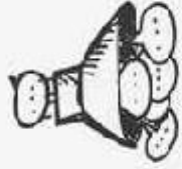
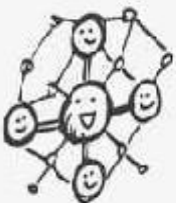


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IAN TUHOVSKY

Communication Skills Training

The Science of Effective Communication

The Science of Interpersonal Relations

21 Days of Effective Communication

Effective Communication Skills Mastery Bible

4 Books in 1 Boxset

Positive Psychology Coaching Series

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Communication Skills Training

A Practical Guide to
Improving Your Social
Intelligence, Presentation,
Persuasion and Public
Speaking Skills

Introduction

It's one of the most important abilities in life, but you won't really learn it at school. There are very few teachers on this crucial subject, but everyone has to go through the learning process and pass exams many times in their lives. There are no TV programs about it, although it is used by everyone, everywhere, all the time. The survival of a species depends on its quality and the better animals or tribes master it, the more dominant they become over others. During a major part of most people's lives, it's automatic and not something they are fully aware of.

Effective communication—**exactly what makes human beings dominant on this blue planet.**

It is said that speech is silver, but silence is gold. Still, few will argue about the great power of words, either spoken or written.

In my personal experience, lack of communication skills is exactly what ruins most people's lives. If you don't know how to communicate properly, you are going to have problems, both in your intimate and family relationships. You are going to be ineffective in work and business situations. It's going to be troublesome on a daily basis managing employees or getting what you want from your boss or your clients. Overall, I'd say effective communication is like an engine oil that makes your life run smoothly, getting you wherever you want to be. **There are very few areas in life in which you can succeed in the long run without this crucial skill.** Obviously, there are also other factors influencing the quality of your

career (knowledge, huge network of contacts, experience, professional approach, proper education), relationships (soft skills, self-confidence, [emotional intelligence](#)) and other areas. It's quite clear that all of your investments in the quality of communication, in improving its standards, learning new abilities or patterns and taking it to an entirely new level, **lead directly to improvement in your self-confidence, soft skills, career, relationships and your entire life's quality.**

Have you ever considered **how many times you intuitively felt that maybe you lost something important or crucial, simply because you unwittingly said or did something which put somebody off?** Maybe it was an unfortunate word, bad formulation, inappropriate joke, forgotten name, huge misinterpretation, an awkward conversation or a strange tone of your voice? Maybe you assumed that you knew exactly what a particular concept meant for another person and you stopped asking questions? Maybe you asked so many questions, you practically started an interrogation? Maybe you could not listen carefully or could not stay silent for a moment? How many times have you wanted to achieve something, negotiate better terms or ask for a promotion and failed miserably? **It's time to put that to an end with the help of this book.**

Personally, I have had some serious trouble with accurate and effective communication during my lifetime, particularly back in my childhood, teenage and early college years. On the one hand, people usually liked me; I had a bunch of good friends and was rather a social kind of a kid. On the other hand, I can't even count how many times I flunked really important exams in my life because of the inability to send

precise messages, to listen carefully, perceive what others were telling me without judgements or adjust what I wanted to say so my colleagues could understand what I really meant. Too many times I would lose my chances for a second date with girls I liked because I never knew when to shut up, stop “being funny and cool,” and just start listening instead. I unwittingly offended some very stringent teachers or professors a few times because I could not see the world or a given problem from their perspective (which, obviously, resulted in VERY hard times for me, both on lessons and on exam sessions). I did not know how to deal with my parents and family during arguments and conflicts, how to maintain business contacts and, what the heck, I even got fired twice because of my lame communication skills and lack of intuition in conversations. At a certain point, I almost hit rock bottom. I lost my job, my health was bad, I ended my long-term relationship, depleted my bank accounts to make a few very bad investments and got in a really deep mess. That’s when I promised myself I would learn from my mistakes, gather myself together and rebound.

I kept my promise. My self-development journey started. It exploded and I never stopped my quest of self-betterment. I started reading TONS of books and watching LOADS of DVD’s about many different subjects, which I decided to master in a few years’ time. Sales, startups, soft-skills, [meditation](#), emotional intelligence, eastern philosophy, NLP ... verbal communication was one of those crucial topics. In this book, I will share with you all the most important things I learned during my journey, so you don’t have to commit the

same errors and make the same costly mistakes. I learned it the hard way, **so you don't have to!**

Verbal communication is the most basic kind of communication among people. It has two forms: oral and written. Effectiveness of the former, on which I'm focusing in this book (although not exclusively, you will also have a chance to learn about non-verbal communication), is primarily influenced by fluency of speech and skillset of a sender, accentuation of particular parts of a message, confirmation from a receiver and paraphrasing of the received information in order to make sure that the real intent was understood correctly.

When talking about verbal communication skills, I mean certain competencies which include **knowledge, abilities** and **attitude**. On top of that there's **experience**, which makes applying effective communication patterns possible.

To explain it simply, only by applying **knowledge** and practicing certain **abilities** by having the right **attitude** is it possible to improve quality of your communication skills.

Quality is infinite as an indicator. This simply means that if you keep working on the improvement of your communication competences, you will be constantly strengthening the quality of your career, relationships, social skills and your entire life, ad infinitum. **There are hardly any limits, in terms of what you can learn and how much you can improve your social interactions.**

There's only one condition. Every single day, you need to ask yourself this question:

What can I do even better, more efficiently, differently and more effectively?

It will make you think about the effectiveness of both strong and weak sides of your communication, each and every day. During this process, you have to be both honest and forbearing with yourself, particularly when dealing with some deficiencies you are aware of. If you decide to deceive yourself, then you're just wasting your time. On the other hand, you need to stop beating yourself up. It will just block your mind and lead you astray. You need to be aware of one thing in particular: we, as human beings, are often the strictest and harshest critics of ourselves, so if you are stuck on thinking, "What did I do wrong?", you will surely open the Pandora's Box in your own mind. Whenever you ask yourself a question formed this way, you are holding yourself back instead of developing and stimulating your mindset. So, again, the question you need to constantly ask yourself isn't, "What did I do wrong?" It is, **"What can I do even better, more simply, differently and more effectively to improve my communication with other people?"**

It is extremely important for you to constantly analyze your communication style and pay attention to communication patterns you use. You need to become aware of these things and find motivation to work on your personal development, improving the quality of your life.

The first steps of this journey are: awareness (knowledge of your strong and weak points—what to improve, what not to do and what to show) and motivation. The bad news is only you can work these two things out for yourself. Nobody else can do it for you. The good thing, however, is whether you want it

or not, everything you read in this book applies to your everyday life. The power to change it for the better lies in your hands.

So, if you decide to take up the challenge and invest your time and energy in developing your communication skills, then you have just taken your first step to an entirely new quality of life. Stay persistent and you will be amazed at how fast and easily you can achieve things which just a while ago seemed far out of reach. Before we begin, let me expand a little bit on verbal communication (understood as **what** we say + **when, why** and **how** we say it) vs. body language and non-verbal communication.

Verbal vs. Non-Verbal Communication – A Little Debunking

Most participants of interpersonal communication skills, negotiations or influence trainings have probably heard at some point that the way of speaking is responsible for 38% of overall communication, spoken content (what we talk about) is 7% and body language is 55%. Maybe you have also seen it on TV or read about it on the internet. In 1967, Albert Mehrabian published the results of two surveys. Based on these results, he came up with the proportions between elements of communication as described above.

What most people don't know is that the results of the survey made by Mehrabian and his team¹ were generalized and simplified. For their experiment, they chose a group of people for the purpose of making two comparisons of various aspects of communication: the influence of tone of voice on the verbal message and the relationship between facial

expressions and way of speaking. These proportions came from the compilation of results of both comparisons (which is one of the subjects of criticism). Other critics also point to the fact that the group consisted only of women, there was fragmentary focus only on relations between words and facial expressions, and so on. Mehrabian's survey concerned the relationship between verbal and non-verbal communication while expressing opinions, showing feelings and attitudes, where the goal was to check how each of these elements influences a positive reception of a speaker (seeing a speaker as a friendly vs. unfriendly person). In summary, the scheme tells us that the total proportions of the "sympathy factor" = 7% content + 38% verbal message (soft skills, use of language, rate of speaking, etc.) + 55% body language. All literal apprehensions of this graph can easily be seen as over interpretations. You can come across many allegations that 7% for content is definitely too little. This is not the main message of this survey, though. If **the proportions themselves are not really accurate and important**, then what is the essence of this experiment? It pointed to the fact that effective communication consists of two inseparable elements of communication: verbal and non-verbal.

The "7%-38%-55%" rule can be seen as the metaphor of effective and efficient communication, which MUST contain the core of both verbal and non-verbal components, connected in a smart and congruent way. Lack or inaccuracy of both verbal and non-verbal messages will essentially limit the effectiveness of communication and proper reception of the transmitted message. Non-verbal messages influence understanding and reception of verbal messages in a very

crucial way. The proportions defined in this experiment are not permanent—they can change along with the context of communication, for example: a conversation between two people while in a business meeting, casual chatter between two friends, telephone conversations and so on. They are based on the study of facial expressions versus the whole spectrum of non-verbal communication (postures, gestures, change of skin tones under influence of emotions, outward appearance and so on).

Non-verbal messages complement verbal messages, being non-specific. Non-verbal communication is imprecise, whereas verbal communication is precise, so only both of these aspects used together properly will decide the overall quality of communication. **Effective communication is a verbal communication supported by congruent non-verbal messages** (tone of voice, facial expression, posture, gestures, etc.). **The congruence between these two elements is what makes communication truly effective.**

Now that we've covered all this, let's start learning how to change your life for the better!

Your Free Mindfulness E-book

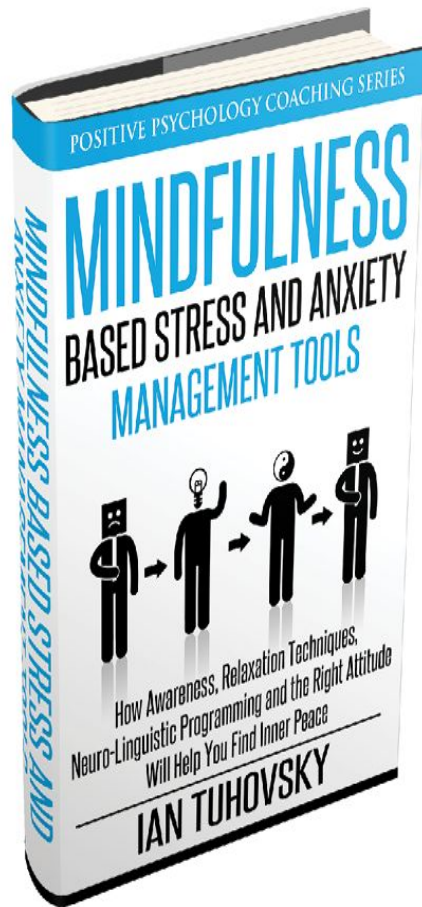
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Enjoy!

Thanks again for being my reader! It means a lot to me!

¹ Mehrabian, Albert; Wiener, Morton (1967). Decoding of Inconsistent Communications. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 6 (1): 109–114
Mehrabian, Albert; Ferris, Susan R. (1967). Inference of Attitudes from Non-verbal Communication in Two Channels. *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 31 (3): 248–252

Part I:

The Right Attitude and a Little Bit About Emotions

Communication does not only consist of techniques. Above all else, it is the way of thinking about and seeing the world around you. A change in attitude towards everything that surrounds us, rather than solely using certain techniques, is the source of the biggest changes in our life.

Acceptance of this new attitude and seeing the world through entirely different filters can significantly change your behavior in many situations. Instead of reacting impulsively and emotionally, you will act more effectively and more constructively, always looking for solutions and mutual agreement. Get to know these assumptions thoroughly and think how they apply to your life. It is important to consider how your behavior will change after you accept a particular way of seeing the world.

1. Everybody Has a Different Map of the World

It does not matter what this world actually is. We each get to know it by our senses: eyes, ears, taste, touch, smell. Due to the constraints of our brain, we can process only a small part of all impulses our environment constantly sends us. Each bit of information is processed by different filters: culture, language, beliefs, values, experiences. **Every human being has their own filters, which differ from person to person.**

That is the reason why every person sees reality individually. Everyone perceives the same situation differently and can interpret the same words divergently. *We all live in our own, unique realities made by sensory impressions and individual experiences.*

What does such a view of the world give you? Firstly, you need to know that you can solve your problems by changing your own filters. You can change your beliefs, values and the way you see the world. It will make you change at a deep level. Secondly, getting to know a map of the world of another human being is the key to understanding them. When you truly realize and understand that everyone can see certain things totally differently than you do, it will be much easier for you to create healthy relationships. You will read more about maps and filters later in this book.

2. There Are Positive Intentions Behind Every Human Behavior

According to that concept, our every behavior is the result of good intentions. Even when we do something we are not proud of, we probably made that choice because it was **the best choice for us at the given moment**. It is extremely important to understand this concept if you want to change yourself and adapt new important behaviors. Remember that your old, unwanted behaviors were caused by the fact that your brain saw a positive intention in them for you. We are simply doing the best we can with the skillset we currently have. If anyone who has ever treated you poorly (your friend, co-worker, stranger, family member) could instead have treated you with respect and love, while receiving the same from you and having their needs met, they would do that. We all would, as that's how we are programmed—to give and receive love, fulfilling our needs at the same time. When someone is not doing that and behaving in a way we don't like, it's not natural. They're probably suffering and that's what makes them hurt other people. The reason for that is **they**

just don't get it. They don't have the skillset to cope with the situation, they don't have the right tools or they don't know how to use them. Very often, when you change your perspective, the things you look at literally change.

It is also very useful in relationships with other people. Always try to guess the basis of other humans' behavior. Think, "They are innocent and they did the best they could in their current situation." Even if they aren't innocent, it will give you a much better understanding of their intentions. It will open up the possibility of much better communication, while giving them the opportunity to respond kindly and in a more constructive way.

3. It Is Impossible Not to Communicate

Everything you represent is some form of communication. In the process of communication, the non-verbal message and your voice play very important roles. Both verbal and non-verbal messages are always sent to trigger some kind of a reaction from a receiver. The way in which a receiver reacts depends on the message you send and the way you send it. You are responsible for the understanding or misunderstanding of your words by a receiver. That is why you have to make sure the information you send is the same that the receiver gets.

For me, familiarization with these basic assumptions was a great foundation for getting to know more about the art of effective communication. Moreover, it gives you a picture of what self-development is, as well as the art of communication. It is not necessarily a set of psychological techniques and tools, but a model of wise change for the better. Even now, I

often come back to these assumptions and remind myself what is worth remembering.

Communication with other people is one of the most precious abilities among our vast array of interpersonal skills. Unfortunately, as time goes by, some of these abilities, once learned, stop developing, stay on the same level or even diminish. There is, however, some good news—your ability to communicate can grow along with your life experience. That growth does not come easily though, especially for people who lack awareness of what to change, as well as an openness for eventual change.

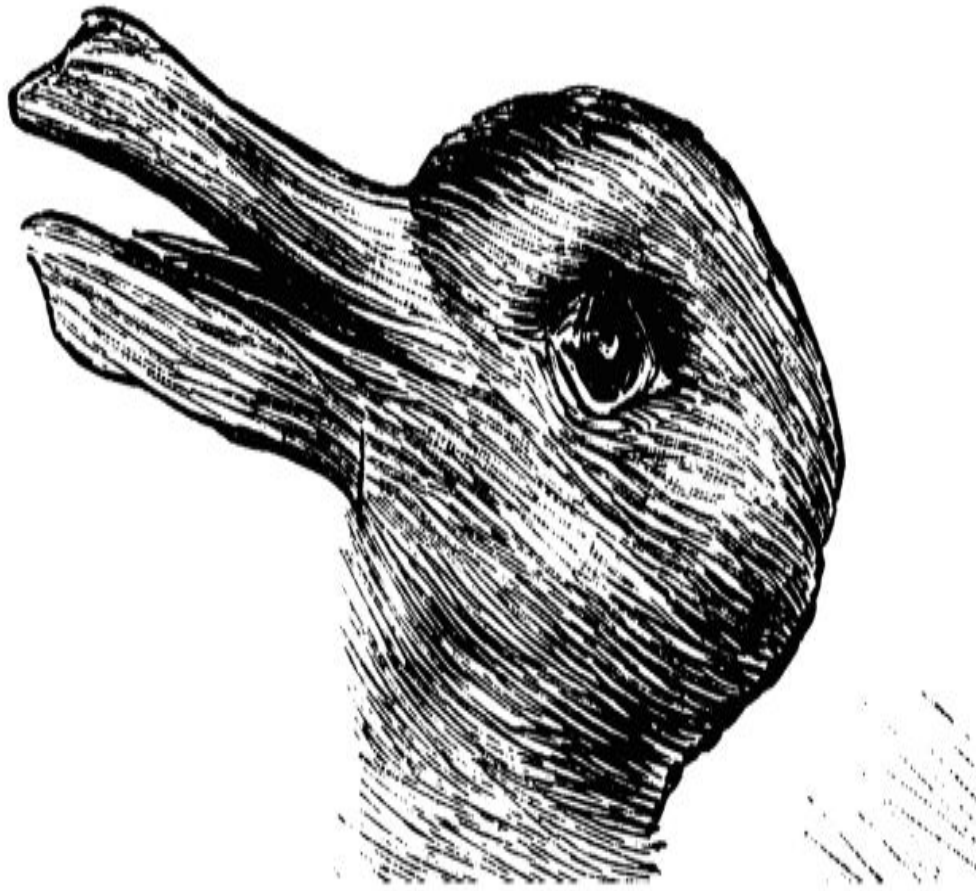
Chapter 1:

How Do Our Mental Filters Operate?

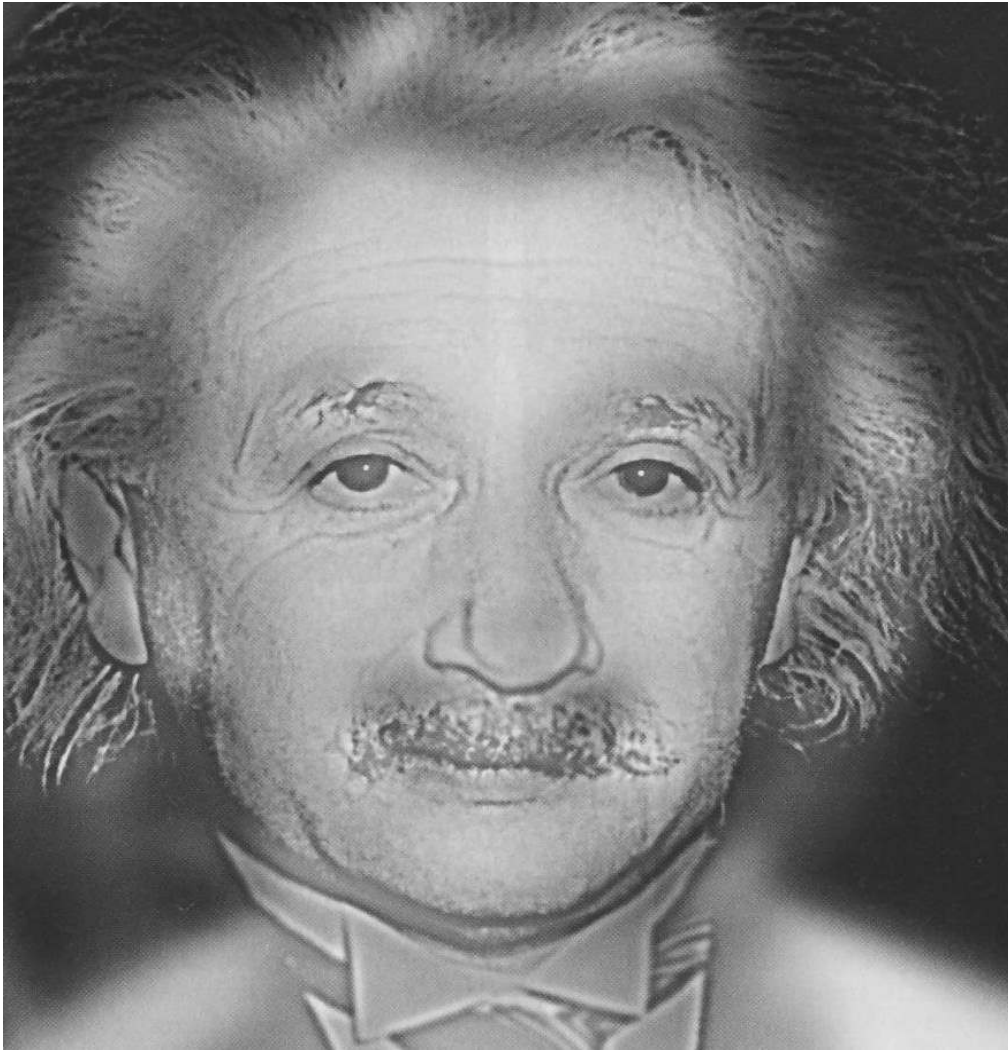
Every single piece of information that comes from our environment goes through mental filters we all have in our minds. The realization of their existence is the first step towards working on your approach and attitude. A change of your attitude and mindset is the most effective route to a positive revolution in your personal growth.

