job offer, may lead you to overlook important questions that you need answers to—like whether you’re actually available to work the hours needed. Give yourself some time to calm down, especially if this offer is unexpected or comes from an

unconventional route:

"Thank you! I'm really happy to hear from you! I just need a little time to think and I'll get back to you tomorrow."

If you've been looking for work for a long time, it might feel so good to get the offer that you could be tempted into taking on something you later regret.



Conversations

A conversation is the exchange of information, ideas, and, where appropriate, feelings between people. We usually think of conversations as spoken, but conversations may also be held via texting or email. Every conversation, no matter how simple, can benefit from careful listening and responding. You can get an understanding of the basics in the sections above.

Dialogues

Dialogues—discussions between two people—are probably the most frequent conversations we have.

- Dialogues are simple in the sense that you have to pay attention only to one person other than yourself; but
- They can be complicated if you are uncertain about the relationship

between you and the person you're talking with.

- How you respond in dialogues depends a lot on your personal style. Some people assume a closer, more informal relationship; others prefer a more formal relationship; while some others might be comfortable stating outright that they're not sure how to respond.

Group Discussions

Group discussions with more than four or five participants usually don't last very long. Participants tend to split into smaller groups, with people speaking to each other rather than participating as a whole. This probably happens because a spontaneous group discussion is far more complicated than a dialogue.

- Different participants quickly focus on differing subtopics. A remark about vacations at the beach may lead to
 - anecdotes about what happened on a vacation at the beach;
 - global warming (endangered beaches);
 - rental costs of beach cottages;
 - preferences for different types of vacations;

and so on.

- If you wait your turn to speak, by the time it comes the topic may have shifted so that the remark no longer fits the conversation.
- If one person with a loud voice wants to dominate the conversation, it may degenerate into a rant, particularly in family groups where everyone is emotionally involved, and all feel equally qualified to answer.
- People who don't want to outshout others may lose interest or feel the conversation is not worth pursuing.

The instinctive response often is simply to turn to your neighbor and say what you have in mind, breaking the group conversation down into a dialogue.

Party Talk

At parties, one expects to meet new people. Circulating and talking with other guests is usually part of the program. Someone you meet at a party usually has some connection with the host, cause, or sponsoring organization, so you are likely to find that you have interests in common.

You are not required to like everyone just because your hosts invited them, or because of a business or family connection. You can introduce yourself to people, and if you aren't enjoying the

conversation, you can move on.

Introductions are short and simple:

- **“Hi, I’m [name].”**

Party conversations start with general topics. To keep the conversation rolling and learn about the person you are meeting, you might try the “keep bouncing the ball back” method:

- End every remark you make with a question to the other person:

“I’m a software programmer.

And you?” “And you?” is a really useful follow-up to many answers in the topics below.

A few topics people generally volunteer about themselves, or ask others are

- How you happen to be at the party —friend, neighbor, or relative of host; employee of company; volunteer or associate at the organization (“...and you?”)
- Your occupation, place of work or study (“...and you?”)
- Things you (or they) like about your (or their) occupation or subject of study
- How you (or they) happen to be involved in that area or task; for how long; where it might lead you (or them)
- Other interesting jobs you (or they) have had
- Hobbies and pastimes

- Travel
- Politics and local issues
- Comments about the weather, the food, the music

and often,

- Where you (or they) are from and where you (or they) lived and worked before

If you have spent long years in a cult or high-demand group, or other situation you don't care to share, you need not discuss this with a casual acquaintance at a party. Some acceptable and honest ways to cope with awkward questions are

- Answer part, not all, of the question.

"I lived in India for years—what an amazing place!"

"Actually, I was born in [location], but I haven't been there in years."

- Answer in general terms.

"I worked in sales (public relations, etc.), but I decided to do something different."

"I was working so hard I didn't have time for hobbies. That's one of the reasons I'm making a change—so I can [however you intend to spend your time]."

These kinds of responses give you the choice of talking more or simply bouncing

the conversational ball back to your acquaintance. You can go on about what in India was amazing, what you remember about your birthplace, what the “something different” is, or what your new interest is; or you can simply add, “...and you?”

- You can always politely ignore the question and change the subject.