How exactly does it work? **All your senses are your first filter.** They themselves already ignore certain parts of reality. When you are watching the world around you, you are limited by how the human brain is constructed. You do not perceive all the physical phenomena with the naked eye—you can't see the gravity, sound waves, infrared light, UV waves, radio waves, Wi-Fi, microwaves, radiation, etc. You do not see reality as it truly is. What you see is only an interpretation, produced by your brain.

You have probably had a chance to see this illustration at some point:



Very famous picture. Duck or rabbit? Depending on who's looking at the picture, both answers might be right. When I first saw it at the age of five, I could just see the duck. It all depends on the angle and distance at which you are looking at it, your expectations and mental filters by which your mind is operating at the moment. How about this photo? Who is that?



Albert Einstein or Marilyn Monroe? Depending on the lighting, the distance from which you are looking, condition of your sight, your expectations and mental filters or how wide your eyelids are open, you can see both. Do you see where this is going? We can't observe reality objectively.

Honestly, your way of seeing the world might be very far from the truth. Maybe brains of other species see a more exact reflection of reality? Perhaps a dog's brain is closer to perceiving the true nature of the world, despite the fact it sees it totally differently than a human? We have absolutely no evidence that states it is our species that sees the world as it

really is, although we have a lot of proof that we can't see, hear, feel or sense even a tiny bit of what many animals can.

The other filters are acquired during our daily life. These are **experiences**, which create your personality right from birth, in addition to **values**, indoctrinated into your mind for many years by your parents, friends, education system and the rest of society.

There are your ambitions and expectations, **and most importantly, your beliefs about the world**. They create the way in which you see the world, your own life, opportunities and relationships with other people. If you believe that the world is a cruel and insidious place, you will behave like that is the absolute and only truth. It will give you a lot of unpleasant emotions and experiences. If your belief is that the world is a wonderful and beautiful place full of helpful people, your thoughts, emotions, self-talk, relationships and entire life will be totally different.

Every Belief Is a Source of Specific Behaviors

Let's assume for a moment that you believe every human is a liar who only wants to take advantage of you. Having such a belief, imagine how would you behave in a new company with new co-workers around you or trying to negotiate a new business deal?

Let's now change a filter and say that you truly believe that people love to make new friends and that everyone has something special in themselves. How will your behavior look then? How different will it be if you change only one of your beliefs so dramatically?

If you want to make a change in how your sensory filters operate, you can only do it by taking stimulants. By intoxicating your brain, you make it perceive reality very differently. You've probably had a chance to notice that after drinking too many beers, the world appears to be quite different (until the painful morning!).

The most important thing is you can easily change how the "second group" of your filters (mental filters) operate. You can change your way of referring to your past experiences. You can change your expectations towards the future. You can change your beliefs about the world that surrounds you and about other people. You can even change your deeply rooted values and your personal statement.

These adjustments cause the biggest and the most profound changes in your emotions, habits and communicational behaviors. They allow you to reach deep down into your consciousness and truly transform yourself. Instead of changing particular behaviors, you can start by changing your beliefs. A lot of people in this world (maybe even the majority) hold onto beliefs that not only don't help them, but simply hurt them and hold them back from real happiness and fulfillment.

A different way of seeing the world means a completely different life. Remember that you always have a pair of "mental glasses" on your nose. These glasses can be black and a source of unhappiness, but they can also be colorful, which will make your life much more passionate and much easier.

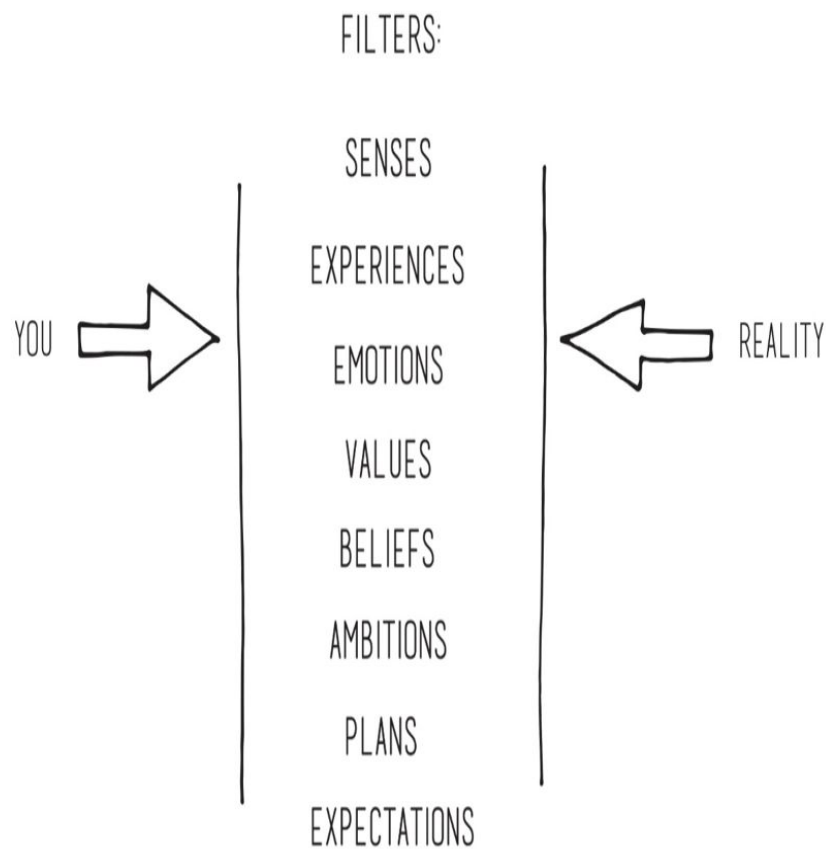
Chapter 2:

A Map Is Not Actual Terrain

As you already know from the first few sections of this book, every human has their own map of reality, which is not actual reality. An understanding of this concept will provide you with endless possibilities of development. You will start seeing the world and your relationships with other people very differently, more in depth and in accordance with reality.

What is a map of reality? It is nothing more than a mental reflection of the world that surrounds us. As I mentioned before, you do not see the world how it is, but as you perceive it through a set of filters: experiences, senses, beliefs and values. All of these create your unique, subjective map of reality.

Our mind is forced to select crucial information from a great number of stimuli and every human has a particular algorithm, according to which the most important information is selected. Hence, the reason why it's impossible to perceive the objective world. What you see is the reality that has already been filtered—all stimuli from the outer world is carefully preselected.



When you accept and understand it, you notice that every human being has a different map of the world. Eventually you'll come to the realization that every person on this planet has different life experiences, different beliefs, different values and expectations. Interpretation of the same information may be **completely different** when made by different people. **There is no one objective truth.**

Everyone is right according to their own map of the world.

Let me give you a few examples which will allow you to better grasp that concept. For starters, let's take Japanese

manga comics. What does this type of comic book mean to you? What does that word mean to you? For a manga enthusiast, the word “comics” probably has very emotional meaning, which automatically brings a smile to their face. It may even be one of the most important words in their lives! For someone else, the term “comic book” may mean a bundle of paper worth close to nothing. Both individuals have different maps of the world and for that second person, it may be really difficult to understand the otaku’s² map of reality. They could argue for hours whether manga comics are cool and interesting or maybe lame and boring, but what sense does it make? Someone might be willing to pay exorbitant amounts of money for a single quirky painting, an old car which barely works, a postage stamp, a book so old you can’t even read it anymore or anything else. Someone else might be wondering for weeks what’s so special about an old copper fork from the 17th century when you can buy a new one for pennies. Who’s right? Both of them. They just have different mental filters.

Here’s another example. Has one of your colleagues ever heard something completely differently than the way you had intended in your mind? It’s happened to me many times and I could never understand why it was happening. It turns out that one simple message can have a completely different meaning for different people. In one person, the word “love” can cause dreaminess, in another it can cause pain and negative emotions. Therefore, you should always choose your messages carefully and take your colleague’s map of reality into serious consideration.

Here’s another situation. Because of the thick fog, a return flight from France to the United States is cancelled. What is

happening at the airport? Over a dozen people jump with joy because they have an extra day to spend in this beautiful country. Some people are completely neutral—for them, nothing bad happened, but on the other hand, they are not sure what to do and how their families will react. Another group of people is desperate; they have important business meetings in the USA a few hours later. Some other people will be infuriated, because for them it will be their second canceled flight in two weeks. Exactly the same event—different people, different maps, different reactions.

Maps in Practice

I think that you can already see what this is about. Here comes the question: **how exactly can you use this?**

First of all, you should come to the realization that the way you live and whether you think your life is good or not depends only on the kind of maps of reality you have. You see, most “happy people” are not happy just because only good things happen to them all the time. Just like some other people are frustrated all the time and not just because they constantly stumble over sad and painful things. It happens because these happy people, as well as those frustrated ones, filter their reality in a particular way. If you have a belief that the world is a bad and sad place, that is how you will feel all the time. You will limit your perception of reality only to the bad aspects of your life and you won’t be able to really notice all the good things that happen to you, simply because you can’t focus on everything at once. You will filter the good emotions out at your own demand.

Having said that, let me tell you about one extremely important thing. There's a gap in time between event and response. Between, for instance, someone saying something mean to you and you giving them a response. Do you want to know what really happens during that time? Do we stop and think about how should we answer? It depends; sometimes we don't really think about our replies. Do we take time to think about what just happened? Maybe.

But what ALWAYS happens is we stop and **think who we are. Either consciously or subconsciously, it can happen in a fraction of a second. The way we react to this situation is simply a reflection of who we think we are.** We tend to think that we say and do what we say and do to other people because they did something to us. But that is not true. **It has nothing to do with what happened.** What people do and say to us has nothing to do with us at all. Therefore, we need to remember that everything we say and do is a reflection of who we think we are and what we believe. What people say to you—it's about them. When you say anything, it's about you. It reflects who you are. **It's all about the way we are perceiving the events, the reality.**

There were times in my life when whenever someone was mean to me (saying, for instance, that I'm too skinny, too pale, too short, untalented or that I will never amount to anything), I would react neurotically and either aggressively or passively (blaming myself for not fitting into other people's vision of me). After I started working on myself, my self-confidence and my list of achievements got bigger and I attained totally different and new self-perception. Now, whenever someone is mean to me, I mostly don't give a crap. Depending on the

context and situation, when it's possible to do so, I simply ignore it like someone would ignore a tiny, silent fruit fly on the other side of the room. Anything people say to you **doesn't have any meaning except for the meaning you give it.**

I've read three different books about people who survived Nazi concentration camps and Soviet gulags during World War II. Despite the fact they were treated inhumanly, cruelly and their torturers attempted to smother their will to live at every moment possible, what all of these people had in common is they did not respond as these things were happening to them. They responded in a completely different way, reflecting their belief of who they really were. At the end of one of these books, there was a touching and eye-opening quotation from an extermination camp survivor's secret diary, later found by American soldiers. It was a twenty years young Polish girl who wrote,

“It's my eighty-sixth day at the camp. I lost probably about 20 kilograms, I can see my every single bone and there are bruises on every centimeter of my body, but I'm still alive, which makes me really grateful. I also shared my bowl of grass soup with a starving little Jewish child, and the Nazis didn't notice. Today I was looking at Nazi soldiers. Poor people, they are watching us from behind these metal bars. If I'm behind the bars, so they are. We can't leave this place, and so they can't until their vain mission is accomplished. Locked in this prison of foolish human pride and self-conceit, and they think we are the only ones trapped in here.”

All of these people (Polish girl, Russian soldier and Dutch-Jewish professor) in all three books did exactly the same thing to make their wall against the hell. They disconnected what happened to them with how they interpreted this situation.

That's why the biblical story of Jesus Christ, no matter what your religion is or isn't, is so powerful to so many people. As the Bible says, Jesus was whipped, humiliated, spat on, kicked, made to carry his heavy cross and then crucified, but he never reacted as if that was happening to him—he acted according to whom he believed he was—God's son. It doesn't matter if you're a religious person or an atheist, you ought to see the everlasting wisdom beneath these stories and apply them into your daily life.

This change of beliefs or way of seeing your experiences will allow you to filter reality completely differently. The assumption that a map is not actual terrain is extremely helpful in social interactions and building relationships with people. Now, before you judge someone's behavior, you will remember that it comes from a different map of the reality that person has. If you want to create a strong relationship with another person, first get to know their map and then try to empathize with it. You will be able to understand their emotions, needs, behaviors and experiences at a much deeper level.

This concept also shows you that proving you are right doesn't usually make any sense. Occasionally in the past, I felt the need to argue with other people about who was right. I always tried to show them rational arguments and concrete proof and I could not stop wondering how someone could be so wrong about something. In reality, it was just like I had a map of New York and they had a map of Los Angeles and we would argue for hours whether the harbor was in the west or in the south of the map.

Think about how much energy you lost in your life for such pointless arguments. Now, when you know that everyone has their own map of the world and sees reality differently, through individual prisms, it should be much easier to understand that very rarely is there such a thing as objective truth and being one hundred percent right about something. Everyone is right in their own model of reality and if you want to improve your communication skills, you have to really think about it. After all, you can say, “OK, on my map the harbor is in the west and on yours it’s in the north. It doesn’t matter as we have different maps. Let’s find the right map together so we can finally find the damn harbor!”

Remember, there are as many maps of reality as people in the world. Make your map the most beneficial for yourself and respect other people’s maps, without forcing them to use yours. This is one of the most important concepts in family therapy, psychology of communication, Neuro-Linguistic Programming and many other different schools of psychology, sociology and social dynamics. I will tell you more about this particular concept and how to make practical use of it later in this book, in chapters called “Rapport, the Art of Excellent Communication,” “Metaprograms” and “Meta Model.”

[2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otaku](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otaku)

Chapter 3:

Eight Most Important Questions You Should Ask Yourself

As we speak about having the right attitude, before proceeding to the verbal communication tools, let's now reflect on the most important rules and the essential knowledge about traits of an effective communicator: [emotional intelligence](#) and the right approach to the process of communication.

1. Is What You Say Possible to Realize?

Everything you say must be possible to realize—that is the first rule. If not, then the verbal message cannot be done and makes no sense. Let me explain. When you hear: “Forget about the number 4,” or, “Don’t think about anything green,” you are not able to do it, because the process of forgetting is impossible (you can’t just forget about something in a second, on demand, can you?). Such a command has exactly the opposite effect—a person thinks more about what they are supposed to forget and reinforces the information they wanted to delete or behaviors they wanted to stop. Do you see the pattern now? It is similar to common sandbox and playground comments parents so often tell their children: “Be nice” (or any other adjective). The verb “to be” is unworkable, because it is impossible not “to be” when you’re alive. A child can’t

really understand this concept, which frustrates both the child and their parent. Instead of throwing out vague words, specify **exactly what** the matter is and make sure that it is possible to perform a constructive action to have a concrete physical result.

2. Is What You Say Precisely Formulated?

“Be nice!” “Behave!” “You better motivate yourself!” Can you tell exactly what these sentences mean? No—they lack precision and hence, can be understood in too many different ways. In effect, it is almost a guarantee of an execution of your message far from your expectations. For example: instead of saying meaningless, “Be nice!”, tell your child **precisely** what you are expecting, like, “Put the car on the shelf, where the other toys are.” Rather than, “Behave yourself!”, say, “Speak more quietly, please.”

Do not demand “motivation” from anyone, because it does not provide any solutions and doesn’t point to anything in particular. Instead, you could tell someone to straighten their back up, speak louder and talk about a specific goal or situation that makes them enthusiastic and excited. **Anything you say must be precisely formulated—that is rule number two.**

3. Is What You Say Positively Formulated?

Imagine that you ask someone if they’d like something to drink or if they would like to have a coffee. The answer is “no.” You propose a tea and the answer is the same.

- “Orange juice?”
- “No.”

- “Glass of bourbon?”

- “No.”

How much time will it take until you get irritated? Negation in itself is reactive—it applies to the already existing reality without constructive creation of the future, which leaves the person you’re speaking with no possibility of solving the problem. It brings especially negative consequences for small children. By hearing what they are not supposed to do, they are not able to create a proactive attitude for seeking solutions in themselves. It is because **our brain does not really recognize negations**—a proposition not to think about pink elephants will end up with failure, because what you hear (despite the negation), the brain will process anyway. Next time, when someone tells you, “I do not want to get at you, but...” you will know that they most probably want to get at you. Instead of saying to your employee: “Don’t respond to a customer that way,” explain **how exactly** you want that person to respond. **Rule number three: what you say must be positively formulated.**

4. Are You Talking To Others Or To Yourself?

“Understand it,” “Know what, I’m talking to you,” “You feel me” ... Other people cannot understand you in the way you want to be understood, because that can only be done by yourself. No one can be responsible for the mental and emotional processes of other people, as in the end it is you who decides what you think and how you feel, apart from whether your interlocutor (person who takes part in a dialogue or conversation) triggers and stimulates it or not.

Because of different “mental filters”, it is not possible for other people to always entirely understand what you mean or “feel you” in the way you want them to.

They can understand you based on how they process what you say, as well as how they feel and interpret it, according to their own cognitive filters. If you can honestly and deeply understand yourself (that can be the hard part), when you know what exactly you want to communicate and you feel yourself, then communicating your message to the other person will be not only possible, but easy. **Rule number four is to remember to always take responsibility for yourself.**

5. Is What You Say A “Mind Reading” Or A Description of Measurable Facts?

- “I can see that you are sad!”
- (*“No, you can just see tears in my eyes. I was cutting an onion.”*)
- “I know what you are going to say!”
- (*“No, you don’t. You are just reminding yourself what I said in a similar situation last time.”*)
- “This picture tells me you were not very happy back then.”
- (*“No, pictures do not speak. You just interpret them this way and then you put your interpretation on the picture. It is an attribution error³ (pictures are not able to speak) and a projection bias⁴⁵ (thinking that what we think about the reality is in fact identical with what our interlocutor thinks).”*)

Correct reading of mental processes is, in reality, very difficult. Until today, psychology has never found unequivocal solutions concerning things like reliable reading of body

language and in most cases, it is close to impossible in every day communication and usual circumstances. The case remains even after thorough CIA training, no matter what you watch in your criminal-drama TV series. It is also estimated that the majority of e-mail communication (or online chat communication) is usually deformed, meaning that the reception of a message by the receiver is usually different than intention of its author. Have you ever gotten into an argument because you didn't include the smiley emoticon or omitted an abbreviation (e.g. IMHO)?

Description of facts has an objective character and when you treat your own judgement as an objective description of reality, it often leads to many conflicts.

- "You look nervous!"
- "No, I am not..."
- "Don't tell me you're not! I can see you are!"
- "What's your point? I just told you I'm not nervous."
- "Why are you responding to me that way and raising your voice? Why are you so nervous?!"
- "FOR GOD'S SAKE, I TOLD YOU ALREADY. I'M NOT NERVOUS!!!"
- "STOP BEING SO ANGRY AND SHOUTING AT ME!!!"

And so it escalates...

Remember the fifth rule of conscious communication—always describe measurable facts instead of trying to read minds.

6. Does What You Say Describe What You Feel Or Does It Attack Your Interlocutor?

Offending your interlocutors usually leads to activation of defense mechanisms in them, which helps them defend their self-image. Telling your partner, “You don’t love me!” will probably end with the negation, “It’s not true. I love you!” retaliation, then “You constantly jump at me!” and eventually escalation of conflict (“Here we go again. How many times can you make up problems that don’t even exist? When will you stop behaving like a little boy/girl?!”). Instead of attacking your interlocutor, it is more beneficial to tell them about your own feelings, which have an educational and informative character and are safe for your interlocutor’s integrity and self-image. In reference to the above example, instead of, “You don’t love me!”, a much more effective and wiser message would be, “Yesterday, when you said that I looked bad in that dress, I felt very sad!” If the interlocutor says that they did not have that on their mind, it is worth explaining. “I understand and I’m glad that your intentions were different. Nevertheless, I understood it that way. Next time, could you say that in a different way, for example ...?”

This sixth rule saves you from unnecessary conflicts, relationship problems and a waste of time and energy. Remember: **always describe your feelings without attacking and offending your interlocutor.** It will just lead you astray.

7. Does What You Say Concern A Person Or Their Behaviors?

Our opinions about others are always generalized and we usually reduce them to a common denominator. It’s always an evaluation of some kind and it does not matter if it’s positive (“You are very smart”) or negative (“You are so stupid!”), it always builds a biased and unreal picture of our interlocutors

in their (and often our) minds. It's unreal, because everyone has moments when they act either in a very intelligent or really dumb manner. Moreover, it always depends on the observer's opinion, because after all, there are no "one hundred percent objective criteria" of intelligence and stupidity (even complex IQ and EQ tests or extremities like Darwin Awards can't be viewed objectively in all cases). These unreal or biased pictures build a particular type of biased self-esteem (or self-doubts) and the message itself describes the external reality for your interlocutor (even if biased), which makes any changes almost impossible. What do I mean by that? For instance, when someone isn't seemingly very intelligent and has never acted too smart in many areas of life according to your opinion, then you can't really transplant their brain, can you? However, what you CAN do is refer to their behaviors, because these—as opposed to inborn capabilities or personality traits—are quite easy to change. Additionally, it's much harder to offend someone when relating only to their behavior. Instead of, "You are stupid," say: "When you go to meet your client next time, please read much more about their company so you really know what you are talking about, okay?" Instead of, "You are so intelligent!" it's sometimes better to say: "When you expressed your opinion about that book yesterday, it was so immersive and well-detailed, you really inspired me to read it!" **Rule number seven teaches us to express opinions about people's behaviors, not about them in general.**

8. Does What You Say Have Hidden Intentions?

"Honey, weren't there any prettier dresses in the shop?" is not a question about availability of other dresses, but a

negative comment judging that particular one or more likely, the person wearing it. The words, “And what do you think, for God’s sake?!” do not mean that you want to know other persons’ opinions, you just want to show your own frustration. Messages with double meaning, in which a told content differs from the real speaker’s intentions, lower the level of trust of adult interlocutors and won’t be understood by most children. Because the building of a relationship without trust is not possible, the more direct and straightforward your messages are, the bigger the possibility that what you want to transmit will be received properly and positively. Of course, by “direct” I don’t mean harsh or explicit. Social correctness, [emotional intelligence](#), empathy and sensitivity have to be taken into consideration.

So the eighth rule is to say directly what you want to communicate.

Implementation of all of the above rules requires a systematic practice and awareness. Some of the most basic communication mistakes (for example: telling your children or employees what they shouldn’t do instead of what they should do or sending vague, bland messages devoid of any real meaning) are so common that despite their dysfunctionality, they are perceived as something “normal” by most people. Fortunately, every ability can be trained and the best idea is to focus on one of these obstacles/dysfunctionalities for a minimum of one week. As soon as you see improvement, you can proceed to another one and so on, until all the rules are applied. The amount of misunderstandings and conflicts will surely be greatly decreased.

3 Gilbert, D.T., & Malone, P.S., (1995). The correspondence bias. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117, 21-38.

4 Loewenstein, G.; O'Donoghue, T.; Rabin, M. (1 November 2003). "Projection Bias in Predicting Future Utility". *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118 (4): 1209–1248

5 Harvey, J.H., Town, J.P., & Yarkin, K.L. (1981). How fundamental is "the fundamental attribution error"? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 40(2), 346-349.

Chapter 4:

How to Express Anger and Avoid Conflicts

Wrath and anger are both destructive and creative emotions. They can motivate us, remove blindfolds from our eyes and give us lots of strength when directed properly, but their destructive nature is revealed whenever we suppress our feelings. How should we express these emotions to use them for creation of a healthy communication with other people, instead of sudden, chaotic outbursts of anger?

In our Western society, it is normal to suppress wrath, anger and other bad emotions. It results in large amounts of unleashed energy residing in us, which sooner or later erupt like a lethal volcano.

Surveys conducted by Dr. Robert W. Levenson from UC Berkeley Institute of Psychology indicate that suppression of emotional expression does not contribute to reduction of experienced emotional intensity, but rather overstimulates and overloads our neural systems. This leads to reduction of immunity and health problems⁶. Suppressed emotions always manage to find their way out eventually⁷.

To understand how anger works, we must realize the difference between a stimulus and a cause. Every emotion is a result of our thoughts. The cause of each emotional state lies

in our thinking. It is one of the basic assumptions of cognitive-behavioral therapy. The behavior of another person which we didn't like is then a stimulus, that activates (indicates, reminds us of) a real cause (a thought that starts to haunt us again).

When your partner does not call you for a long time, you can feel anger and accuse them that they don't care about you. However, if you look deeply at the real cause of your anger, you could realize that you simply need more love signals from your partner. Subconsciously, you decided to treat the stimulus (no phone call) as the cause. This is how we transfer the responsibility for our bad emotions to the external world instead of taking a better look at ourselves, our emotions, thoughts, feelings and needs.

When we express anger, we usually interpret a stimulus as a cause and we blame the other person for our anger. Feeling that a certain behavior should change or end, we accuse them, saying that they did something wrong and the next time they have to do it differently.

As a result, our interlocutor is raising the shield and going into defensive mode. It's a normal, usual reaction. Where there is an attack, there is also a defense. The stronger the attack is, the stronger the defensive reaction.

As soon as your interlocutor starts defending themselves, they are not able to understand what the problem actually comes down to. Their priority will now be to push the accusations away and to resolve the conflict as soon as possible (usually not in the healthiest way possible, but the quickest, to release the tension they feel). They also won't be able to change their behavior, even if you communicate to

them how extremely important it is to you (probably yelling or crying at the same time, as the conflict escalates).

The basic mistake most people commit when they are angry is blaming the other person for what and how they feel. They are not aware that anger really tells them about themselves. On the surface, it seems like a stimulus is a cause of our anger and bad emotions...and the real reason stays unknown.

The source of anger always lies in our thinking, beliefs and attitude. Our needs, expectations and judgements. If you feel anger, it very often means that some of your needs remain unfulfilled. When you choose yelling and accusations as a method of expressing this emotion, you'll have unnecessary conflict instead of solution and your relationship with the other person will quite possibly get worse.

So what should you do when these intense emotions occur? Treat them as an alarm, a sign pointing to a certain unsolved problem. When the siren howls, direct all your attention inwards. Why do I feel anger? What exactly made me so angry? What am I missing that makes me feel this way? What do I need?

Such insight and finding answers to these questions is not easy when we feel like we want to fight and pour these bad emotions on the other person. It is very important, however, to stop for a while, take a deep breath and give yourself a few moments to observe what is going on inside of you.

When you lose control of yourself under the influence of bad emotions, the explicit expression of your anger can be very tempting, even pleasant in a way. Holding it in may require some inner strength, but when you manage to push the

“STOP” button, it’s sometimes better to leave your room, house or apartment before the anger explodes and the conflict escalates. Then, you need just a few moments and some good questions to ask yourself and the emotions will start to evaporate. Working on a constructive dialogue, you can return with a desire to talk in a calm manner and to solve the case in a healthier, more efficient way.

Have you even wondered why, in a frenzy of anger, we have such a huge need to throw unpleasant words at others and simply make them feel bad? Why can pouring this anger and psychological bullying be so pleasant?

Simply, we want them to become aware of the pain we think they made us feel. We want to give these bad emotions back so that they admit their mistake, submit and surrender. We want them to finally change their behavior.

The problem is that when someone thinks they have done something wrong, they will not have the opportunity to empathize with your pain. They will allocate all of their energy into defending themselves.

Therefore, there is no point in blaming others when we feel bad. It makes no sense at all on a practical level of reason. If we want to solve the matter constructively, we have to allow that person to understand what is going on inside of us, how we really feel. To express your anger wisely, it is worth it to restrain yourself from throwing swear words, plates, cutlery and photo frames.

When you accuse someone of something, the accused person has two possible choices. To take your words personally (which will make them feel hopeless and restrain

them from changing their behavior) or to reject them (which won't change their behavior either).

If you really want someone to change their behavior, remember, they must feel the need themselves. It can happen ONLY when they feel no need to defend themselves and when you explain to them very calmly and clearly what exactly you feel, why you feel that and what your needs are.

Let's recap quickly:

1. Take a pause. Stop for a moment and take a breath. Put aside any accusations against the other person.
2. Be aware of thoughts which are the source of anger. Reflect on them deeply. What judgment, opinion or belief in your head makes you feel the way you feel?
3. Understand your needs. If you already know the thought behind the source of anger, consider what need this thought comes from. What specifically are you missing?
4. Express your needs. Do not judge the other person. Talk only about your feelings, which appeared due to the particular behavior of that person.

If you want to express your anger in a healthy way and use it to create agreement and build better relationships, stop blaming others for your feelings and direct the beam of consciousness on your emotions and needs.

Learn how to constructively communicate these needs, to help others understand what you feel and where your anger

comes from. This will help them change their own behavior according to what is important to you.

How would you estimate your level of control over the intense, devastating emotions?

<http://conium.org/~ucbpl/docs/42-Emotional%20suppression93.pdf>

7

Chapter 5:

Smile

Why do we like to laugh so much? What happens in the brain when you smile? **1. Your smile is controlled by two groups of muscles**—the major zygomatic muscles and *orbicularis oculi*. These first run on the sides of the face, connecting with the corners of your mouth. When you smile, they reveal the teeth and raise the corners of your mouth. *Orbicularis oculi* are responsible for closing the eyelids. They are also responsible for the wrinkles in the corners of your eyes.

The movement of zygomatic muscles can be controlled by us. We do this when we want to smile artificially. *Orbicularis oculi* work independently of our will and appear **only when we laugh honestly**. So if you want to know if someone laughs for real or artificially—look at the sides of their eyes. During artificial laughter, only their mouth laughs.

2. A smile is contagious. Scientists have discovered the “mirror neurons” in our brains which are responsible for recognizing the emotions on other people’s faces. After such a recognition, they turn on the areas of our brain responsible for the same emotions (sometimes it’s enough to look at a photo of a smiling baby or watch a short clip with someone laughing in it). When we see a smile on another person’s face, we can also start to smile very easily—we automatically feel joy, so smiling affects the behaviors of other people and their

reactions on us. Also, **when we laugh often, people see us as more friendly, nicer and happier.**

3. Laughter is good for your health. Smiling positively affects your breathing. When we laugh, we breathe faster, and this is a great exercise for the diaphragm and throat. It also increases the oxygenation of the blood and betters your blood flow. According to neurologist Henri Rubinstein, one minute of honest laughter equals 45 minutes of deep relaxation.

4. The hormone of happiness. Laughter stimulates the secretion of endorphins, hormones in the brain. These are of similar chemical composition to morphine and heroin, but they calm and strengthen your immune system. The release of endorphins greatly improves our well-being.

5. The mere act of smiling, even artificially, causes the release of endorphins in the brain. Activity of the muscles responsible for smiling is so strongly associated with our well-being that it works both ways. So if you want to feel better in a second, just smile a couple of times, even if you do not have the desire to. Try it yourself, even now.

6. Social smile. Research shows that we laugh more often when we're in the company of other people rather than when we are alone. Robert Provine says that only 15% of our laughter comes from the amusement of jokes! There is wisdom to that—so many times I barely smiled when reading a joke alone at home, but when I heard the same joke while with a group of people, I cried out loud with unstoppable laughter. It turns out that laughter has an important social function; it's the way to forge relationships.

Conclusions? They are probably obvious. **Smile more often to improve your communication skills!** Your brain will be functioning much better and other people will see you as a more sociable and friendly person. What's more, you will also improve their humor and you will feel much better in the process.

Part II:
Communication Skills

Chapter 6:

The Most Common Communication Obstacles

The ability to effectively communicate consists of:

1. Understanding of others (and showing it)
2. Clear expression of oneself
3. Imposing an influence on others
4. Active listening
5. Asking open and detailed questions
6. Taking care of our own needs and goals during a conversation
7. Exchanging opinions in a non-conflicting way

Get to Know Your Obstacles!

If you want to improve your communication skills, you need to first recognize your limits, then really think about all the things holding you back while interacting with other people.

A good idea is to ask the people you see most about what you should improve in yourself (or even change totally) when it comes to your way of communicating. It might appear as a strange idea at first, but believe me, it's one of the most effective ways of inner transformation. Your friends, family or coworkers (interlocutors in general) may often see some aspects of your communication (sometimes as subtle as tone of voice, facial expression, etc.) that you are completely unaware of. Now, let me tell you about the most common obstacles on your way to becoming an effective communicator. Take a moment to reflect at each of these points very deeply and honestly. No need to deceive yourself. Answer yourself: are you doing these things often?

Playing a Judge

Do you often tell others how you think they are or how they should be? Perhaps you are certain that your way of perceiving the world is the only correct way? If you tend to show judging behaviors, you may have a tendency to interpret your interlocutor's messages through mental filters of stereotypes or your own beliefs and experiences. Feeling like you are the only one with the right to be right will turn out to be wrong and unfair.

Feeling the Need to Finish Sentences for Others

Often, while talking with others, you interrupt and practically finish the whole sentence instead of letting your interlocutor do it. It is very frustrating for people around you and can make them unwilling to continue the conversation, even if you are not told directly. In some instances, if it happens constantly, it can even contribute to the ending of your relationships because a listener does not try to analyze what a sender is trying to say. If you are a frequent interrupter, **do everything you can** to stop this tendency. You could, for example, imagine yourself as a journalist conducting an interview with a VIP, in serious need to gain as much information as possible about the other person.

Uncle Good Advice

When you share your observations and give others advice, you almost always feel like you can surely help them or contribute to solving their problems. Step back and take a moment to think about how you feel when other people are constantly giving you their advice (especially unwanted advice). How does it make you feel? Instead of playing a good uncle and giving your “helpful tips” to everyone (“If I were you, I would...”), try putting yourself in your interlocutor’s place or situation and reflecting on how you would feel when something like that happened to you. Eventually, you can give advice if that’s your field of expertise or you’re asked for it. Only just enough advice and not too much, only an honest attempt to understand your interlocutor deeply and nothing more. As often as possible, avoid playing a role of a wise sage or oracle and try to lead the conversation in a way to enable your interlocutors to solve the problem by themselves.

Moralizer

Similar to “Uncle Good Advice,” but even worse as it’s totally pointless. Does your style of conversation have features of a moralizer? “Good and honest men do not act that way!” “Every intelligent man put in your place...” “You can’t just say that to people!” “Who do you think you are?” “How can you listen to this kind of nasty music?” “How can you wear these bright colored clothes all the time? If I were you...” “One day you will see!” “When I was your age I never...!” Are these the sentences that you say often? If the answer is yes, really think about what you want to achieve by saying these things. It is the most irritating and the least effective way of communication. Try to avoid that kind of sentence as often as possible, unless you want to be perceived as a hunchbacked grumpy old aunt with a never-ending headache, chronic back pain and a fiery hatred for cute, small animals.

Being “The Talker”

Maybe you have a tendency for too many frequent, excessive utterances, meaning that your mouth rarely shuts. On one hand, it can be a feature of your openness, knowledge or high intelligence. On the other hand, such need for a constant self-expression can be overwhelming for others.

This feature is rarely required in everyday situations (only sometimes, when you first meet someone, when they’re shy and you want to kick start the talk) and makes it difficult to receive genuine info about other people (and also feedback about yourself) during the conversation. Too much excessive talking from your side can be discouraging in the early stages of relationships and too often you may wonder why a selling transaction was cancelled or why somebody avoids contacting you. It feels like hanging out with a parrot or an actor

rehearsing his annoying monologue for the fiftieth time before a big play. This was my big obstacle and the reason I was able to date many nice girls back in my high school days, but without a chance for a second or third meeting. I simply talked way too much and rarely listened to them and it took me many wrecked first impressions and sleepless nights to figure that out. They probably felt like they were having dinner or a walk with a TV screen. Many men have problems with that. Even today I can talk A LOT and once I start firing words, I often have to force myself to stop, thinking, “Easy, you will have time to say all these things, but not yet. You are not here alone! Chill out, dude.”

People Who Don't Let You Speak

Opposite to above, you may have a tendency for submission in relationships with others. Do you have the impression that others are not interested in your opinion? Do you often find yourself in situations where your interlocutor takes advantage of your attention and does not let you speak? Think about the reason beneath such situations.

Maybe you have a bad opinion about yourself (“I have nothing interesting to say”). Maybe you are afraid of other people's reactions when you want to interrupt a conversation or simply add to it. Do not let that happen. You have the same right to speak as others have. If you feel badly during a conversation (someone is overwhelming you by their talking), just stop them, politely tell them about it or try to change the subject. Don't waste your time and energy.

The key phrase is, “So, you're telling me...” It's a great navigational tool to use in conversations with people who tend

to often jump from one topic to another and talk about one hundred different things in a matter of few minutes. I have this business partner who tends to lose track often in his conversations. He really is a big talker. If you took him to a business meeting and asked him to quickly tell you how he got into the retail business and what his background was, he would tell you something like: “Well, that’s an interesting question. In 1979, I was a military school dropout. Before that, I originally wanted to become a pilot because I always wanted to be paid for playing with grown-man toys, and you know, the military planes are so fascinating. I don’t know if you’ve heard about the new project for US army stealth-planes, but they can fly above the stratosphere and they’re equipped with the newest...” and then he would tell you everything he knows about military, soldiers, their families, their friends and dogs. He would probably love to tell you a story longer than all nine seasons of *How I Met Your Mother* put together.

What you need to do to politely interrupt in that situation is to take any of the last sentence that person said and repeat it back, prefacing it with, “So, you’re telling me.” So if my friend got to that point, I would tell him something like: “So, you’re telling me that these new planes can fly really high, right?”

And normally when you say something like that to people, they respond with saying, “Yes, I was telling you that...but why did you ask me?” and then they go back right on the track. “Ah yes, I’m a mechanical engineer.” Or if they forget the original question, you just need to repeat it and they get right to the answer you wanted to hear, but they are not offended that you are interrupted them, because you

interrupted them while showing that you are listening to them carefully at the same time. As an effective communicator, you will sometimes have to lead the conversation where it needs to go.

Comforting Words

There is nothing wrong with comforting someone, at least at first glance. When we comfort someone, we have good intentions. We want to show that a certain situation isn't as bad as they might think and it will get better. But clichés like: "Don't worry, there will be a new day tomorrow," "Others may be in a worse situation than you are," or a very common saying, "Keep your head up!" usually bring exactly the opposite effect. These sentences usually show a low level of communication abilities. Remove them from your list of usual reactions. What you can do instead is this simple process: first of all, acknowledge what this person is feeling and why. That might be, for example: "Really?! That's a horrible thing to have to go through!" That's what people expect to hear rather than, "It's not bad," or, "Don't worry," which would mean they are exaggerating, overreacting or creating an artificial problem. The next thing you should say instead of using clichéd phrases is something like: "I just want you to know I'm here for you and I will be here for you until you overcome this situation," or, "Know that you can count on me if it ever happens to you again."

Losing Focus

Do you often find yourself distracted when listening to others? Perhaps it is also difficult for you to stay concentrated or focus on something for longer periods of time? Maybe you

often show your impatience non-verbally. If that's the case, you should dedicate a good bit of time to improving your focus.

By mastering the ability of concentration on what other people say to you, you get more valuable information. This enables you to focus on the real benefits of connecting with others and also allows you to be there, in the moment, which not only makes you much more likeable, but also more effective as a communicator. Thanks to this, you also make an impression of a trustworthy and understanding person and thereby, you build deeper relationships with others.

Let's now quickly recap what you just learned about basic communication obstacles. To communicate effectively and avoid distraction tendencies mentioned above, you have to remember some basic rules:

1. Do not judge others; try to separate your own interpretations from what your interlocutor really said.
2. Listen patiently to the entire conversation and paraphrase often—the latter makes you rehearse what you have just been told and keeps your mind from wandering away. Not only that, but it also creates a very good impression of a genuine listener.
3. Instead of handing out advice all the time, pay attention and show readiness to find something interesting in your conversation.
4. Give people you talk to a chance to show their beliefs, even if they are quite different to yours. Do

not show disapproval in the form of moralizing, such as “Not bad, but when I was your age...,” or, “But I would do it differently and more efficiently,” etc.

5. Try to notice your interlocutor’s subtle emotional reactions (you have to actually look at them when you talk) to know if your utterances are overly expanded or not.
6. Remember that you have the same right to express yourself as everyone else. If you feel overwhelmed, don’t stop yourself from telling people who talk too much that you disapprove of this.
7. Instead of comforting with cheesy clichés, just learn to show interest and approval to your interlocutor.
8. Work on your concentration (e.g. by applying regular [meditation](#) and relaxation techniques), and endeavor to understand other people’s real intentions.
9. If possible, communicate face to face. Nowadays, we have a plague of Facebook and e-mail quarrels, serious arguments and even break-ups. When you don’t see who you’re talking to, you can’t recognize their emotions. Written communication is also often dishonest: people accuse somebody of something or offend them and read the answer whenever they want to (or never), not giving the other person a chance for a direct reaction. Poor and weak...but unfortunately more and more common. It’s so easy to hide beneath your computer screen, but it’s hard to say these things face to face.

There is a saying, “Everybody wants to grow, but nobody wants to change.” When it comes to communication abilities, it is worth the effort to open oneself for such a change.

The oldest public opinion research institute in the world, Gallup Institute, conducted a very interesting survey. It concerned the most irritating and nerve-wracking speaking habits. Below, I would like to show you the results the research gained, from the least irritating to the most irritating factor:

Place 11. Speaking with a foreign accent

Place 10. Too high-pitched tone, squeaky voice

Place 9. Grammar mistakes or incorrect pronunciation of words

Place 8. Rapid talking

Place 7. Groaning, nasal speaking voice

Place 6. The use of fillers like “eeeer,” “uhmm,” “you know” (It’s a common illness; people are usually just afraid to take a pause and allow themselves to be totally silent for a while, which is a lot better than constant “uuhmmm”-ing and “you know”-ing.)

Place 5. Colorless, bland and monotonous speaking manner or voice

Place 4. Very loud talking

Place 3. Muttering or overly quiet talking

Place 2. Swearing or frequent usage of extremely explicit vocabulary

Place 1. Interrupting when someone else is talking

So we have another important obstacle, the final one.

Despite someone's irritating voice, swearing or muttering, it is **INTERRUPTING** which is **THE MAIN VERBAL FACTOR** beneath **IRRITATION AND UNSUCCESSFUL CONVERSATIONS**.