“You know, I’m really curious about [some local place of interest, movie, current event, etc.]. Have you [been there, seen it, been following the story]?”

Asking and Answering Questions

Questions can be the heart of a good conversation, or critical to understanding a task or a situation. But long-term involvement in a setting that discouraged questions may make you hesitant to question, or uncertain how to respond to a question.

Asking. **If you have a question, ask it.**

After you have waited until the end of a communication—because your question may be answered along the way, and after you are clear that you need more information or still don’t understand the information, you may have a question.

- Asking a question does not mean you are stupid, ignorant, or

disrespectful. It simply means that you need more information about something.

- Even if you are asking because you weren't paying attention, you still need the requested information.
- If the setting isn't appropriate for your question—for instance, talking about a co-worker's divorce proceedings while you're riding on an elevator with other co-workers—you can try to find a better setting, whether that means a more private setting, a better time, or even a written question.

If you think of a question as simply a message you are sending, you can use basic communication techniques to help make your question both clear and respectful. For instance, questions, like statements, may be closed-ended or open-ended. Closed-ended questions require a "Yes" or "No" or other tightly defined answer.

- "Will the test cover Chapter 2 as well as Chapter 3?"
- "How many students are in the class?"
- "What time is your appointment?"

An open-ended question asks for more thought or more detailed answers. Often, an "I" message will help keep the question clear:

- "Can you tell me more about how

the course relates to my work?”

- “What do I need to know about the job that I haven’t asked?”

Sometimes, the question is better framed as an “I” statement:

- “I’m uncomfortable about being the only male on the sales team...”

An overly emotional question is likely to trigger a negative response:

- “How many times have I told you not to slam the door?” is less likely to trigger an apology or behavior change than **“What will help you remember not to slam the door?”**

Answering and not answering. Once you’re sure that you understand a question, you can decide how—and whether—you want to answer it, especially personal questions that may be awkward for people who have left high-demand groups. But asking and answering personal questions is a standard part of the get-acquainted ritual in mainstream society. Here are a few suggestions for answering questions.

In social settings, whether or not to answer a question is entirely up to you. If you feel uncomfortable about answering a question, it may be because you don’t want to answer it. There is no need to answer a question about your past, your health, your family, or

anything else that you don't want to answer. You can signal politely, but clearly, that you prefer not to answer. You can

- Ignore the question altogether.

"Right now, I'm interested in (whatever it is)."

This moves the conversation to the present and future, rather than past history.

- End the conversation:

"Excuse me, I just saw someone I need to speak with."

or

"Excuse me, I need to find the restroom."

Follow your statement by the action you've named.

- Answer the question in a general way, and immediately bounce it back to the questioner (people are usually happy to talk about themselves).

"Oh, I grew up in [name a state or other large area], but I haven't lived there for a long time. How about you?"

- Openly decline to answer.

"I'd rather talk about my ridiculous week."

Follow this with your description of the things that made the week ridiculous.

Or, if it's the right kind of question,

"Hmm—interesting. I'll have to think about that."

Most people will politely follow your lead. To the intrusive few who persist, you should feel free to say,

"I prefer not to talk about it."

In situations like these, you might get the "why" question: "Why don't you want to talk about it?"

This of course is a trick question that will lead you precisely where you have already said you don't want to go. Your response may depend on your relationship to the person asking, as well as the setting. In a mainly social setting, you might say something like

"Why is this important to you?"

If the person asking is in a position of authority, like a supervisor or a professor, it's fitting and appropriate to respond with:

“I’m confused—I really don’t understand why you need to know about this.”

The right not to answer extends especially to requests for personal information such as your postal and email addresses, and your phone number. If you are not comfortable giving this information to a casual or recent acquaintance, don’t.

To a co-worker or other person you will be seeing again, you might say something like

“For now, you can just contact me at work [or whatever the meeting place].”

To someone you have met casually and don’t care to see again, your response might be

“I’m not ready for that.”

In official settings, there will be situations, such as job interviews, when you will need to give personal information—your name, address, and phone number. For more information about job interviews, see [Applying for a Job](#).

Sometimes, you have a seeming “choice,” more apparent than real, about sharing information.