Your conversation should look like talking on a **walkie-talkie** or **CB radio** in the car. **When one person talks, the other one listens**. When one side pushes the "transmit" button and also starts talking, they obviously won't be able to hear what their interlocutor has just said and might have lost important information about what's on the road ahead of them. Every time you talk to someone, try to remind yourself of the "CB radio" example.

These bad verbal habits are often a significant barrier in our everyday conversations. If you avoid them whenever you can, you will see a huge improvement in your social life and career.

Now, take a quick look at all these obstacles again and ask yourself if you can recognize your patterns of speaking in them. Do as much as you can to eliminate them forever.

Chapter 7:

Five Most Basic and Crucial Conversational Fixes

Let me now expand a little bit on what we learned in the previous chapter and tell you about the five most powerful and easy-to-apply conversational improvements you need to start using.

Stop for a Moment

One of the most basic and crucial things to do, which most people aren't doing in conversations, is to PAUSE before replying. A short pause (2-5 seconds) after a person stops talking is a very smart and savvy thing to do. When you pause, you accomplish three goals at the same time.

First of all, you avoid the risk of interrupting if the person is just taking a breath before continuing. The second benefit is that you show the other person that you're taking careful consideration by not jumping in with your own comments at the earliest opportunity. The last benefit is that you actually hear the other person better. The words will soak into a deeper level of your mind and you will understand what they are really saying with greater clarity. By pausing, you mark yourself as a great person to talk to.

Ask for Clarification

Another tactic you can utilize in order to greatly improve your communication skills is to ask for clarification. Never

assume that you fully understand what the other person is saying. Instead, if you have any doubt at all, ask: “What do you mean,” or, “What do you mean exactly?” Then just pause and wait.

It’s one of the biggest assets I know to lead and control a conversation. When you ask “What/how do you mean?”, the other person can’t stop himself or herself from answering more extensively. You can then follow up with other open-ended questions and keep the conversation going.

Paraphrase

Another very good idea is to paraphrase the speaker’s words in your own words. You can nod and smile and then say, “Let me see if I understand you correctly. What you’re saying is this...”—and then you repeat it back in your own words.

By paraphrasing the speaker’s words you’re demonstrating that you’re genuinely paying attention and making every effort to understand his or her thoughts and feelings. It’s also the best way to politely interrupt and lead the conversation back on the right track.

Listen More, Talk Less

You need to know that listening builds trust. The more you listen to another person, the more they trust and believe in you. Listening also builds self-esteem—when you’re listening to somebody, their self-esteem will naturally increase. They will feel more valuable, respected and just better overall about themselves. Finally, listening will also build your focus; your mind can process words at 500-600 words per minute, but we can only talk at about 150 words per minute. It takes effort to keep your thoughts focused on other people’s words. If you do

not practice [self-discipline](#) in conversation, your mind will wander in a hundred different directions. In other words, by learning to listen well, you actually develop your own character and your own personality.

Three-Second Look

This one is actually a useful addition to the “stop for a moment” fix, which you can use in many different situations. When you suspect that someone is not telling you the entire truth, hiding something or stretching the facts, you need to just stop talking. After they finish their sentence, look them directly and deeply into the eyes, for three seconds non-stop, completely silent. You can also tilt your head a little bit forward. Since we are programmed and conditioned to deal with this kind of pressurized situation rather badly and lying can be very difficult, it usually ends in your interlocutor breaking down and telling you the truth, giving more details, etc. It can be also used when dealing with difficult people, for example, when you don't want to answer their nosy questions.

Chapter 8:

How to Deal with Difficult People

Dealing with difficult people is extremely important, especially in the corporate world or any other kind of professional life. It's most important not only in every day life, but when you can't afford to simply ignore them.

In this chapter you are going to read about the most popular types of difficult people and how to deal with them easily and professionally, like the polished communicator you want to be. Let us start with the most important principles you should always keep in your mind:

1. **Avoid trying to change these people.** First of all, their behavioral patterns are usually well-rooted and it would require at least a few psychotherapy sessions to change their behavior. So, unless you are an experienced psychotherapist or hypnotherapist, don't try it. It's a little bit like an amateur trying to dismantle a bomb: ineffective and careless. Moreover, even the best professional in the world can't change someone who doesn't want to be changed and doesn't allow it. All you can do is to point out the annoying behavioral pattern, but it's not your job to transform these people.

2. **Set your boundaries.** You need to let these people know that you will respect them, but you also want to be treated with respect and won't accept anything else. Don't tolerate shouting and pathological arguments in public situations or other forms of disrespect. If necessary, tell them that you need to remove yourself from the situation and just leave. A good idea might also be to wait until they calm down and are ready to talk more temperately. Teach and condition others how to treat you and never settle for less than you deserve.
3. **Remember different mental maps and positive intentions behind every behavior.** Even though you don't agree with someone's viewpoint, you need to realize that there must be some reason behind their annoying actions. Realize that it must be difficult to be stuck in such a negative situation with anger and other bad emotions. Empathy is helpful if you want to deescalate a frenzied situation. Sometimes all these people want is to be heard or paid undivided attention. They just lack the skills to communicate it in an effective way. Also, don't take things personally. These people's behaviors show their own level of self-development, [emotional intelligence](#) and communication skills, not yours. They might be tired, traumatized or in the middle of a difficult life situation.
4. **Don't talk too much.** When dealing with difficult people and their irritating behaviors, it's often a good idea to make your verbal messages brief and concise.

You should also have a timeframe in your head and know how long you're willing to be a part of a discussion. Instead of talking about things like "attitude" (it might be taken as a personal offense), focus on certain behaviors these people represent.

5. **Focus on behavior, not people.** Instead of saying things like, "Michael, you are a liar!", rather say, "Michael, we both know that what's been said is far from reality." Having said that, you should always use a passive voice when having difficult conversations. Instead of telling someone what you want them to do, say what you want to have done, e.g., "Michael, I need that report done by the end of the day!", not, "Michael, you need to finish the report by the end of the day!" Active voice: here's what you did to me. Passive voice: here's what was done to me.
6. **Focus on the most crucial things.** When you are facing the behavior of difficult people, they always want you to engage with them in a way they imagined or are used to. When someone does not fall into their pattern, they usually get off their beaten track. Remember: don't take their bait and never engage more than you have to. What gets rewarded gets repeated. Another important thing is to often use the broken record technique, using exactly the same words/phrases, which sends the clear signal: "I'm not easy to throw off my game. I know how to stay on message."

7. Use **“difficult people” silver bullets**. First and foremost, use boundary statements. They are usually based on, “Would you like A or would you like B (you can’t have both)?” In this instance, when somebody is trying to get your help while being verbally aggressive, you might say, “Sir, I do want to help you and address your problem, but not if you’re going to keep your voice raised.” Then, you would use the so-called empowering statement, e.g., “Would you like to take a few minutes before we continue our conversation or have a cup of tea? Are you ready to continue now?” Another smart thing to do is to use the so-called “preemptive attack,” which comes down to alerting someone that what you’re going to say is going to aggravate the person a little bit. The more you jump around and try to hide it, the more difficult it will be for you to eventually say and as hard to acknowledge for your conversation partner. The more you warn your interlocutor that what you’re saying is difficult, the less difficult it will be for them. So you can say, “I’m terribly sorry Mr. Smith. I know it will be extremely frustrating for you, but your car won’t be ready today. We will have to lend you a different model and your car will be ready tomorrow morning.” That lets the person know that you understand the situation is bad and also saves you even more frustration by the end of conversation. The last wise thing to do is to validate people, even the difficult ones. Even phrases like, “I can see why,” “I understand you were really angry,” or, “Oh, that’s really bad!” can be helpful (unless you

say something like, “I understand exactly how you feel”—no, you don’t!). Ability to validate anyone in your conversations while being truthful is a great communication skill, not only useful to deal with difficult people.

8. **You can also use suggestions.** For example: “Bob, if we do XYZ, how do you think it might affect you?” By saying this, you show people you are interested in their opinion. Often there’s much tension relieved when we let people express their thoughts. People become much more open when they know you are really listening and paying attention to what they think. When you get the answer, you should say something like: “If I understand you correctly, you think (here use the same words they spoke). I considered that and here’s how I see it...” At the end, you need to quickly add, “Does that make sense?” By doing that you show that you too have been thinking about alternative solutions and resolving the conflict, that their idea is one worth considering and that you are interested in their opinion. It permits the person to say if they agree or not and opens the communication process to more constructive discussion. That’s something always worth trying.

Another important thing is body language. You can’t send a firm message while your body is sending signals that you are being passive. Here’s what you need to remember in this context.

- Find your tone of power. Here's how you do that: simply look down at your feet and go, "Mmmhmmmm." This sound should be resonating, strong and firm. When you localize it, you need to speak in a slow and steady tone. When you speak too quickly, you project an image of uncertainty and nervousness. People tend to listen more when you speak slowly. You also want to keep your tone within a small range, without going up and down too much. Of course, that only applies to difficult conversations, not your everyday chit-chats!
- Keep your head straight—don't tilt it. That's what dogs and other pets do when they want to show you they are playful and harmless. That's the same message you are sending when you tilt your head to the side. If you don't want to project an image of someone who's soft and easy to take advantage of, you want to lean slightly forward with your shoulders back and your chest out. You may also want to shift your head forward a little bit.
- Keep your eye contact. In normal conversations, you don't want to maintain eye contact for longer than 7 seconds, but during difficult conversations, you should maintain it much more intensely, which is going to send a message that you are strong and hard to knock down verbally.
- Get rid of physical things standing between you and the person you are communicating with. Physical obstacles contribute to conversational barriers.

Again, remember that these bullet points are about difficult conversations, not normal communication.

How to Fully Disengage

Imagine you are dealing with a difficult customer, your annoying boss or anyone else who is just eating at you and has gotten you off track. If you really want to let that go, instead of saying to yourself, “Let that go. Surrender to the moment. I’m at peace,” which may be effective, but not in this kind of situation, you want to do this simple 3-step process. First of all, you want to start with disengaging physically. Many people grab a coffee, a cigarette, or a beer, for example, and then turn on the TV. Don’t do that! Go for a walk! If you can find a place to stretch or do a few pushups, do it immediately! Go for a bike ride or exercise for fifteen minutes. If you do it on a daily basis, you will notice that after you finish, you will feel differently. Exercise forces your body to release endorphins, which makes you feel good. Then, you need to disengage mentally. Begin with asking yourself, “What are the objective facts?” Then ask what your role and their role in this matter are, as well as what options you have. For instance, “They called me an imbecile!” That’s their role. What’s your role in this? If you think, “My role is nothing,” you’re wrong. It might be, “In fact, I believe what they said,” or, “I feel disrespected and humiliated. I don’t understand them,” or, “I got too emotional and acted like a silly kid, throwing names back at them and now I feel dumb.” That’s your role in this. Lastly, consider your options. It might be, “I can just ignore it,” “I can honestly talk to them about what happened,” or, “I can stop seeing them,” or, “I can just decide that it’s OK they are calling me that, it’s not really my problem.” Once you have

done that, you can disengage verbally. Most people can't disconnect from the problem at all. They store all the painful things inside them, take them home, watch TV with them, eat dinner with unfortunate events, then go to bed, keeping them under their pillow. And it's not a funny thing. When you remember these two steps, you can really change your behavior for the better. When you want to disengage verbally, always remember the different maps and the principle of good intentions. Remember that in fact, these people are innocent. It may sound silly, but the person who it helps most is really you. It's much easier to communicate effectively when you take these two simple steps beforehand and remember positive intentions and different mind maps.

Coping with Passive-Aggressive People (The Snipers)

We've all had or will have to deal with passive-aggressive people at some point in our lives. Whenever someone is picking on your specific behavior, giving you mean comments hidden behind snarky lines or a "joke," attacking you verbally using seemingly polite words and sugar-coating their offenses, they are being passive-aggressive. Some people do it from time to time without bad intentions, but some act this way too often. Back in the day when I was working in an HR department, I bought myself a pair of cool marine-blue suit pants. I liked to wear them on special occasions, such as company meetings. There was one typically passive-aggressive guy named Christian who would always pick on them and say something like, "Hey Ian, how's your work in the car repair shop?" For a while it was quite funny and I didn't think repairing cars was a bad thing to do. However, he never stopped teasing me about it and it became more and

more annoying. After two or three times, he would start asking me if I was going to change his tires, then he went even further and started calling me “lost postman,” “fired mechanic” and “delivery boy.” What I didn’t know then was **you should always call these people out on their abusive behavior.** If they say mean things in public (and that’s what they usually do), you need to address their behaviors in public. If you don’t, they will continue doing it more and more aggressively. These people usually have an issue of some sort with you, but they are either too scared and not strong enough to say it directly to you or they can’t do it in a given situation. Here’s what you should do:

1. Repeat what they said.
2. Clarify their behavior.
3. Ask a closed question to confirm or deny their intentions.

When that “blue pants” thing happened again, this time at a business conference in front of our entire department, I looked at him with a serious tone and facial expression and asked him, “Christian, when you asked me again at which discount store I bought my suit pants and told me I looked like a delivery boy, what I’m thinking is that you are trying to belittle me in front of our co-workers. Is that what you are trying to do?” You simply want to repeat their behavior, clarify their intentions (“Was that your true intention?”, “Is that what you wanted to do here?”, etc.) and then ask them a closed question (yes/no) to call them on their actions and make them either confirm or deny their intention in a clear and professional way. These three simple steps tell these people

that you're not going to engage in their "jokes," nor let them get away with what they are doing one more time.

Christian blushed, become awkwardly silent for a few seconds and said, "Oh... I'm really sorry, it was just this joke we had, you know..." Well, I didn't know. I just gave him a three-second silent look. Then he shut up for the rest of our meeting and never picked on me like that again. Of course, this was a professional situation and this guy was rather smart (he was probably jealous for some reason, maybe because I was given better projects). It's also possible that if you ask, "Are you trying to insult me?" someone replies something like, "YOU BET I AM!" As long as that person isn't actively aggressive, threatening you, etc., the best way to answer it is to ask, "Interesting, why would you do that?" and then go from there. People who ask more questions have more perceived power in the relationship than those who answer them.

Coping with Nosy and Challenging People

There are many kinds of annoying and hard-to-deal-with behaviors in people. Let me tell you another work situation related story. In the very same office, there was this girl Kate. She was nice to talk to from time to time, but unfortunately, she never knew when to stop asking questions or where the boundaries were. Replies like, "Stop asking. I won't tell you," worked on her like red cloth works on a bull. Once, when I just finished talking to my boss on some strategic decisions in the HR department, she came to my cubicle and started asking me, "Why did she want to talk to you?" Obviously, it wasn't her business and I had a lot of work to do. Knowing this girl was very stubborn, inquisitive and much into gossiping, I didn't feel like giving her a report on my conversation with the

boss. The first time I ignored it and just kept typing on my computer. When she asked me her nosy question for the second time, I gave her the silent three-second look and asked her, “Why would you ask that?” “I’m just curious...” she replied. I smiled briefly and asked “...are you always this curious?” She got a bit surprised and then replied, “Well, uhmm, yes, usually.” Again, I looked directly into her eyes for three seconds without saying anything and said she got a little bit unsettled. Then I stared at my computer screen again and asked, “What were we talking about?” Normally, at this point, everyone would probably understand that I didn’t want to tell them anything, but she replied, “Huh? I just asked you what you and Isabelle were talking about.” Again, I gave her the three-second look and asked the same question, “Are you always this curious?” She replied “...but you just asked me and I just told you!” And I asked her back, “Well, what were we talking about?” Guess what? Yes (or “oooh noo!”)! She asked me again! So I asked her why would she ask that and if she was always this curious, she got perplexed, turned on her toes and finally left me alone. You just learned a perfect technique you can use to deal with nosy, stubborn and challenging people! Again, I wouldn’t advise you use it on your boss, but it will work with anyone on your level of the hierarchy. Don’t worry. Not all people are quite as stubborn as Kate was, but this little trick worked even on her. This persistent broken record technique is very frustrating and effective when it comes to this type of person. Again, all you need to do is ask something like, “Why would you ask that?”, then ask them a question regarding the answer they just gave you to make them taste their own sword and get them off their train of thought, e.g., “Is everything people do so interesting to

you?” (Mind you that this question shouldn't be aggressive or mean. Actually, being very polite is much more confusing and works a whole lot better). Then, when you get your “yes” or “no” you ask, “What were we talking about?” to either change the topic or totally confuse the challenging person.

Coping with “Judges”

We all know people who feel the urgent need to judge others and make everybody listen to their comments on everyone and everything around them. Sometimes it might be a good idea to simply ignore it (non-reactive people have more power in social relations), but sometimes enough is enough. Few know that dealing with this kind of person is actually not that difficult at all. All you have to do is repeat the judgement while super-exaggerating it and then ask a distorted clarifying question. This simple, yet effective trick is something I actually learned from my mother.

I remember when I was a teenager, my mum had this colleague from her work, Ms. Jacqueline, that she sometimes invited over for a coffee. She was a nice person overall, but very much into judging others and criticizing everything and everyone entirely too often. Once she made a mistake and commented on my behavior (“The music he listens to is really aggressive and difficult to get along with!”). Then, fifteen minutes later, she told my mum that my sister, who was several years older than me, should have been married long ago. My mum probably had enough of her judgements that day and she said, “When you say you believe my daughter should have been married a long time now, are you saying that she's too ugly or too dumb to find herself a decent man?” Ms. Jacqueline almost spilled her coffee on her pink dress, covered

her mouth with an open hand and replied, “No...oh! My dear! That’s not what I’m saying at all!” My mum just looked at her silently for a few seconds (I imagined laser beams firing from her irises) and then said, “By the way, it reminds me of that funny book I read in elementary school...” As far as I know, Ms. Jacqueline never commented on our family members again. You should’ve seen her face (I did as I was stealing their heavenly chocolate cookies)! I figured it out a few years later my mum actually used one of the most effective social-dynamic techniques without even knowing it.

That’s what you can do when you feel that you are struggling with someone’s annoying judgements. Repeat what they said and ask a clarifying question, exaggerating the whole thing. Then, give the person a clear three-second look and change the topic saying something like, “Now that you mention it, it reminds me of...” Again, you want to remain calm (or at least act like you are) and polite, but be straightforward and serious (don’t say it like their judgements are a funny joke). With some hard-case people you may have to do it two or three times, but believe me when I say they will get the message. That’s the perfect way of dealing with these people in an eloquent, polished and effective non-aggressive way.

Coping with “The Exploder”

The fancy sounding “Exploder” is a name for people who often lose their temper, yell and scream at other people or are just rude and nasty in general. People act like that for many different reasons, but usually it’s because in the past, when they acted like that, other people would get intimidated and give them what they wanted. The number one reason difficult

people are difficult is because it's **working** for them. The best technique you want to have in your pocket is called "DTU" – "Do the Unexpected." When aggressive people shout, get intense and into your face, they either expect you to start shouting back at them (usually not a good solution) or surrender and give up. When you do something else, they usually snap and lose their temper. One good idea is...to actually agree with them. This is one of the best "silver bullets" you can use when it comes to dealing with this kind of verbally aggressive person. Let's say that you are working in a bank and one of your clients comes to you, yelling that his two dollars disappeared from his bank account due to some kind of online error. He says that he's so upset, it's thievery, a scandal, that he will call the police, the military and an exorcist and sue you and all your family if you don't give him his two bucks. The best thing you can do in this kind of situation is to say something along the lines of, "Yes sir, you are right. I agree that two dollars is a substantial loss and an unacceptable error..." What you would do here is look for some nugget of rationality in their exploding madness. While remembering that everyone is using different mental maps, moral values and acting according to different beliefs, you need to realize that behind all of their unreasonable communication, they are usually upset about something that's easy to be upset about. When they start exploding, they normally expect a fight. By agreeing with them, you show them you are on their side, which allows you to solve the problem much faster.

Naturally, if you have these people in your social circle as colleagues or friends, you should do everything to avoid them as often as possible, if you can afford that.

If you really need to disagree with them, start by agreeing (finding bits of rationality in their aggression, like stated above) and then, once they calm down, disagree constructively. If it's possible, you can put the blame/responsibility on someone else. For example, say, "If my boss was here, he might say..." and then express your disagreement. Then, ask a question. "How would you solve this problem?" or, "What would be the perfect solution for you here?" Listen to their answer and say something along the lines of, "Your idea is interesting, but I cannot agree with (repeat the exact spot of disagreement using their words)." For instance: "Your idea is creative and inspiring, but I cannot agree that five hundred dollars as compensation would be a good fit for both sides of this dispute. We don't have to agree on everything, though, and we can work out another mutually agreeable solution, can't we?" Adding the "Can't we?" is very important. Then you need to stop and listen again. Push the idea that you can agree to and still get along, avoiding the disagreement and moving onto something more constructive and desirable.

Coping with "The Diverter"

Anyone constantly trying to divert your attention from the subject at hand to what everyone else does, etc. is called a "diverter." It could be a person in your company who usually says something along the lines of, "In my previous company we used to do this differently," or, "With our previous manager, we never..." It can also be a teenager who wants to go to a party and when you don't allow it you hear something like, "But Jack's parents allow him to go!!" The solution here

is simple. You need to remember this simple script: “The subject here is not XYZ; the subject is...”

So for example, you might say: “The subject here is not what you did in your previous company; the subject is how we are going to deal with this project...” or, “We are not talking about Jack’s parents and their parenting methods; we are talking about how far away that party is from our home and your big exam tomorrow.” Of course, these people might also say different things like, “We could do that project better if only we had more people/more funds etc.,” but it’s essentially the same meaning. Again, you need to use “the subject is not” technique. So, in this instance you might reply, “I agree with that, but the subject is not what we could do with more funds we don’t have right now. We are discussing what we can do in our actual position.” Very simple, yet effective.

Coping with “The Steamroller (or Tank)”

Also called “hostile aggressive” by psychologists, steamrollers are people who try to run over you to get what they want. They try to overwhelm, bully and intimidate other people, often throwing in cutting remarks. They are mean and rude to you, intentionally and directly, verbally offending you and sometimes even threatening you, which sets them apart from “exploders”. It’s another type of person you shouldn’t hang around with, but if you can’t avoid it, here are some tips that will help you deal with this most difficult type of person. First of all, you need to remember that what these people are trying to do is to make you angry and lift your emotions to their level. You can’t let them do it. You need to keep eye contact, stay calm and assertive. A good idea is to let them go and go at the beginning, allowing them to unwind. When they

grow a little bit tired of attacking you, it's time to interrupt them. Imagine a boxer who is used to receiving lots of punches in his chest and stomach, just to make his opponent exhausted and then—bang—KO! Let the steamroller wear themselves out a little bit and then call them on their behavior. “Michael, wait a minute. I've been listening to you and now it's time for you to listen to what I have to say.” Once you say something like this, they will probably...interrupt. You need to remain assertive and interrupt back. “Hey, I said hold on. I've been listening to what you have to say and and now it's my turn.”

A very important thing is to determine whether this person normally acts like that or if they're just now becoming extremely upset about something very stressful to them and want you to listen. If it's not their normal behavior, you should sometimes just listen and open yourself to a constructive dialogue. You need to also ask yourself whether there was a particular event that might have triggered their aggressive behavior. Usually you are not responsible for the actions and frustrations of steamrollers, even though they believe so, and you don't have to tolerate their rude behavior. When you can afford it, sometimes a good idea is to just ignore them without engaging and walk away, but if you can't, you need to turn conflict into communication. Again, here's how you do it:

- Give them enough time to run down.
- Grab their attention. You don't have to be overly polite or mean. Instead, be assertive and abrupt. Speak up loud enough, from your diaphragm. Call them by using their first name, if possible and appropriate. Hold your head up so that your chin is pointed upwards. Straighten yourself

up, hold your arms back and your chest up. Maintain eye contact.

- Try to get them to sit down. If you are seated when they get into the room, stand up to be on their level.

- State your opinion boldly, but not aggressively like they do. Use the facts.

- Avoid engaging, arguing or trying to get them down. Just express your opinion and do everything you can to end the conversation as soon as possible.

Coping with “The Complainer”

Positive-minded people see the world this way: It’s not very sunny today. At least I won’t get sunburn again and won’t have to use air conditioning. I guess I will stay home and read a great book!

Negative-minded people see the world this way: The weather sucks. It’s cold, cloudy and I feel sleepy.

The Complainers see world this way: Oh no! The weather is horrible again! I wanted to take a walk, but now I’ll end up cold and wet and I’ll catch the flu for the fourth time this year. I will have to spend a few days in bed and it’s boring! I will also have to spend lots of my hard-earned money to buy medication and maybe visit the doctor! This summer sucks! How the hell am I supposed to enjoy it? It’s so dark I can’t even read without feeling sleepy. There’s nothing interesting to do around here! And Bob just left town to visit his family and...

This type of person will always find a good reason to complain and will find a defect in everything. They will often want to make you believe it’s your fault. By putting you on the defensive, they shift the responsibility for their own actions

and emotions upon you. Here's how to deal with their endless whining and dragging everyone else's emotions down.

First of all, you need to realize what things don't work with complainers:

- Offering a solution/giving your advice or addressing their problem directly – they will usually start whining about your solution, the action they have to take, your attitude or about anything else on this planet.
- Trying to cheer them up or telling them to get it together – supposing their problem is trivial one way or another (even if it really is!) is highly ineffective.
- Complaining or criticizing their whining – see bullet point number one.
- Ignoring them – it will just cause the complaints to accumulate and then explode at you at once when you eventually meet them again.

Here's what works:

1. Instead of rolling your eyes or ignoring them, let them know you're listening and seeing their problem. Something as simple as, "Yeah, traffic jams can be really intense and annoying sometimes!" can prove very helpful both for you and them.
2. Complainers don't want to be cheered up. They want your attention and your empathy. Remember to be sincere when you say these things. If you're sarcastic or making fun out of it, the effect will be opposite.

3. Remembering that everyone sees this world through different mental filters, you don't have to agree that their problems are big, but remember that something seemingly small to you might indeed be a big problem to someone else, depending on their life situation, previous experiences, values brought from home, etc. So you don't want to state that their problem isn't a problem or that it's enormous. Simply acknowledge that there's a problem they are struggling with (even if you think there isn't one or that it wouldn't be a problem for you). You need to let them know that you understand and acknowledge what they have said, but you shouldn't actively agree with them. It would just make them feel justified and sometimes shift the responsibility for their emotions to you.
4. Listening and acknowledging their problem might not be a perfect fix to stop their complaints once and for all, but it surely slows things down, prevents the negative energy from accumulating and gives both you and them some initial relief.
5. You need to be ready to interrupt them. Listen, understand their concern and then stop their utterance in a civil, polite, but confident manner.
6. If there's a need, provide them with facts. State them without any comments, apologies or additional remarks.
7. If it's a workplace or a professional situation, you need to come up with practical questions and then

proceed to problem solving. Complainers very often put their focus and attention on the past, but if you assign them a specific task they could do, it can often help. You can say something along the lines of, “Yes, these young guys from the marketing department can often get extremely annoying. I know exactly what you mean, but I hope you can endure it, soldier, because we totally have to have this project completed before five!”

8. Finish the utterance as soon as possible, politely letting them know that you have to get back to your things.
9. Remember that even everyday complainers sometimes come across things that are very hard to cope with, so if you think someone might struggle with something and their complaints are legitimate, you can show your empathy, followed by brief and targeted advice. In this case, it will probably be appreciated.

How to Stay on Track

Do you know the feeling when someone throws a cog into the wheels of your conversation, presentation or idea? When we're not trained in the art of effective communication, it's very easy to put us off, disarm our arguments or discourage us verbally from doing something. You need to be persistent in your message to achieve what you want. You need to show that you are not just another scared newbie, but a polished and effective communicator.

The ideas I will tell you about will instantly boost your self-confidence in situations where you are making a request for something, presenting your ideas or sharing your opinion in team projects. We let other people twist us in different directions just because we lack the tools to block their evasive answers. “The tools” really come down to three very simple and effective phrases, which you can use when something is trying to get you off track. The three universal skeleton-key phrases are:

- That may be, but...
- I understand, however...
- I see your point and...

You need to use them in front of your reply and then repeat the exact same words you said previously. Let’s say that you are brainstorming the direction of your business with your partners and want to change your product’s graphic design as you are certain that a change is needed at this point. You say, “Listen guys, we need to change our website because it’s not easy to use for our customers. It looks like it stayed in the 90’s, loads slowly and shouts, ‘DON’T BUY OUR PRODUCTS’ directly in our customers’ faces,” to which one of your colleagues rolls his eyes and responds, “But we just changed it five years ago!” Then you need to respond, “I see your point, but we need to change our website because it’s not easy to use for our customers.” And he says, “Oh, you are being so very innovative these days, aren’t you?” You say, “That may be, but we need to change our website because it’s not easy to use for our customers.” And then he says: “You know we’ll have to pay someone to do this?” And you, keeping your calm, collected and professional attitude use the phrase again: “I

understand, however we need to change our website because it's not easy to use for our customers.” This broken record technique, along with these three skeleton-key phrases used in a row send a clear message: “Don't do that, man. I know what I want to achieve and it won't be so easy to put me off. I'm an effective communicator, not another scared little kid who's easy to distract.”

Again, take note that I won't advise using it with people who are above you in the hierarchy. Your boss is an example (of course it depends on the person and context, but you may want to balance pros and cons of doing it first), although it's extremely useful with people from the same level of the social ladder, having similar power and influence as you or people who don't have any power over you and are just trying to distract you from your goal for some reason.

Keep in mind that these strategies are no magic bullets. Yes, they can be extremely helpful, but since everyone is different, you need to view them more as a general rule of thumb. You need to learn these strategies and practice them until you feel comfortable using them in everyday situations. You can use them to cope with many difficult personalities in your life and gain more self-control, as well as social control, in many different situations.

The problem of coping with difficult and toxic people is as wide of a subject as psychology and sociology themselves. I will probably write another whole book exclusively on this complex topic, where I'm going to cover all types of difficult people distinguished by modern psychology with comprehensive descriptions, strategies and action steps. For now, the strategies and ideas I gave you on the most common

difficult personality types will surely prove to be a great help in your everyday communication!

When someone does something mean to you, it's about them. When they do it another time, **it's usually about you.** Let me clarify: when people do something annoying over and over and over again, it's about you, because you are allowing that. What are you doing to reward their behavior? There must be something. Look for that and try to ask yourself how you are rewarding their mean actions. It's difficult, but we can always do it when we know where to start. We begin with ourselves. Changing your behavior is the most effective thing you can do to better deal with difficult people, as well as all other kinds of people, for that matter.

Chapter 9:

Phrases to Purge from Your Dictionary (and What to Substitute Them With)

In both work situations and at home, there are specific “phrases of highly ineffective communication” in our verbal repertoire which need to be eliminated completely and substituted with different, wiser and harmless phrases. Many of them are so popular in our culture that you might be surprised to find you’re using them on a daily basis. Let me now tell you about the most detrimental and useless things you could be saying in casual and professional situations and what to exchange them for.

Casual Situations/At Home/Relationships:

1. This one is big. I’m sure almost everyone has had the opportunity to hear it at some point in their lives. Yes, I’m talking about the infamous, cheesy and cliché “We need to talk” phrase. First of all, it creates lots of unnecessary tension even before the beginning of the conversation. Second of all, it has a very serious connotation in our culture, so instead of having a more relaxed conversation, you will create a more stressful and uptight atmosphere. Third of all, it simply sounds stupid, like a cheap C-class TV soap opera from the 80’s my Grandma used to watch.

“Romeo Alejandro Maria Antonio Rodriguez, how could you cheat on me with Esmeralda Rosalia Julia Desgaldo for the fiftieth time this very season!? We need to talk!” But that’s my personal opinion. Point being, you really need to completely eliminate this phrase from your repertoire! What should you say instead? “I need your help.” People like to help. Did you know that we tend to like people who we’ve helped before more than those who we haven’t? That’s actually one of the techniques in social psychology—if you want someone to like you more, ask them to help you with a small task. When you express these feelings, you are triggering positive emotions in them and they feel needed. They will also concentrate better on what you are trying to convey. It’s a great start for a “serious conversation,” which doesn’t have to be perceived as such, being more relaxed and productive instead.

2. Another phrase which we often use when someone gets us off track, says something unexpected or acts out of character is, “What’s wrong with you?!” It’s a good phrase if you really want to make someone feel bad, but if you want to solve a problem or difficult situation instead of annoying or hurting people, you need to erase it. No one likes to admit that there’s something wrong with them, so don’t ask, “Are you damaged in some way?” Instead ask, “What’s bothering you?” Not only are you showing that you care about that person by saying this, but you’re also avoiding creating an even more stressful and neurotic

atmosphere. You're reframing the situation, pointing to a certain problem this person might have, rather than to what might be wrong with them as a person. If the person still acts mean or withdrawn and says, for example, "Nothing..." while rolling their eyes, depending on the situation, you could kindly say, for example, "Well, okay. Remember that if you want to talk with me about something, my door is always open for you." Of course, you can use different words, but you have to show that person that you are always there to listen to them. Sometimes you might receive a positive answer, e.g.: "Right... I'm just sleepy and irritated; I'm sorry for my grumpiness," or an answer pointing to a certain problem, "Yeah, always open for me, right! Last time I wanted to talk you just..." Either way, it gets you closer to the real problem and the solution.

3. Another crucial thing in our "Hall of Infamy," is a phrase which causes bad emotional response on a subconscious, biochemical level. It is: "You said *something*," or "But you just said..." Anytime you say something like this, you just make your interlocutor much more annoyed, irritated and angry. Remember the last time when someone tried to tell you that you did or said something you didn't? How did it feel? You probably instantly got pissed off or maybe even aggressive, right? The automatic response in your brain is resistance: "NOPE! I NEVER SAID THAT!" Even though you are 100% sure that person said something, it is always much

smarter, classier and more effective to say, “I heard/I understood *something*. Let me clarify what I just heard before I respond, alright?” Phrases like these can totally change the result you get.

4. Let’s now proceed to another cliché and very poor phrase which is very popular in our culture that we hear far too often. “It is what it is.” What does it even mean? Nothing. It’s empty, devoid of any meaning, hard to understand (especially for children) and a very annoying thing to say. You could just as well say, “Buttons, haircombs, dumplings, scissors,” “I like grapes so much,” or, “My pajamas are well starched!” If you don’t want to leave your interlocutors annoyed, confused and feeling ignored, you’re better off saying, for instance: “I believe it’s this way because it needs to be like that on this stage where we are right now,” or maybe, “I believe all things are the way they should be at the moment, to make us stronger and...” Do everything to delete meaningless “It is what it is” from your conversations, especially when there’s tension or stress involved. It’s a good thing to read in ancient Stoic philosophy scriptures, but not suitable for effective everyday communication.

5. Here’s the last one I’m going to tell you about in this book. Anytime you say, “That doesn’t make sense,” the message your speakers will often perceive is, “You don’t make any sense.” You really want to be more precise, at the same time avoiding stressful situations. Instead, say: “I don’t understand...” for

example: “I don’t understand what you mean exactly by saying that...”

Professional Situations:

Let me now tell you about phrases which are sometimes socially accepted, but not suitable for polished, savvy and effective communicators. If you want to be perceived as a professional and achieve your goals easier and faster, you also need to eliminate them from your repertoire. Let’s start with the first one:

1. “No problem!” How often do we hear it when someone does us a favor? In a shop, in the office, during a business meeting, etc.? While you might be surprised, as the phrase is extremely common in everyday life in English speaking countries (and not only), it actually implies that there was a problem attached to the thing they did (or we did). Since our brains don’t really understand and can’t perceive negations at subconscious level and because you don’t want to subconsciously communicate that there was or could be a problem with you doing someone a favor, it’s much better to simply say, “You’re welcome!” instead.
2. Very often, especially when being serviced at shops, we hear, “Do you want/do you need...?” (e.g.: “Do you want a bag?”). While you might think now, “I don’t understand. What’s wrong with saying it?” you have to know that, first of all, depending on the tone of voice and manner of speaking, “Do you need...” might be perceived as mean by some customers,

especially when the vendor is repeating it for the fiftieth time that day or is simply tired. Also, “Do you need” or “Do you want” sounds a little bit like a hidden remorse sometimes (stating that there’s a problem with someone wanting something again). Second of all, customers are often asked only about their preference, not additional service with the help of these questions—e.g. if they like sugar in their tea or coffee—they already paid for it, so it just boils down to their preference. Instead, it’s more universal and much more professional to say, “Would you like...?” Not only is it more kind, but also fits almost every situation possible.

3. Let’s cover another one. The word is: “Unfair”—NEVER EVER use it in your working environment. The brutal truth is “fair” has nothing to do with work environments (and never has). The same goes for life in general. Whenever you go to your superior and say, “I don’t believe I was treated fairly,” or, “I think I was treated unfairly,” what they most likely think is, “Yeah, life is not fair indeed, sweetie pie.” It’s the best way to be perceived as a soft and unprofessional person. Instead you should say, for example, “I don’t believe I was treated equally in this situation.” No one ever promised work will be fair or life will be fair, but most people are rather sensitive when it comes to equal rights and chances. That’s much more polished, suitable and useful in work situations and is less likely to lead to a failure.

4. Often, when we want to give our message more power, we use words like “really” or “very” as we think they will underline and bold our message, making it stronger or more influential. Very often it’s the other way around—it’s the elimination of words like “very” or “really” which makes our messages stronger and more polished. It’s a very common problem for a lot of women, as they tend to use these words more often in their verbal messages. Men do as well, just not as often. If you want to convey your messages more professionally in the workplace or in a business situation, stop using these words to supercharge what you’re saying (they end up vague or poor sounding instead) and compose simple straightforward messages instead. What sounds more serious: “It’s really dangerous!” or simply, “It’s dangerous”?
5. “I can’t deal with...” Never let anybody hear you saying that! It makes you appear as a helpless, neurotic or maybe even toxic “victim type” of person acting rather like a sulky teenager than an adult. It’s ten times better to say instead, “I’m struggling dealing with...” On the top of that, you should also add a question for a contribution to this problem. For instance, let’s say that you’re talking to your manager about your annoying colleague and how your team operates: “Listen, Bob, I’m really struggling to deal with Mark’s frequent unpredictable behaviors. Do you have some tips or advice for me on what can I do?” Not only does it show that you

are a problem solver, but also, instead of simply throwing your issues at other people, you ask them to contribute, which makes them feel needed and appreciated. It's a very professional and effective behavior.

6. Whenever someone is not behaving normally in a professional situation, you should avoid saying that they act "strange," "weird" or "funny." It can be perceived as a mean thing to say, even insulting (that's for sure), but moreover, that doesn't sound professional and can make that person start acting even more extreme. Additionally, it's just your opinion you're giving, which is not always wanted, needed or positively perceived in many different work situations. Anytime you see that someone's behavior is unusual and they are not acting "normally," it's much better to say, "I'm noticing a change from the regular pattern of so-and-so's behavior..." or something much more objective and diplomatic. This way you sound like a professional, not expressing your subjective opinion, but simply stating a fact.

7. Another thing on our list is "normal." The problem with this adjective is that it's very difficult to define and relate to. What does it mean nowadays? What type of business or what job is normal? What family model is normal? What appearance, what car, what type of relationship or what kind of career is normal? In most situations, we can't objectively say that. Moreover, it's polarizing. When you say someone is

normal, the other side of the coin is “not normal,” which could be offensive to some people. Instead, it’s much safer and smarter to say “average” or “usual.” It’s almost impossible to receive it wrong and misinterpret it and it’s much more specific, defined, and easier to relate to.

8. Now, the last one, and a little talk about the right attitude on top of that. In your utterances, you should change “Because...” to “Because I...” Let’s say that you lost your job and it’s hard to make a living now. You could say, “Because my boss fired me, I lost my job and now I am struggling to make a living and...” or, “Because of the bad economy, I lost my job and now I’m...” Instead, you should say, “Because I used to spend too much and failed to save enough money to make a living before I’m able to find a new job or start a business...” or, “Because I stopped developing myself and learning new things, my boss was able to find people with higher qualifications than mine who would work for the same money...” Apart from the fact that you might really hate your boss and your bad situation might really also be caused by the bad economy, doing so trains your brain **not to shift responsibility to other people and circumstances** and makes you **learn from your own mistakes**, shortcomings and imperfections instead. Remember: changing your verbal patterns also changes your mental patterns. Next time, when someone asks you why you are late, instead of shifting the responsibility and offering

stupid excuses they are not likely to believe anyway, change the “Because my car engine stopped...” to “Because I forgot to take care of my car previously...” Simple and yet difficult. But definitely a powerful thing to start doing today!

Chapter 10:

Verbal Dexterity

Language is a powerful instrument which gives us a lot of amazing opportunities. When used properly, it can lead your conversation wherever you want it to be, leave a great impression or influence your interlocutors' decisions.

In this chapter, you will learn about the patterns of linguistic dexterity, thanks to which you can easily change the way of thinking in most people. One of the most useful applications of these patterns is the changing of people's beliefs.

I want to tell you about so-called "sleight of mouth," which was created by Robert Diltsa. He decided to analyze Richard Bandler's (the creator of NLP – Neuro-Linguistic Programming) most frequent patterns in his verbal communication. He picked the ones he found the most effective and modified them, creating his own system. Now "The Sleight of Mouth" is used by therapists and coaches all over the world, mainly as an effective instrument for changing beliefs in a conversation.

Long story short, it's a set of fourteen language patterns, which you can use in practically every single conversation. These patterns are independent from each other and it's up to you to decide which will fit most in a particular situation.

Each pattern, in its own way, helps to extend the perspective and horizons of a person with whom you are talking and helps

them notice more opportunities. Hereby, with some practice, you can change your interlocutors' beliefs quite easily.

It gives you the possibility to help others when they are trapped in their limited way of seeing the world. Once you learn to use these patterns, you will have the ability to persuade people, that in addition to their limited perspective, there are also other, better options.

To make it easy for you to understand, I'm presenting all of the patterns as interpreted by me and slightly modified, with the example of three beliefs. You will now be able to empathize with contexts in which these techniques are most useful. At the end of this chapter, you will also find a few beliefs, which you can later work out by yourself.