- If asked for proof of age at a

restaurant, for instance, you could refuse. The restaurant can then refuse to sell you an alcoholic beverage.

- If security personnel at an airport or other public building ask your permission to search your bags, you can refuse. However, you would probably not be allowed to board your flight or enter the building, and you would attract a great deal of unwanted attention from the police.

The requests in situations like these are backed by laws. In general, people simply comply. Should anyone in this kind of authority abuse her power—for example, keeping a record of your photo ID for personal purposes, you can and should complain.

Finally, ***you may be required to answer questions in a courtroom, under oath.*** If you should find yourself summoned as a witness in a court proceeding, the law requires that you appear and answer questions. In this unusual and difficult situation, you may want to get legal advice beforehand.



Conflicts

This section discusses some of the difficulties people may encounter in communicating with each other, and suggests ways to straighten matters

out. These difficulties are not unique to those who have left a cult or high-demand group where conflict of any kind was not acceptable. Many people in mainstream society are not skilled at managing conflicts.

Confusion in Communications

Communications are at times unclear, sometimes accidentally, sometimes intentionally. An unclear communication will confuse you, and it is helpful to address the confusion directly.

You can clear up some confusions immediately:

“You invited me for Sunday the 25th, but Sunday is really the 26th. Did you mean Sunday the 26th or Saturday the 25th?”

Other times, when the situation is more complicated, you can use questions to help sort it out:

“I’m confused. I thought we agreed on a budget of X to pay for a car. I need to understand better why you think we should go over budget for this car.”

Especially if someone shows impatience or agitation about your questions, there may be serious consequences if you make incorrect assumptions. So it’s

important to clear up any confusion you may have.

Miscommunications

Miscommunications, a subcategory of confusion, may be deliberately deceptive; but often miscommunications are simply misunderstandings that occur because of vagueness, unfamiliar expressions, or local differences in language. For instance,“

- “I’m going on vacation next week” may mean “I’m taking time off work,” or “I’m going on a trip,” or both.
- “They threw the book at him” means “They charged him with several crimes,” not “They physically attacked him with a book.”

Until you master these fine points, you may sometimes find yourself confused about what the speaker really meant. Often, the context, or additional remarks, will clarify for you. If the meaning is important, you should feel free to ask.

Then again, a miscommunication can be seriously misleading, even manipulative: “He never calls me” may be true, but what if the speaker is calling *him* several times a day? Once you identify someone as this kind of communicator, it’s

advisable to follow up carefully on any information you receive from that person.

Lying

If you have left a cult or high-demand group, you may find that mainstream ideas about lying are blurrier and more complicated than those you are used to.

- In the group, you may have been taught that anything less than total, exact truth is “lying,” and that lying is one of the worst sins there is. (This view is quite helpful for keeping the leadership informed and in control.)

or

- You may have become accustomed to lying freely and regularly to people outside the group, while adhering strictly to the truth inside the group—an overly simplified formula that may confuse you when you are making your own decisions.

In the mainstream world, inaccurate statements are not usually considered lies:

- Although obviously an overstatement, “Everyone watches ‘The Office!’” isn’t considered a lie—just an enthusiastic endorsement.
- “I went to the dentist three

months ago," is close enough, even though in fact it has been three months and two weeks.

Lies are acceptable in the interests of civility:

- "Unfortunately, I'm busy that evening" is considered preferable to "I'm not interested in getting to know you better."
- "Nice to meet you" is OK to say, whether or not you actually think so.

Despite the potential of some of these social evasions to backfire, they are frequently employed. It may take you a while to understand these messages for what they are.

Partial truths may reduce conflict and be kinder than full or total truths:

- If you don't like daisies, you can just thank someone who gives you daisies, and let it go at that. It's neither necessary nor kind to explain that you dislike daisies
- If someone asks why you changed roommates, there's no need to go into all the details. You can just say something like "It was the sensible thing to do."

In some situations, lying is even considered important and praiseworthy. For instance, a woman who lies and deceives her husband to escape from an

abusive marriage, or to protect her children is seen as clever and courageous.

Saying "No" or Disagreeing

Saying "No" or disagreeing can be difficult for people leaving groups in which objecting to anything may have had severe consequences. But doing so is an essential skill in a mainstream world where people are constantly trying to persuade you that something is good for you and you need it.