Here are three detrimental beliefs, which we will be undermining by using the patterns:

- a) It is difficult to learn languages!*
- b) NLP is not appropriate for our company.*
- c) It is hard to make new friends.*

1. Hierarchy of Values

Connect a belief with some greater value.

- a) Imagine the freedom and plethora of new possibilities the ability to speak foreign languages can give you!*
- b) Let's focus on how NLP can help you to succeed in the market and totally crush it in your niche.*
- c) A little bit of effort put into meeting new people will give you a lot of happiness and joy.*

2. Intention

Change the intention of belief to a positive one.

a) That may also mean that the ability to learn new languages is very important and it is definitely worthwhile to gain it.

b) That's why it's the perfect opportunity for our company to finally open up to new ways of development.

c) It seems that this is the great opportunity to work on your own limits, at the same time getting to know some interesting and fun people.

3. Redefinition of Meaning

Change the meaning of the belief using different words, which cause a different reaction.

a) The fact that someone had been learning Spanish for so long with mediocre results does not mean that everyone needs so much time and effort.

b) It's not about NLP not getting along with the style and direction of our company. It's just that NLP must be properly and wisely implemented in order to bring great benefits.

c) It's not about how hard or easy meeting new people can be. It is simply worth it to put a little effort and attention into it, so the relationships we establish can be fulfilling for both sides and long-lasting.

4. Consequences

Show a consequence which will undermine a belief.

a) Will it be easier for you to never leave your country or to go everywhere with a dictionary in your hand, mispronouncing the words constantly, butchering the language and making foreign stereotypes about our nation even stronger?

b) This approach will hold our employees back from getting the possibility of quick and effective

development... and hence increased productivity and creativity.

c) The more difficult it is, the more it is worth to get to finally learn this ability... otherwise you can be alone for the rest of your life.

5. Chunk Down

The descent to a more detailed level. Find one element of belief which will undermine it.

a) The fact that different pronunciation is a problem for someone does not mean that you will also experience this.

b) I am totally convinced that the techniques of establishing good contact with clients can be very useful and profitable for us.

c) Exactly which element of meeting new people is specifically difficult for you?

6. Chunk Up

Getting on a more general level. Generalize a belief, so you can see it from a different perspective.

a) Learning a new language always takes some time, but then you know it forever.

b) By saying this, do you mean to tell me that effective communication with clients is not appropriate for our company?

c) Remember that relationships with other people give true meaning and depth to our lives.

7. Counterexample

Find a concrete example which will undermine a belief.

a) For me, learning how to speak Spanish was extremely easy and fun.

b) I know this company with a similar profile to ours. They have been using NLP for a long time now and have had a lot of success.

c) Do you remember how you met John? It was totally natural for you and you understood each other very well from the very beginning!

8. Analogy

Use an analogy or a metaphor to undermine a belief.

a) I have a friend, according to whom everything is difficult. He hasn't achieved anything in his life yet.

b) I used to think that owning my own business was inappropriate for me. Now I run a very successful company.

c) In the same way as ants, building an anthill is hard work. Nevertheless, it is the meaning of their lives and that's how this species survived on this planet for hundreds of millions of years!

9. A Reference to Oneself

Refer the most important element of a belief and blame the person holding this belief.

a) ...and for me, it is hard to listen to another excuse like the one you're giving me.

b) I use NLP on a daily basis... does it mean that I'm inadequate for our company?

c) It's really me who it's hard for, when I have to beat that nonsense out of your head for another time.

10. A Different Result

Find another result of having that belief.

a) It is your life that's going to be hard if you're going to depend on other people all the time or act like a stereotypical dumb tourist abroad.

b) It is inappropriate to endanger our company by using outdated techniques which hardly work at all.

c) Your life will be hard when you find that you have nobody to turn to.

11. Change of Frame

Evaluate a belief by putting it in a different context.

a) If learning languages was so difficult, there wouldn't be so many people speaking five or six different languages fluently, all language schools would be out of business and people would probably stop traveling anywhere on their own.

b) We should think how using NLP techniques in our company can change our course and raise our sales in a five-year perspective.

c) If what you said was true, everyone would be lonely and humans would have been extinct a long time ago.

12. Meta Frame

Formulate a belief about a belief.

a) I understand that you must know a lot about the learning process of many different languages of the world then?

b) Could it maybe be that NLP is not appropriate specifically for you, just because no one showed you how to apply it effectively?

c) So I assume that means you tried to meet all the people in the world already?

13. Model of the World

See a belief looking from a different perspective, from a point of view of a different model of the world.

a) You're probably just saying this to justify the fact that you haven't taken any action to learn a foreign language.

b) According to many famous and successful people, NLP is one of the best things that's ever happened to them.

c) The fact that this is such a big challenge makes it even more interesting and tempting.

14. Strategies of Reality

Make your interlocutor aware of the fact that a single belief may mean many various things, depending on a point of view.

a) What exactly do you mean by "hard"?

b) What exactly did you want to tell me by saying that "NLP is not appropriate"?

c) What does "hard" mean to you?

Now, when you are familiar with every pattern, you can start using it every time you talk to someone. The most important thing is to consciously pay attention to what the other person says. Listen carefully to everything they have to tell you and depending on a situation, use an appropriate language pattern. Some of these patterns and examples might be too cocky in some instances, whereas some of them might be too weak to pierce through someone's mind-shell. Sometimes you would have to be rather subtle (e.g. when talking to your teacher or professor), sometimes you would need to roll out the heaviest artillery to change the way someone thinks (I sometimes had to use several patterns to finally succeed in explaining something to someone). Deciding which of these patterns you should use is up to you, as every single case may be totally different and you have to take different circumstances into account.

You should especially pay attention to beliefs hidden in verbal messages, which say that someone is not able to do

something, something is difficult or too hard, something is impossible, etc.

To have the ability of using these patterns more fluently, you should practice a lot. That's why it's best to choose two patterns per day and practice only those two. After some time, you should have really improved the ability to sense the context. That's when matching a pattern into a situation will come naturally. Your intuition itself will be giving you relevant things to say.

These patterns can be used practically everywhere: in negotiations, in a conversation with a client, in conversations with your partner, dispelling doubts in other people, motivating your loved ones, helping people to solve their problems. There are as many applications as topics of conversation.

Each day, select one or two patterns and practice. Pay attention to what happens when you use each of these patterns in a particular context.

Below, you can find another four beliefs, which can be broken down using verbal dexterity. Try to work them out by yourself:

- I can't start my own business because it's risky.
- Relationships usually end in suffering.
- Long walks are boring.
- Only lucky people succeed in life.

Start now!

Chapter 11:

The Subtle Art of Giving Feedback

How can you effectively and politely tell people about their mistakes and shortcomings so that they start to work on themselves instead of getting bitter and demotivated? Feedback is an opinion which you give to the other person to let them know what to improve in their behavior or when performing a particular task.

Quite often, when we want to tell someone what they could improve or focus on, we get the effect opposite of the one desired—usually that person gets even more depressed (or pissed off) and does not think about taking our advice at all. How should we give feedback properly, so that the receiver can feel good and get a lot of motivation to improve their performance?

Imagine this situation: your friend is going to perform before a group of people and do a presentation on a certain topic. He stands in front of everyone and begins to talk. You sit in the audience watching his speech, writing down the things he does wrong and all the aspects he could improve upon. His speech is not good—he's holding his hands in his pockets, he is not looking at his audience and he is talking too quickly. He ends the presentation and goes straight to you asking, "How was it?" You want him to perform much better next time, so you tell him what was wrong. "Well, you spoke a

little too quickly, your gestures were chaotic and you closely examined all the walls in the room while you should have been looking at the group.”

What is the outcome of such feedback? By commenting on his performance this way, **you only focus on his mistakes and provide him with negative emotional content.** Your friend, getting a negative emotion, starts feeling bad and will probably not listen to your advice. He might even get depressed and be much more afraid or stressed out next time. On the other hand, you might be wondering why he behaves this way—after all, you are his friend and want the best for him.

So how do we go about giving feedback? Firstly, you need to be aware of the fact that **if you want someone to learn something, this person must be in a positive emotional state.** Motivation is a positive emotion. Even if you're motivated by bad things and prefer the so-called “negative motivation”, the idea of motivation itself is still positive. If you only tell someone about their shortcomings and provide them with negative emotions, in most cases you will only demotivate them. People are not able to learn effectively when they feel bad. The key here is to associate the feedback containing information about what should be done differently with positive emotions.

Sandwich Feedback

Sandwich feedback is a model of giving feedback, which allows us to motivate people instead of giving those negative feelings. If you have ever watched the TV show *Shark Tank*, this is how (usually, sometimes it gets brutal) “the Sharks”

give feedback to people before or after rejecting their deals. This model consists of three stages:

1. **A positive emotion.** At the beginning of giving feedback, you must show the person you give it to that they did well. You can say, „This is what should have been done, congrats”; „Good job, you did great!”; „A great performance”. If this person’s performance was obviously poor, then of course you will not say, „Wow! What a revelation!”, because they will simply think you are making fun of them. In that case, you can just say: „Good job, congrats on your first try!” **After the initial approval, tell them about two or three things that they’ve done well.** Provide specific examples! You can say, „You really knew the topic well!” Or, „It’s great that you spoke loud enough!” Appreciate their effort. It is about making them feel great at the start. Joy and relaxation are states conducive for learning and motivation.
2. **What to improve?** On the second stage, you tell them all those things they did wrong, but in a positive overtone. So, you do not say what they did wrong but **what can they do better.** You do not say: „You were talking too fast!”, but rather, „You could have spoken a little bit more slowly; the audience would have understood you much better then.” Instead of, „You were ill-mannered,” you should say, „You could have been a little more polite,” and so on. Additionally, you can already give that person the solution for their particular problem. For example, if

a friend of yours has problems with establishing contacts with new people and he has just spoken to someone, you can tell him exactly what to do. „Listen, man, what you really need to do in order to get along with people better is to put a smile on your face from time to time. You need more openness—look them in the eyes more often and listen carefully to what they have to say.” Just a short comment about what the person has to do better may not be enough. If you have adequate knowledge, it is worth it to immediately say exactly what that person should do to solve the problem, so next time this error won't occur.

3. **Positive emotion.** You end the conversation by evoking joy and relaxation again. You could say, „Well, like I said though, generally, you did great!” At the end, you need a little praise again.

Based on the example I gave you earlier, how would the situation from the beginning of the chapter look? Using a sandwich feedback, this is what you could say to your friend who just performed his first public speech: “Not bad, it was a really nice presentation. I liked how you told this joke; everyone liked it. I see that you have a lot of knowledge on this topic. Among some things you could have done better is certainly your speaking rate—I would advise you to speak more slowly. Before you start speaking, take a few deep breaths, it will relax you and enable you to slow down a little bit. Also, remember to look people in the eyes. They will be able to feel that you're talking directly to them. Additionally, you could work on hand gestures a little bit. Recently I read a

great book about body language. I will bring it to you tomorrow. In general, though, this was a great performance. Congratulations!”

How do you think this message would be received by your friend? What would be his attitude after he hears these words? Would he be depressed or would he more likely say, “Wow, cool! I will try to improve these things! Thanks!” Another way of communication with a completely different effect.

It may not be the reflection of the harshest truth, but instead, you give people a wonderful gift in the form of constructive feedback, as well as a lot of motivation so they can start applying the advice immediately and hence, the opportunity to become better in what they do. As a result, instead of depression and the absence of desire for development, you will see a wild desire for improvement.

The so-called “sandwich feedback” can be used in many different contexts. If you are a student, you can use it to motivate and teach your friends who have problems with their upcoming exams. You can advise people how to give better public speeches or perform better at concerts. If you are a parent, you can use it to motivate your children without making them feel bad and overly pressured. It can bring excellent educational effects when used properly on kids. As a teacher, you can use sandwich feedback to motivate your students. As a CEO or a manager, you can tell your employees what they need to improve without upsetting and annoying them, so you don’t feel hostility in your own office. As a son, daughter, brother or sister, you can help your family and friends in many different ways. Now, think about real life

situations in which you can use this knowledge and apply it as soon as possible!

What's also worth mentioning in the context of giving feedback is delivering difficult messages, when all we want to do is ask people to change their behavior. Often when we want to tell people something important, we take for granted that they know more than they do or that they know what we are thinking or how we are feeling. For example, "This worker's position in this company is solid," or that, "Our relationship is great." However, the other party may not know that. Has your boss ever asked you to talk for a moment and you knew they wanted to tell you something important, so your self-talk started getting louder and louder? "What's wrong? What does he want to tell me? Am I getting fired?" Then, after five minutes, the boss told you that you shouldn't leave the office half an hour earlier and you should do something else instead to finish out your day. You say to yourself, "Ooooh! Am I not fired? What a relief... Ok... Wait... What did he say?"

If you want people to really listen to you and you want to avoid causing negative emotions that may lead to unnecessary behaviors or feelings, it's crucial to address at the beginning of the conversation whatever fear they might be having. So, for example, when speaking to your employee you could say, "Bob, you know that you are a great employee and that you have a great future with us; however, I just wanted to ask you to..." Or, for instance: "Honey, you know I love you and I see my entire future with you, but I would really appreciate it if you could please stop..." This way you are slowing down their self-talk and calming their emotions. Do this whenever you think someone might have even the slightest doubts about your

relationship with them or about some kind of situation that may end, etc. It will save you lot of time and energy. It's also a very classy thing to do.

Another great thing you can do when you want to start a difficult conversation with someone and to make people drop their guard a little bit is to ask them to help you with a task. For example, if you want to talk about something rather difficult with your kids, you could ask them to help you prepare a salad or some other dish or maybe pay them to help you paint the fence to make them focus on the work even more. That way you are lowering their defense, making them listen more carefully and intuitively as they're focused on a particular task. It's much easier to start the conversation without creating unnecessary tension. You should also remove as many distractions like smartphones, computer, TV, etc. as possible. You can also use it at work, asking your employee or co-worker to help you with organizing files, moving boxes, etc. It's a much better idea than just saying, "Hey, Daniel, see me in my office in five minutes." Try it and you will be surprised how effective it can be.

Last thing I want to tell you in this chapter is how to deal well with negative feedback and criticism. When somebody is criticizing your work and giving you negative feedback, you need to remember that what you are doing physically also affects what is going on mentally. When people criticize us, we often tend to close down our body language. At the same time, the ability to receive negative feedback is something very valuable and useful in life and appreciated in many companies.

The first thing you need to do is to raise your head, straighten your spine, put your shoulders back and open your chest. You need to physically be open to receive that message, which will help you receive the criticism mentally. It's not easy, but very necessary and helpful, a skill you can and you should learn. The very next thing you should do is to relate to the negative feedback. Let's say your boss told you, "Your work report is too short and I don't like the way you worded it. I can't accept it in its current form." You could say, "OK, so the problem is that it's too short and my wording should be better..." Here you need to repeat the criticism back to the person. At the end, you need to ask a solution oriented question. For example, you could ask, "If I write an extra two thousand words and rephrase it, will you be able to accept it?" You could also try a different approach and ask, "Alright, if I could show you evidence to support my belief that my work report is long enough and straight to the point, that it doesn't require much time for our employees to read and the language I used will be easy for them to understand, would you be then willing to accept it?" So, let's recap: you need to open your body language, then make sure you understood what was said correctly and finally, specify the steps to resolve the problem. If you train yourself in doing so, you will be perceived as a much more effective, experienced and professional communicator.

Chapter 12:

How to Become a Master of the Sharp Retort

Everyone knows the feeling of finding only emptiness in your head at the exact moment a retort that's sharp like a razor, perfectly matched to the context, is what you need most. It's one of those things you don't want to happen often, yet it keeps coming back during the most unexpected situations. Wouldn't it be great to always have smart, sharp and funny retorts at hand, everywhere and anytime you want them?

It's high time to master the art of responding with witty retorts to any unpleasant comments and annoying remarks aimed at you. Below, you will find **10 ways to train a sharp tongue** that will surprise your friends, parents, colleagues from work, strangers on the street and even your dog.

You probably know the annoying feeling when you keep coming back to a past situation, imagining what you could have said and how the annoying person would look if you had this or that great response in your mind back then. These are usually the moments when you've already managed to calm yourself down and have had a while to rethink things. That's when suddenly, the best retorts come to mind, but "If I only said that!" doesn't change anything as it's already too late.

To annihilate this problem, you need to learn things that will fill your head with hundreds of retorts for any given occasion.

The art of the retort is very subtle. Not only is it about knowing what to say in a particular moment, but it also needs to be done and said in the right way. It is not enough to know only the techniques that can help you find a great retort, but a foundation, the right approach to what other people say.

A mix of all these elements creates a special skill that allows you to have your guard up all the time without any effort from your side.

Granted, I won't give you any prewritten texts or so-called "canned material" here. Learning someone else's retorts by heart would be the best recipe for making you as close to sharp retorts as politicians are to telling the truth. Believe me, such an approach would make you miss that perfect moment to shoot your verbal bullet as each single time you would wonder, "Which response should I use?" for too long.

Instead of that, in this chapter I will tell you about spontaneity—the key to make your answers natural, different and unique each single time. So if you are ready and want to become a master of the witty retort, get to know each of the points below and start to work!

1. First and foremost—distance yourself from your own flaws and what other people say about you and simply chill out! Even if these are unpleasant comments concerning your weak points, people often do this out of fear or because they do not feel secure in your company. Some people do it to raise their own status when they feel inferior. If you took everything other people say personally, you would constantly go into

negative emotional states, which block your creativity and skill of choosing perfect words.

When you distance yourself, you do not care what other people say and you are able to quickly and coherently respond to someone else's words. Remember, whatever people say, they are **only words!** For the most part, people do not mean what they say and do it only for the purposes listed above. Accept this fact as well as your flaws and no one will be able to make you feel unpleasant emotions without your permission.

2. Instead of taking things personally, you need relaxation, calmness and peace—that's the only state of mind where sharp retorts come naturally. Moreover, the mere act of responding to someone in a nervous way disqualifies your retort and does not allow it to get on the podium. Imagine a stressful person, who stuttering and sweating tries to stammer a droll retort! It would not pass and the end result would be ridiculing the poor guy. Say what you have to say with relaxation and peace and certainly it will sound as it should.

3. Look serious while giving a retort. Do not laugh while speaking. When you're serious, it increases the effect and makes everyone around even more amused. Note that jokes told in a serious tone are usually funnier than those told by a laughing person. Do some acting and throw your retort suddenly, with a deadly seriousness. Of course, this rule has its exceptions, as you will read in following paragraphs.

4. A good retort usually goes outside the box in which a message preceding the retort is set. It is supposed to be

something surprising, something the other person will not be expecting. Many times you have probably witnessed an explosion of laughter right after someone aptly replied with a good retort. Such volleys of laughter mostly appear after something totally unexpected.

5. Relate to the most popular current topic or trend. All you need in order to do this is the most basic knowledge about events occurring in the world and in our country. There is no shortage of scandals and strange or funny events in our homeland, so you can always tell a retort connected with a situation in which one of the politicians or celebrities offended someone after they felt dishonored, etc. There are many options if you watch the news at least sometimes (I wouldn't really recommend watching mainstream news too often!) or you sometimes follow these things online, then it's easy to refer to what's currently on most people's minds as soon as the opportunity arises.

6. Use reframing. It is one of the best NLP techniques and comes down to seeing the same thing from a completely new perspective. There are two types of reframing: content and context reframing. In content reframing, if you want to find a good answer, you need to ask yourself the question: "What different, positive meaning could this particular situation have?" In context reframing, you need to answer this question: "In what other context would this situation would seem positive?"

7. "This is my favorite story!" Sometimes you meet people who talk too much—they start talking about what you did wrong or how you should behave and you cannot see the end of their criticism. At this point you can interject their

monologue, preferably at the very beginning of it: “Oh yes, I love this story!” This strategy requires you to say it with a smile and joy in your eyes, as if you really enjoy what you are going to hear. It will knock your critic off guard. It is very useful when you are in a bigger group (at least a few people), because then you can turn to others by saying, “Listen to this carefully; it is really great!” It often applies lots of pressure on your critics and gets them off track.

8. “Speaking of shoelaces...” If your interlocutor started talking about something you don’t want to mention or discuss, you can suddenly and surprisingly change the subject to something entirely different. Change it to one that has something to do with the issue this person wanted to bring up, however, lead the conversation in a completely different direction. Imagine that someone says to you, “Your shoes do not fit the trousers you are wearing,” and you say, “Speaking about shoelaces, have you heard of the world’s longest shoelace, according to the Guinness Records book?” Or less neutral: “Speaking of shoes, do you think that if I lubricated your bald head with a black shoe polish, it would shine bright like a diamond?”

9. Amuse yourself and others. Remember to use clever retorts in order to lower the tension, to make yourself and others laugh or simply to improve the atmosphere. It is not worth doing it in an impolite or rude manner as it will just generate unnecessary conflicts which can then escalate into something worse. Whenever there is risk that your words will ignite an argument, then the best retort is usually just silence or ignoring the other person. The real master of the sharp retort is a person who knows when to stop the discussion, even

with the retort of the year (or even of the century) on their minds. I know that sometimes it's hard to stop yourself when something funny and accurate wants to escape your lips, but believe me—there are moments when it is better to swallow some words and keep them for a better occasion.

Try to use this ability only when you know that the other person will take it with a smile or at least with a positive attitude. Enjoy it, entertain others with it, unleash your creativity and surprise everyone around you, but use it for a good cause.