It may help to remember that, within the group, saying "No" was praiseworthy when applied to many people and things outside the group. "No" was only "wrong" or "negative" when it applied to a group demand or belief.

However you frame it, "No" is a rejection. It can be as small as rejecting a flyer from a street distributor or as large as rejecting a proposal of marriage.

- Your "No" is most effective if you speak firmly and sincerely, without understating or overstating the actual significance of the rejection.
- Being mindful of the power of nonverbal communication, try to avoid gestures or postures that suggest hesitation or indecision.

Different ways of saying "No" depend on the circumstances. For example, you

don't always have to give a reason for saying "No" to

- casual acquaintances you're not interested in getting to know better,
- salespersons,
- telephone solicitors, and
- other people who are incidental to your life.

If you want to soften the refusal, you can add a simple qualifier, such as

- "Not today; thanks."
- "Sorry, I can't help you."
- "Maybe another time."

The salesperson who persists after an initial "No" is trying to pressure you. It's perfectly OK to ignore him and walk away.

In contrast, saying "No" to friends and family members may call for some explanation. Assuming you have thought through the subject and decided to say "No," it's generally a good idea to explain the rejection.

- Sometimes the explanation is perfectly straightforward, as in

"I can't come that evening, I'm already committed elsewhere."
- Sometimes explaining is difficult and calls for almost as much careful thinking as the decision itself. In that case, a thoughtful

introduction may help:

“I know this means a lot to you; I’ve thought very long and carefully about it, and I want you to know why I decided [whatever it is].”

- Sometimes you simply can’t articulate your reasons, even though you feel very strongly:

“I honestly don’t know why I don’t want to [do this, buy that, go somewhere]—I just know that I really don’t.”

Discussing and Arguing

To *discuss* something is to examine or explore the topic. To *argue* is to defend a position, and often to attempt to influence someone to adopt your position. The distinction between “discussing” and “arguing” may be blurry.

- What one person sees as discussion might look to another like argument, especially if you are not used to open differences of opinion.
- Your **relationship** with the other person or people in the discussion may have a major effect on what you discuss, and how you respond.

An argument can be

- a simple disagreement, with little or

no emotional baggage;

- an emotional altercation, as when you find yourself energetically advocating a position or objecting to someone else's misguided opinion; or
- a formal presentation, as when a lawyer states a case in a courtroom.

As with all communication, keeping your side of an argument or discussion civil and respectful is key to successfully conveying your message.

If you are going to discuss anything, it's likely that at some point you will find yourself arguing. When this happens, it's important to activate your listening skills:

- Listen to the whole presentation without interrupting or disengaging to think of pithy responses.
- Suspend judgment until you have heard what the person wants to say.
- Check your understanding by first summarizing and restating what the other person has said:

“If I understand you correctly, you are opposed to gays in the military because you think they would cause a lot of unnecessary tension and distraction—have I got that right?”

- Explore, if possible without antagonizing:

“Could you tell me more—maybe give me an example of how that would play out?”

At this point, you may simply want to let the topic go:

“That’s an interesting point of view, and I’m going to think about it.”

Or you may want to challenge the speaker. If so, try to engage respectfully. If possible, use an “I” message:

“That sounds to me a lot like the things people said when the army was racially integrated, and then again when women’s roles in the military were expanded; but really those turned out to be good moves.”

The subject can become highly emotional, and the dispute may move to the level of aggressive or hostile behavior, even **abuse**. If you sense this beginning to happen, whether in yourself or in the person you are arguing with, the best course is to withdraw:

“This is getting just too emotional for me. I can’t talk about it any

more right now.”

or

“I’d rather leave it for now—thank you.”

If you can physically leave the room, or turn to another conversation, that will help. After you calm down, you can decide whether

- The argument is something you should ignore, perhaps because it is unimportant, or perhaps because you have more important issues to address.

or

- You need to address these issues. If so, you might want to talk the whole thing over with someone you trust before returning to the contest.

Fear of Conflicts

For some people, conflict is so threatening that they tremble from fear or become numb, unable either to engage or withdraw. This may be a legacy of years of a cultic environment in which questioning or disagreeing brought swift punishment. If conflict makes you unreasonably fearful, you can try to train yourself out of it gradually.