10. Take away these “magic bullets”: At the beginning of this chapter, I told you I won't be giving you any ready retorts and “canned material”, but this will serve as a good exception. With these phrases, you can respond to anything anybody ever tells you when buying yourself time to think and regain composure.

The phrases always start with, “That's interesting,” and they are:

“That's interesting. Why would you say that?”

“That's interesting. Why would you do that?”

“That's interesting. Tell me more.”

“That's interesting. Why would you ask that?”

There's nothing that you can't respond to using these phrases.

Moreover, they also get people off track and make them realize how stupid, futile or vain the things they tell you are. Also, they sometimes have the power to make your interlocutors start thinking very deeply about their real

motives and the intentions behind what they told you and what they threw at you. They simply surrender or suddenly change their attitude to a much nicer one. They sometimes work as a “wake up call.”

11. Practice with yourself. Your internal dialogue, constantly commenting on the surrounding reality, can be very useful. Just sit for a few minutes in a quiet and peaceful place and start talking with your own mind. It can be done out loud, but if you do not want your family to take you to a psychiatric ward, you’d better choose to practice only in your mind. You will need two inner voices: one should be your friend’s, and the other your own.

The exercise is very simple—you need to imagine this person saying unpleasant, mean or insulting things to you. Then you think of some good, relevant, creative retort. Of course, in the beginning, coming up with such retorts can take a few minutes or longer, but having dialogues with your own mind shouldn’t be so strange, since almost everyone on this planet is doing it on a daily basis. No matter how much time it takes you at first, you will become better with practice. Once you come up with a juicy retort, let your inner voice tell you something unpleasant again. You’ll see that in a short time, good answers will appear faster and faster. Practice it as often as possible!

Once you master the above points, you will become a conjurer who juggles with words. Retorts as sharp as a Japanese katana blade will be flowing out from your mouth just when the situation requires it. Work on improving your ability to find relevant answers and you will see that in some

time it will be completely natural for you. Have fun and good luck!

Chapter 13:

How to Have Unique and Memorable Conversations

How often do you have conversations which you can describe as fascinating or witty? Do you frequently talk with other people in a way which feeds your soul, makes your mind tingle pleasantly and leaves you fully content? Even a usual chit-chat can be a memorable experience.

In this chapter I will show you ways of taking your communication skills to a more advanced level. Thanks to these cool tricks, you will be able to make every conversation unique, whether it will be an informal conversation, a negotiation or business conversations.

Some time ago I went to this interesting seminar about [emotional intelligence](#). During one of the lunch breaks, I had a brief conversation with another participant of the training. The guy was several years older than me. I had no opportunity to get to know him better until then and frankly, I expected this conversation to be typical and a little bit like boring small talk.

You rarely can be SO wrong. At the very beginning of exchanging our opinions, it struck me that it clearly wouldn't be another usual obvious small talk between two strangers. Everything we discussed somehow concerned the most important things to me back in the day and I was challenged to

think very differently and look at the whole thing from an entirely new perspective. More than once I had to take a moment to reflect on my response to be able to reach an important and meaningful conclusion. The solid workout for my mind, intertwined with frequent explosions of laughter, made this conversation stay in my memory for a very long time.

Since that day I would often wonder why some conversations are just usual chit-chat fluff-type time fillers, while others can be a unique, almost spiritual experience. By doing a conscious observation while carefully listening to conversations of others and testing of various different concepts, I came to a sudden realization that how a particular conversation goes depends vastly on myself.

I can give it a tone, change its direction, fascinate an interlocutor or invite them to answer interesting, challenging and tricky questions. I can do a whole bunch of things, becoming a source of fascinating conversation. And the most interesting aspect is that it does not only apply to chats with friends—imagine how powerful and useful it can be in business or in negotiations!

In this chapter I will show you the **eleven most useful ideas to make a conversation unique**. They are all briefly described below, with examples and links to wider sources of knowledge on a particular subject. Learn, test and check the effects!

1. Use the Matrix of Entry

By a good conversation starter, you can define the way in which it will be received. If you start with, “Dude, yesterday

something absolutely amazing happened to me,” then the entire content of what you say will be received by the listener as something extraordinary. If instead of this you say, “Man, yesterday something extremely instructive happened to me,” then the same content would be received as more instructive than incredible.

How can you benefit from knowing about this? Say to someone, “I have a really cool proposition for you!” or, “Focus, because what I tell you in a moment will really give you food for thought.” There are a whole bunch of opportunities! Remember, a matrix of entry is something you always use in the beginning of a conversation or whenever the subject of the conversation changes or is just about to change. Thanks to this simple fix, you always have the certainty that your message will be received the way you defined it. You simply put it in a good frame.

2. Tell Stories and Use Metaphors

Not only are analogies a great tool in psycho-therapies, they also prove very useful in everyday conversations. An accurate story or metaphor is like a skeleton key to the mind of the other person. It will be enough if you think about what situation from your life is similar to the event which you and your interlocutor were just talking about.

Then you just say, “It reminds me of a similar story...” or “It is just as if it...” and you continue. It should usually fascinate your interlocutors and stimulate their imagination.

3. Discover Your Interlocutor’s Beliefs and Values

Find out what is important to this person and what they think about the world around them. It can be easily observed during the first several minutes of talking, especially on more serious life-related topics. For example, the other person may start to express their opinions, beliefs, life philosophy and their view on crucial things like relationships, health, money, career, education, religion, politics (although that’s a topic you should really avoid in your conversations), family, sports, et cetera. On the foundation of this crucial knowledge you can build a rapport, showing your interlocutor that you also have a similar view (but this is not an entirely necessary step, especially when your view is totally different—it would most probably appear fake). It is enough to simply direct the conversation to topics that are important to this person. **Everyone likes to talk about the important things in their lives. If you can change the track of the conversation so you talk about topics important and interesting both to you and your interlocutor, you hit the bullseye.** It’s usually possible, even

if the person you're talking with lives by different values, on a different level of the social ladder, is much younger or older, etc. By showing interest in these topics, you will surely cause this person to involve themselves in the conversation and immerse in it more deeply.

4. Get to Know Your Interlocutor's Metaprograms

Metaprograms are individual filters of thinking. When you know more precisely how the person with whom you have a conversation thinks, you are able to use this knowledge very effectively, **to motivate, for example or strongly inspire them to do something (or restrain from something). You will have a chance to learn more about this topic in the chapter called "Metaprograms."**

5. Enjoy and Use Your Own Voice

Do not let it be monotonous and colorless, because this is the fastest way to make your interlocutor fall asleep. You need to modulate your voice and make it engaging. Sometimes speak loudly, then go quieter. Sometimes slowly, sometimes more rapidly. Use stops, which evoke the feeling of strong curiosity and mystery. Change your intonation. You can sometimes (don't overdo it) imitate voices of people you are talking about if it's not offensive or do impressions of characters from movies and cartoons to make people laugh (unless you have zero stand-up and acting skills, in which case, hold off until you train them a little). Keep practicing and listening to your voice and soon it will be a pure pleasure for everyone to listen to you talk. Since you can't actually hear the real sound of your voice, it is a very good idea to record your monologues from time to time or to join a Toastmasters club or some other public speaking or acting classes. There are lots of these activities you can find to join, on sites like [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com) and many different places online. Don't think twice. **These skillsets are very useful in everyday life, business and your career** and you will also probably meet lots of great people.

6. Ask Penetrating Questions about the Topic

You can lead entire conversations only by asking good questions (which, by the way, is a great mind exercise) on which you can learn much more about the topic and your speaker. When your interlocutor stops talking, ask them any question regarding the content of their speech. When they are responding, **listen carefully and actively to what they are**

saying—they will feel your involvement (even though you will be silent) and will appreciate it. People love when someone really listens to them and they love talking about themselves!

7. Ask Unique Questions

Unique questions distinguish your conversation from the grey crowd, stimulate your speaker's imagination and make you think. Some examples: "If you had a passive fixed income of \$40,000 provided every single month, what would you do with your life? Which dreams would you fulfill?", "What do you want your life to look like three years from now?", "What was the best day of your life?", "What makes you laugh the most?", "If there were no limits, what would you want to do in five minutes?" and so on. There are infinite amounts of such questions—it all comes down to your creativity. Sometimes a single question like that can be enough to build an extremely interesting conversation.

8. Induce Feelings

Tap into all kinds of emotions! Make sure that there is laughter, joy, occasional tension and uncertainty and at other times curiosity, mystery and fascination in your conversations. You can also use the so-called "emotional rollercoaster"—tell your interlocutors about something very cheerful, then about something rather sad in order to break the emotional state (but don't overdo it, you don't want your interlocutors depressed or crying) and then again about something very uplifting, relaxing and joyful. **Strong emotions engage people in a conversation and get both sides in the state of flow**—instead of thinking about what to say, you just speak. You do not

simply talk to each other, but have a real conversation where both sides are fully engaged and present in the moment. You don't want to overuse this technique and do it every single time you talk to a person, but it is especially helpful at the beginning, when you get to meet someone or want to be remembered.

How do you induce emotions? The best idea is to feel them yourself. If you want to make the other person feel curious, first feel it yourself, then start telling them about something with great curiosity. The so-called mirror neurons⁸ ensure that they will quickly start feeling very similar emotions to these you are feeling at the moment⁹.

9. Lead Conversations

Are you bored with talking about the same thing for too long? Do you have a much more interesting idea in your mind? With a little bit of ingenuity, you can lead conversations in the direction you want them to go. **The only thing you have to do is to “catch” particular parts of your interlocutor’s speech and start a new thread on this previous foundation.** For example, when someone talks about how last year they were in the hospital for two weeks and how awful it was, you can interject with: “One month ago I was also unlucky enough to visit the hospital for an extended period of time. I spent almost all that time watching movies on my laptop. Have you watched any interesting movies lately?” When someone is complaining all the time about how bad the situation in our country is and you don't feel like listening to it for fifth time in a row, you can say, “Well, you're right, our government could work more efficiently, but that doesn't change the fact that our country is extremely beautiful—I went

to the mountains recently and you won't believe what happened to me..."

Another example: imagine that while negotiating, your interlocutor pays too much attention to the high price of your product. You could say: "The price is totally adequate to the premium quality of the product. We are the best in terms of quality, so please pay attention to the exotic materials this product is made of..." At the beginning, such actions can seem difficult to you, but as soon as you get the general idea, it becomes simple. With a little practice, you can change the subjects of conversation as often as you like.

10. Finish the Conversation at the Perfect Moment

It is no art to totally drain a topic and finish the conversation when there is nothing more to say, as it makes you end up in an undesired emotional state. End when there is still some hunger, curiosity or any other good emotion. This feeling should remain in your interlocutor's memory for some time after you finish your conversation and thus they will still be thinking about the nice talk you had. Moreover, it will probably make them come back for more in order to satisfy this hunger.

11. Build a Good Rapport

Lastly and most importantly, by matching both non-verbal (body language, voice tone/modulation and breathing) and verbal (experiences, beliefs, and values) aspects of communication you can build a unique atmosphere of trust during every conversation. **After making a good match you can start to lead**—causing that the other person to follow the direction in which you point.

A good rapport will make using each of these methods for having a unique conversation much simpler. Once you learn how to use all of the above in your conversations, you will be surprised with the great results you'll get. In fact, there is no need to master every single one of these ideas, just a few that you like the most are enough to raise the quality of most of your interactions.

Be sure to learn it step-by-step. If you try to learn all of these ideas at once, it won't work. Choose one method per day and practice it during every conversation. Thanks to this, you will develop new habits of effective communication, which will stay with you for a long time.

8 http://www.scholarpedia.org/article/Mirror_neurons

Chapter 14:

Rapport, the Art of Excellent Communication

Do you want to know the key to effective communication? Would you like to learn how to establish the subtle thread of understanding with other people quickly? Thanks to good rapport, you will be able to create an atmosphere of trust, cooperation and mutual understanding which will make the people with whom you communicate familiar, safe and at ease. Knowledge which you will now acquire will give you the ability to evoke in your interlocutors the impression that you both “transmit on the same wavelength.” The truth is, **we like people who are similar to us**, enabling us to trust them the most.

Think for a moment. Who do you most like to spend your time with? Do these people have similar views, beliefs and interests who speak and behave in a similar way to you? Of course, this is not a rule, but this is who you usually feel the best with.

Not only is the ability to quickly establish such a deep connection and understanding crucial in interpersonal relations, but also in business, therapy or sales. In this chapter I will explain to you exactly what the “rapport” thing is and how to create that bridge to a better understanding in order to make others feel comfortable with us, to make them trust us and also open up a little bit more. Thanks to this, you give

them and yourself a chance to create a strong relationship in a much shorter period of time.

Building the atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding is the most effective way to quickly establish a solid relationship between two interlocutors. In this chapter, you will learn the basics of so-called “mirroring”, as well as what “leading” is.

Since non-verbal communication (mainly body language and our voice) is a big part of the entire communication process, we can usually tell if communication between two people occurs harmoniously or clumsily and chaotically, even if they speak the Martian language.

Let me begin with an example:

Imagine a couple sitting at a table.

He sits laid back and relaxed. Seated on the chair, his legs are extended and straight. Hands in pockets, breathing quietly. Speaks slowly and softly.

She is much more nervous looking. Sitting hunched, tense muscles can be seen. Legs bent and crossed. Clenched fists on the table. She speaks loudly and quickly; you can hear the anger.

How do you think these two people get along? Is there an understanding and cooperation between them?

Now imagine another pair. Seated at a table, both in the same position. Their arms are on the table and they’re holding hands. They look at each other with a similar expression. They both speak in a very similar way: slowly, clearly and warmly.

Do they feel comfortable? Is there more harmony and trust and less stress between them?

Considering these two cases, we know that the body language of these people works unconsciously. It adapts to the relationships that exist between these two people. NLP says that you can control those factors consciously. **This way you can change your body language and the tone of your voice to create understanding and establish meaningful contact with the other person. You can adjust to a person's gestures and manner of speaking to gain trust and begin to create a strong bond.** This skill is extremely useful in virtually every area of life in which you contact other people.

In other words, rapport is a skill of matching **body language and** tone of voice with the person you are communicating with. To some extent it's about miming your interlocutor's behavior. Let me remind you that this is not meant to be a typical imitation though, about which you will read later. In psychology, such behavior is called "mirroring". The goal is to create harmony and synchronization, through which you can build an effective and deep understanding.

How to Create Rapport?

Let me now show you the areas in which you can become more like the person you are talking to. Change your posture so that it is similar to the attitude of the other person. Here is exactly what you can adjust:

Body Language

The general posture. Closed or open, the body curled or spread out and relaxed. If someone is lying on their back, do

the same. Adjust arms and legs, but also the direction you are facing when sitting, etc.

Gestures. You do not want to do the exact same gestures. You should do it differently, but just as energetically or as quietly. Adjust them elegantly and gracefully and remember that it has to be very subtle and unnoticed.

Facial expression. If the person you are talking to is sad, do not smile all the time. You don't need to have the same expression, though—it should just reflect the same set of emotions.

Eye contact. When someone avoids your eyes and looks at you for brief moments, do not stare at them. The person will feel better when you give them some space and reduce your eye contact. Another very important thing to remember is that we have been programmed over thousands of years to subconsciously perceive prolonged eye-contact as a sign of aggression. So remember—eye contact is good, but too much eye contact is bad. You should never look people in the eyes for more than seven seconds, non-stop. It's a typical communication-newbie mistake, kind of a creepy thing to do, even though we've been conditioned to look people in the eyes in our Western culture. Also, remember not to open your eyes too wide (the same thing, sign of aggression...or psychosis).

Voice

Speech rate. Imagine a man who always speaks very quickly and clearly, meeting with a girl who speaks very slowly. Do you think it will be easy for them to bond?

Gaps in speech. If your conversation partner makes a clear break between words or sentences, speak to them in a similar

way. Omitting the pauses would hold back that person from understanding your message.

Tone of your voice. Learn how to modulate your voice tone and start fitting it with the tone of the person you're speaking with.

Emotions

A very important point. Many people make the mistake of being happy and smiling when they want to comfort the other person. It brings a completely opposite effect—your cheerful consolation might upset the person even more. If you want to comfort them, try to understand the problem and show your sympathy. Adjust your emotions and it will make that person feel better. Only after the creation of a deep rapport can you begin to slowly change your attitude to a more joyful one and lead the person to a better well-being.

Breath

The pace and depth of breathing. Matching breathing can sometimes be a very strong incentive to create a rapid and profound rapport. How to see the other person's breath? Follow their nose, chest or arms. You will see how quickly and how deeply their breathing is.

Words

Some people use specific words in their statements such as: just, exactly, likewise, etc. Using these words from time to time when talking to them can be very useful.

On a verbal level, you can create rapport by matching:

Interlocutor's experiences. In the communication process, the exchange of experiences plays a huge role and you can use

that to your advantage. When your partner tells you about various events and experiences in their life, always think how you can relate those experiences to your own life. It does not have to be exactly the same experience; sometimes it is sufficient that just one part is a little similar. If you can find such a situation in your life, share it with the person. An example in which experiences are not identical may be a situation where someone tells you how they broke their arm riding a bike. If you have ever broken a finger playing basketball, it is a great time to mention it. I often use it when I have an individual coaching session with someone. When, for example, my client starts telling me how much he is tormented by his internal dialogues which do not allow him to fall asleep, I will surely mention that I had a similar problem some time ago and that I managed to solve it. This way he knows that I experienced the same and that I can help him.

Matching experiences is a very strong element of the rapport, because it creates the impression that two people have a similar or even common past.

Beliefs and values. When you talk to someone, try noticing what kind of values this person is guided by. Try to determine what the most important thing to them is. For example, if health holds the first place in their value system, you can mention, “Health is extremely important indeed, because it enables us to enjoy everything else we are given in our lives,” etc. Very simple yet effective. Where else can you use it? Before you go to a work interview, you can check the interviewer’s profiles on social media. Is your boss-to-be a religious person? You can mention about how you traveled around South America and was in awe of people being not

ashamed to show their devotion and how proud of it you were. Believe me, it works just great (field tested).

Your conversation partner's beliefs are nested in the deep structures of the brain and their reflection has an immediate effect on the physiology of the person with whom you are communicating. Beliefs are shown when someone's speech starts from expressions such as: "I believe that...", "It seems to me that...", "I'm sure...", and not only because opinions and views on the surrounding reality are expressed in very different ways. It is important to know what that person thinks about the topic.

Reaffirming your callers' maps helps them open up to you, which is the key to establishing lasting relationships. When you talk with an acquaintance and you find out that, for example, they believe social actions like helping children from orphanages is something worth spending money on, you can show them that you have a similar belief.

This is, of course, not about agreeing with everyone all the time. An exchange of totally different beliefs may be a beginning of a great discussion. Use this tool whenever you'll find it useful though.

Characteristic expressions. People often have regularly repeated words and phrases in their linguistic repertoire. This is related to the way in which mind encodes information. These formulations might be, for example: "in fact," "just," "exactly" or "absolutely."

Catching up on such expressions and using them from time to time will give your interlocutor's subconscious a signal that you speak their language. Just remember not to overdo it—

then a conscious part of that person's mind will become aware of it and your interlocutor might think that you are making fun of them.

Characteristic words relating to specific senses. While communicating, we use words and phrases such as, "It is clear to me," "I feel it," or "It sounds great." All of these expressions have a similar meaning. However, they represent a different sense. The first is the sense of sight, the second - feeling, the third - hearing.

When most people speak, they **predominantly use one of them**. When at the particular moment they are more visual in their talking, you will find words like: "clear," "simple," "I can see," "a perspective." In the case of a person using more of a sense of feeling, there may be words like: "I feel," "hard," "hold," "smoothly," "touch," etc.

When it comes to sensory perceptions, there are three main types you can gather from a person, depending on the way the person uses language to communicate with others:

- Visual – People whose sensory perception is visual would tend to use "seeing" phrases such as "my vision is clear," "I see what you mean," "your future is bright," and words such as "view," "imagine," "color," "hazy," "clear," "foresee," "appear," or "outlook." They also tend to describe things in terms of "seeing" such as "small," "light," "brown," "rectangular," etc.
- Auditory – People whose sensory perception is auditory would tend to use "hearing" phrases such as "I hear you," "she scratched the floor," "his voice

was sharp,” “I am listening to you,” and words such as “listen,” “talk,” “discuss,” “hear,” “sound,” “call,” etc. They also tend to describe form in terms of “hearing” such as “loud,” “noisy,” “beeping,” “ticking,” etc.

- Kinesthetic – People whose sensory perception is kinesthetic tend to use “feeling” phrases such as “I feel that is the best way to do it,” “My feelings do not support this,” “She was warmly welcoming,” “I feel that,” “I can’t grasp that” or “I fear that,” and words such as “touch,” “feel,” “afraid,” “fear,” “warm,” “cool,” “rough,” “smooth,” “wet,” etc.

Pay attention to these details and learn to adjust your style of speaking accordingly. First, you can practice creating longer sentences having a characteristic of each type of sensory perception above, so it becomes easy and natural for you to use them during real conversations. Pick one of those rapport-building techniques and use it in your next conversation. Then try another one and test how it works for you.