- Learn to notice when the alarm inside you begins to rise (perhaps a tight feeling in your stomach,

perhaps the urge to get away),

and

- Confirm whether or not the feeling makes sense under the circumstances.
 - If you are physically endangered, take steps to protect yourself immediately—leave, call for help, do whatever you need to do to keep yourself safe.
 - If you are being verbally abused, inform the abuser that unless she can express her concerns in a more respectful manner, you will terminate the exchange. Then follow up as needed.
 - If someone is simply being highly emotional on a given topic, you can remind yourself that the person is frustrated about the issue or situation, not angry with you personally. You might want to reduce the tension by saying, “Hold on—it’s hard to follow you when you’re being so vehement. Can you tone it down a little?”
- Try out different ways to help keep yourself functioning when unreasonable fear rises during a conflict. For some people, this means remembering to take a deep

breath. For others, counseling may be necessary.

Thought stoppers. Sometimes people will resort to shocking or upsetting you rather than responding to your remarks. They will make highly emotional remarks intended to evoke strong emotions:

“You’re crazy! You’re going to Hell”

You can defuse hostile remarks like this by recognizing them for what they are and turning them back on the speaker:

“I see you’re very upset. Perhaps you could tell me quietly why this is so upsetting to you?”

or declining to let them distract you from the real issue:

“Let’s stay with the topic. Tell me more about your thoughts on gays in the military.”

Either reply needs to come in a neutral, but interested, tone of voice.

Ending an argument doesn’t mean the arguing parties must come to an agreement. You may be tired of arguing, pressed for time, exhausted, or even bored with the topic. If you’re feeling like this, it’s possible that others are, too. Many arguments simply fade into other

topics. It's OK to let them go.

Sometimes, though, you might want to offer an explicit concluding statement.

If the argument has been relatively calm and unemotional, you might want to say something like

"This has been an interesting conversation; maybe we can continue it another time."

or

"Thanks for sharing your opinion. I still don't agree, but it's been instructive to hear your side."

or

"I don't think we're going to solve this any time soon, but it's been good talking to you."

If the parties are emotionally involved, either about the subject or with each other, these civilities probably will be out of place.

The best you can achieve might be an honest statement of where you are:

"I'm just too wrought up to go on with this—let's take a break."

or,

"I've tried my best to explain this to you, and it's unfortunate I didn't succeed; but I'm not going to argue any more."

Apologizing—or Not

People accustomed to cultic environments in which the leader is always right and they are always wrong may get tired of apologizing, or they may have difficulty recognizing when apologies are in order. If these responses resonate with you, this issue could be a problem because

- Out of habit, you may apologize unnecessarily.

or

- You may fall into a relationship with someone who is manipulating you by constantly making you feel at fault, just as the cult leadership did.

or

- You may err in the opposite direction, thinking that any admission of fault lays you open to control and manipulation.

In mainstream society, apologies are often simple courtesies to smooth over the rough edges of life:

- A simple “I’m sorry” or “Excuse me” after you step on someone’s foot or bang them with your backpack on a crowded bus expresses your acknowledgement that you’ve hurt them—however trivially or unintentionally.

- When you're late to an appointment because the bus broke down, an apology to the person you kept waiting makes sense, even though it wasn't your fault; the apology shows your awareness that, however inadvertently, you have put him in an unpleasant situation.
- Telling a neighbor or co-worker who's had a death in the family, "I'm sorry for your loss," is not an apology, but a polite and kindly way of showing you're aware of her loss.

In the same way, you can expect to receive these kinds of acknowledgements when you are the person trodden on, inconvenienced, or bereaved.

Sometimes the word "sorry," is used simply as a preface to a negative: "Sorry, I'm not a football fan," or "Sorry, I'm just too busy right now."

When you are in the wrong, however, apologizing will help resolve a conflict faster than any other approach. If you've yelled angrily at someone, or passed along mistaken information, or spilled wine on their sofa, or hurt or wronged the person in any of the dozens of ways people do, an apology may not right the wrong entirely—but it's a foundation for a solid peace.

[TOP](#)