Every time focus on just one element, **teaching your brain exactly what it should catch in the other person’s speaking.** Thanks to this, you will learn the ability step-by-step and will soon be able to use it automatically. Then, being able to adjust yourself through all of these ways at once, you will become a significantly better communicator.

I will also tell you about different, often repeating, verbal patterns and models of thinking and how to recognize them and utilize this knowledge. We’ll also talk about other aspects

of verbal rapport in the chapters “Metaprograms” and “Meta Model.”

It is important that you remember to be vigilant and careful when you talk and listen to people. Besides the fact that I promised myself to carefully listen to other people’s words a long time ago, I would often find myself in a situation when at some point I forgot to pay attention to the linguistic structure and turned the “autopilot” on instead, losing track of my goal in the conversation.

With time, however, I developed the ability to be present and attentive to what the other person was saying. I started noticing the beliefs and values, experiences, specific words and phrases relating to the senses very easily. Remember, it’s just another skill that you can learn.

This knowledge gives you great opportunities. Use it effectively and start to use it in your life as soon as you can.

The Most Important Things to Remember while Building Rapport!

- 1. Creating a rapport with the other person does not have to rely on miming everything that person is doing. It is not, under any circumstances, about typical imitation, overacting and copying everything. The secret lies in the fact that your actions are subtle and unobtrusive.**
2. The adjustment will be discreet if you do not do it abruptly. Do it slowly, being careful step by step. Do it so that it is invisible to the other person. Initial matching may take two minutes or more.

3. You do not need to match everything (and you really shouldn't). Start by observing and noticing what the most visible characteristic of the person is and then select the specifics that you can match easily.
4. If there is a risk that the harmonization of one element would be too visible, you cannot do this directly. For example, nervous movements of the hand of another person may be reflected by rocking your body. Quick speaking can be reflected with a fast movement of your hand.
5. Remember that to have a good fit, you need to notice all the non-verbal signals of the other people first. So before you start to create a rapport, observe. Learn to notice the different elements of human behavior and practice this observation every time.
6. Observe your caller's reactions. See if they feel more comfortable thanks to your actions. The signals may be different—relaxation, smiling, opening up to your propositions, visible better mood, increased understanding of your messages, etc. Since everybody is different, you will have to remain flexible and alert. Never take anything for granted when building rapport.
7. Rapport can be also applied to any other part of communication with others. The point being, you should also try to speak your interlocutor's language. We all have different symbolic language that we speak in all areas of our lives. For example, let's take appreciation under our magnifier. Imagine that your

colleague from work wanted to say “thank you” for your help with his project and gave you a bottle of premium bourbon or red wine. If someone said “thank you” to me this way, I would be really happy, but my cousin, for example, would be a bit unfulfilled because his language is spending time with people as a sign of appreciation, not giving them gifts. He would probably think, “Well, nice, but why don’t we just go out and you could buy me a few beers at the pub instead of just giving me something and walking away?” It’s just not his language. If you want to be an effective communicator, don’t show people appreciation in your language, **do it in their language**, provided you’ve known them long enough. My dear wife, for example, likes being surprised very much. When I buy her a present for a special occasion, she appreciates it, but no matter how much love I give her, she feels a little bit neglected when I don’t positively surprise her once in a while (and that doesn’t have to mean buying stuff, she just loves the surprise factor and unpredictability showed in many different ways). Don’t treat people the way you like to be treated, treat them the way THEY want to be treated. That’s a **big** rapport take-away to remember!

Leading

In addition to matching, the concept of rapport includes **leading**.

As soon as you establish a good strong connection, you can start leading. If you have a deep rapport with a person, you've succeeded already. Now you can take the next step. Thanks to that you will be able to exert influence on people, changing their emotional states and approach to various issues. For example, if someone is stressed out and you want them to be relaxed—first you adjust to that stressed out state, then you begin to change your attitude to a more relaxed one. Slowly you begin to speak more slowly, breathe deeply and do less intense gestures.

If you do it skillfully and not obviously, the other person will start to follow your lead towards a better, more pleasant emotional state. This is a great tool that provides huge opportunities in terms of effective communication.

Some will say that they “prefer to be themselves” and that they believe such actions are artificial. Sticking rigidly to the same behavior can sometimes bring good results, but it's on the contrary much more often. Now you have obtained knowledge which allows you to achieve excellent results in many different situations. Remember that every single interaction with the other person has a purpose.

The objectives can be different: getting close to the other person, gaining trust, comforting the person, exchanging viewpoints and many others. Whatever the goal, rapport helps you achieve it by establishing better contact with other people. Creation of harmony and effective agreement is a beautiful thing and what's more, brings great benefits for both sides of communication.

Chapter 15:

How to Use Metaphors to Communicate Better

Our daily conversations are stuffed with this remarkable linguistic structure. On average, during one minute of spoken language, we usually use as many as six metaphors. Once you learn to notice metaphors among other people's words, magical things start to happen.

The ability to refer to metaphors in daily conversation gives you many great new possibilities: everything from changing other people's beliefs or solving their problems, to inducing laughter or motivation. In this chapter I will show you how to navigate among metaphors during your usual conversations, coaching sessions or even business negotiations.

Metaphors vs. Logical Mind

Imagine that your friend says: "My business is not taking off!" As long as this person is not actually a pilot or airline owner, they're referring to a specific event or situation in their life. Maybe you could simply ignore the metaphor and just ask, "What do you mean?" However, getting very clear information about how this problem is represented in their mind and then relating to this specific metaphor gives a much better effect. Why? Because then their logical mind doesn't get into action, ruining all your efforts.

The fight with their logical mind in such a situation would be a rather futile attempt. Your friend, explaining to you what exactly they meant by saying their business isn't taking off, would find a lot of reasonable arguments supporting this metaphor and possibly start feeling even worse. "...Oh, I'm so hopeless! Can't even take care of my own business!" Even if you were brilliant with rhetoric and turned down all of these self-deprecating arguments one by one, they would probably find new ones. More or less accurate, but quite true for their logical mind.

By referring to a metaphor itself, **you bypass your interlocutor's conscious mind and refer to their subconscious.** The world of metaphors is created subconsciously and usually has no direct connection with the real issue it presents. Thanks to this, there is almost no risk that the so-called "inner critic" (internal voice) will start messing around in this person's head, making them feel even worse. It is impossible to discuss with a metaphor!

Move Inside the Metaphor

What does "moving across the metaphor" mean? This is the process of taking a particular metaphor literally and referring to it as if it was not a metaphor, but a normal, logical expression.

Let's discuss it on the example of our friend's business "not taking off." Knowing how beneficial referring to a metaphor usually is, instead of asking for specific reasons for not taking off, you could ask, "Are you sure that you accelerated your plane to the maximum speed before trying to take off?", or, "How long is the airstrip?" You can also ask, "In that case,

what can you do to make the engines run at top speed and finally take off?”, or, “Have you read the right manual on how to fly this particular plane?”

There are many options. Going further, you could also say, “Maybe you need to try taking off with a better, newer model plane?” Or with humor, “Are you sure that you’re sitting inside of a plane? Maybe it’s just a strange car?” Each of these metaphors proposes different solutions or invites the other person to discover a particular issue more deeply. “Next time you better refuel your plane before trying to take off or you will just drive all around the runway again and make ground control laugh!”

The most unusual thing about metaphors is that the **subconscious mind will always find the relevant and necessary meaning of a particular analogy.** It often happens that two different people find answers for two different problems (which don’t have anything in common) in a single metaphor. High flexibility of this fanciful linguistic structure makes it useful in a plethora of situations. Maybe that’s why it’s so widely used in many religious books and folklore stories. It’s very helpful for our mind and our ancestors knew about it.

Some time ago a friend and coworker told me: “I feel like I have had my hands tied with a thick rope for a very long time...” I asked him: “Do you want to run all over the place and beg people to cut these ropes and free your hands, or maybe you will finally pull yourself together, find a sharp hook and tear them up to shreds?” He just nodded his head significantly and said, “I definitely prefer to find the inner strength and opportunity to tear these cords up.” This brief

exchange of thoughts made me realize very quickly who I'm dealing with and how to talk to him to get him motivated to overcome his problems.

Remember that before you start referring to a metaphor, it is worth it to have a good rapport with your conversation partner.

The strategy of referring to metaphors used in everyday conversation is very simple and consists of two stages:

1. Specification of a metaphor.
2. Searching for solutions.

In both stages, you move only on the surface of the metaphor, not going into the details of what the particular analogy means for the person you are talking with.

To explain it better, let me tell you about a case described by Sue Knight in her book, *NLP at Work*. She worked with this company where the CEOs would often use these expressions in conversations between themselves:

- “I was taking heavy fire...”
- “To attack the competition...”
- “Aim at the right spot...”

This way of perceiving their business wasn't a beneficial cognitive scheme in this instance. Instead of focusing on how to improve their company, these CEOs were focusing on their “enemies” and the “war” they believed they led. They were wasting their energy on the constant preparation for the “fight” instead of putting their focus on finding new, creative ways to make their business stand out.

Taking the two stages of working with metaphors into account, I would ask them questions like: “Who is fighting with whom here?”, “What are you fighting for?”, “How will you know that you won the war?” and so on.

Knowing the answers, I would refer to searching for solutions through some ideas that are still connected with the metaphors of war or battle. I could also use more general solutions: “Wouldn’t it be better if you buried the hatchet or perhaps maybe even joined your forces at some point?”, “You will never build a great empire focusing on fighting all the time. Perhaps it would be better to put the entire focus in development inside of the team?”

If you refer to a given problem like that, it’s almost guaranteed you will be understood by the person who sees the world in a certain way. You do not have to have extensive knowledge or specific skills to give a good metaphoric solution, as metaphors are usually simple.

Below you will find a list of some other metaphors which are often used by people in conversations. Take a look at the list to be able to notice them easier in conversations. In addition, taking each of them into consideration, you can practice what you have learned in this chapter:

- I’m carrying a huge weight on my shoulders.
- I have a feeling there is a big, thick wall in front of me.
- Someone cut my wings.
- I am speechless.

- I am still standing in the same place and cannot move forward.
- We do not transmit on the same wavelengths.
- He's like a ticking time bomb.

Where Can You Use This Knowledge?

- **In any conversation, with any person**, in order to play with the language and improve your linguistic skills. Catch metaphors, change them, seek solutions and make others laugh.
- **When you want to help someone** - people very often describe their problems with the help of metaphors. Expand on metaphors they use and try to find better solutions for them on the level of these analogies.
- **To influence and inspire others** - when someone verbalizes some of their obstacles/blocks in the form of a metaphor (e.g. "it's out of my league"), refer to it without getting into logical arguments and introduce that person to new possibilities.
- **When you want to teach someone or open their eyes to something important** - a good metaphor can be the key to understand even the most difficult issues. It's sometimes enough if you start a sentence with: "It's just as if..." to make someone's mind "click."

These are just a few ideas on how to apply operations on the level of metaphors. Across the vast ocean of possibilities, you

will surely find out what is the most useful for you.

The world of metaphors is truly fascinating and I encourage you to start discovering it—**mastery of this particular linguistic structure in conversations takes communication to a totally new level.**

Chapter 16:

Metaprograms

Do you want to know the key to every human's mind? Metaprograms refer to the different ways of filtering incoming information by different people. Knowledge about specific mental filters they use gives you the opportunity to communicate much more effectively with others and also enables you to strengthen the influence you have on them.

As you already know from the first chapters of this book, everyone makes decisions, finds solutions, processes what you say or motivates themselves differently. The ability to see these differences and to recognize different metaprograms allows you to adjust your message so that you can always reach the intended goal of your interaction.

The human mind processes a HUGE amount of information every single moment of our lives. To be able to function normally in this world, it must filter all the information and signals it receives by ignoring some of them and letting others in. **Metaprograms are these filters of perception, which decide how we develop specific, individual thinking patterns in our brains.** They are a little bit like club bouncers, defining which information will be let in and which won't be allowed to enter.

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) assumes that every person has their own unique set of metaprograms. They filter

the world of every person differently, creating unique maps of reality. Metaprograms define how each person will behave in a particular situation.

Metaprograms can be easily identified by the observation of behavior and language a particular person uses. The ability to see the patterns between different metaprograms gives amazing opportunities in communication with others—you can easily tell which decision to make, how to motivate people and how to look at their specific problems. **Such knowledge allows you to customize your message for the receiver, having much more of an impact on their behavior.**

In his book *Introducing NLP*, Joseph O'Connor writes: "A good speaker forms his message the way it fits the other person's world. He uses language compatible with their metaprograms, changing the shape of information in advance and making sure that they will be able to understand it easily."

Let me show you the most important metaprograms now. I'll describe them thoroughly so you have a clear picture of what each of them is about. In addition, I will show you the way to recognize each metaprogram in the other person and the way to use this knowledge in a smart way.

Motivation From-To

This metaprogram refers to **a strategy of motivating oneself**. People with a "TO" metaprogram are focused on their goals, while those with a pattern of "FROM" are focused on the problems to avoid. The former ones motivate themselves more easily when they have an image of something positive in their minds, something they can achieve, a success they can reach. **They are attracted TO this image.** On the other hand,

people with “FROM” metaprograms motivate themselves by being constantly aware of what bad can happen if they do not execute a particular task. **They motivate themselves using fear and are pushed away FROM the negative images.**

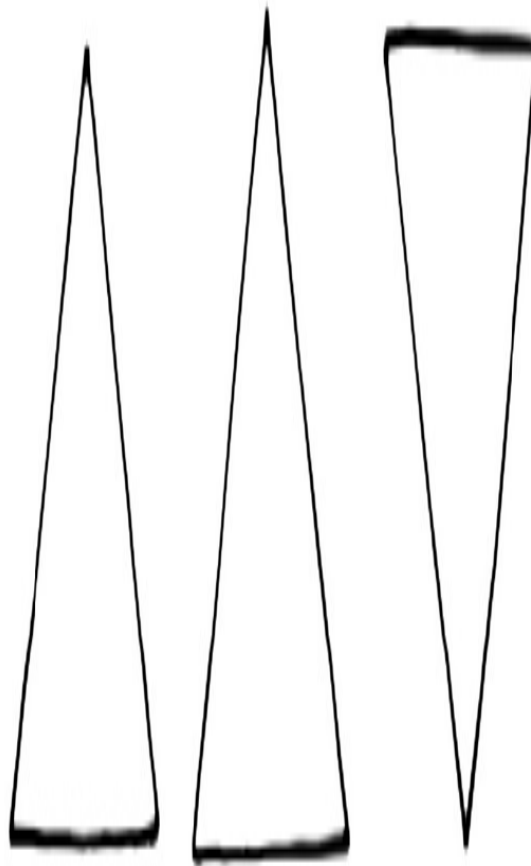
How do you recognize these metaprograms? For example, when a person works a day job, you can ask why they chose that work over another field. Depending on which pattern is more dominant in them, they will answer that either this work allows them to achieve their goals and realize their dreams or that job gives them a roof over their head and allows them to pay their bills. Of course, that might not apply in every possible case of people working day jobs, as some of these dead-end jobs don't leave space for any self-development and everyone knows it, but you get the point. If the person you are talking to does not work yet, you can ask about their reason for choosing a particular university, school, or faculty over another, why they do what they do, etc. Besides, this metaprogram very often appears in usual, everyday conversations.

Once you recognize the pattern usually used by this person, you gain the possibility to influence and motivate them much more effectively. **When persuading that person to do something, always use their metaprogram.** Trying to motivate someone with a strong desire for accomplishments and successes by some kind of punishment will be ineffective in most cases or could even bring the opposite effect. Vice versa, if you try to use some kind of reward to motivate people who always think about how to avoid defeats, it may end up in a failure. Of course, this rule is not an absolute when applied, at least not always and everywhere, but remembering about

the matching of metaprograms you will always be sure that your message will have the planned effect or at least end up close to it.

Similarities-Differences

People who are similarly oriented will notice things similar to each other in many different contexts, whereas those focused on differences filter their reality mainly by noticing new, different and various things. The first group of people usually do not like changes, stay away from new technologies and revolutionary solutions. The second group of people look for changes, they like challenges and enjoy growth.



What kind of relations do you notice between these three triangles? A similarities-oriented person would probably say that these three triangles are the same size and same color, while the differences-oriented person can respond to the same question that two triangles are the same, while another one is different—upside down. You can try it on someone by, for instance, showing him three coins, two showing tails and one showing heads.

Looking from a point of language, people with the metaprogram of similarity often use the phrases: “the same,” “similar,” “traditionally” or “commonly.” People with metaprograms of differences use phrases such as: “different,” “various,” “innovative” or “as opposed to.”

Let’s suppose that you are a car seller. A person comes to you who owns the same model that you are currently selling, just from three years prior, and is now looking for a new model. If this man is focused on the similarities, it will be much easier to convince him into buying the new model by telling him it retains all the advantages of its predecessors, that it is still the same tradition, that the very soul of this car remains unchanged. On the other hand, if that person is focused on the differences, it is worth it to say: “This model is completely new, has an innovative line, many revolutionary features, much better acceleration, it’s almost an entirely different car that looks similar.”

The two metaprograms above refer mainly to motivation. Fluency in noticing them quickly will help you motivate and persuade people you are communicating with much more effectively by adjusting your message to your receiver. Start to watch and listen to people during each conversation more

carefully—you should be able to notice these patterns quite quickly. Often it's possible to differentiate metaprograms of the other people even during the most usual conversation about the weather.

Knowing how the mind of another human filters information allows your messages to be much more precise, which is the key to effective motivation and influencing.

Options/Procedures

People focused on options like to have a possibility of choice. They avoid common schemes and feel much better when they have big impact on the process of achieving their goals.

People focused on the procedures prefer to work according to the finished procedure scheme or template, without feeling the urge to make their own choices. They feel best when their tasks are determined in advance and they accomplish what has to be done step by step following, for example, some kind of written outline.

People focused on options are more often very creative. It is not the best idea to employ them on positions where success depends strictly on the adherence to superiors' commands. Figuratively, it is not worth it to employ people focused on procedures where more creative ways of acting and individual decision making are needed.

For instance, when you want to convince a person focused on “options” to do something, tell them about a wide range of opportunities they will have in this position. Show them where they will be able to make decisions for themselves, as well as how big their impact on the course of the whole situation will

be. Show that they will be able to use their own ideas. When interviewing a person focused on procedures, let them know they will receive all the detailed instructions necessary to operate. Convince them that everything will be clear and well-presented and the only thing they will have to do is execute the ready-to-use instructions.

General/Detailed

People with “general” metaprograms prefer to look at the whole problem or issue in general from a bigger perspective. They feel good when they can fully embrace the concept. **People oriented on the details, however, prefer to look at the specific elements of the whole.** They focus the greatest attention on details, on the specific elements of problems and concepts.

The former are usually great at planning. Their ability to grasp all issues allows them to prepare a plan and a strategy for better action. People with a “detailed” metaprogram feel more comfortable with tasks that have a sequence of required individual steps. They look at each single task individually, focusing only on one step at a time.

Again, this metaprogram can easily be learned by observing peoples’ expressions. Listen carefully any time they are presenting an issue, problem or idea. Note if they are talking about the details and specific elements of this issue or are rather focused on general transmission of the concept.

How can you use this knowledge? Let’s suppose that you are a bicycle retailer. If your customer is focused on the general perspective, you could encourage them by speaking about the general merits of this bike (it will allow them to take long and enjoyable trips, they will feel great riding this bike, that it’s comfortable and robust, etc.). To a person with “detailed” metaprogram you could say that this bike has great brakes, handlebars and a frame made from the best materials, essentially only the concrete stuff.

The Authority of the External/Internal

People oriented to external authority need the support of others to make a decision. They usually lean on the authority in a particular field. When they have to make a decision, they ask other people for their opinion and based on their feedback, they make their final decision. **Those oriented to the internal authority rely only and exclusively on their own beliefs on the subject.** They reject the opinion of others, taking mainly their own priorities and judgements into consideration. Generally, they are guided by their own guts.

People with a metaprogram of “external authority” need someone who is going to support them and show them the right way. Those on the opposite side can rarely accept someone else’s leadership.

How can you specify this metaprogram in another person? The most helpful question might be, “How do you know you’ve done your job well?” People with the internal authority will say they rated it themselves, while those with an external authority will indicate the confirmation from other people.

In an attempt to convince someone into something, you can tell them about how they will have your support or the support of other people along the way and they will always be able to ask for any advice and help. You can also convince internal-authority people by telling them about how much independence and impact they will have on the decision-making process by selecting the most suitable options for them, et cetera.

Me/Others

The last metaprogram I’m going to describe refers to the particular view of benefits. **People with the “me”**

metaprogram usually focus on their benefits as opposed to people with the “others” metaprogram, which mainly pay attention to what other people’s benefits will be.

This metaprogram is very easy to recognize. Asking people what benefits are the most important to them, you’ll notice that some people talk mainly about themselves or about other people, their loved ones, for example. Someone focused on “me” will say, “I want to be happy about it,” “I’m doing it for myself,” or, “I need this.” Someone with “others” metaprograms will say, “I want other people to like it,” “I care about the opinion of my friends,” “My wife has to accept it,” or maybe, “I won’t buy this product—I like it but I’m concerned about the environment.”

Once you recognize which direction this person takes, use it to talk about the benefits for that person or about the benefits for people from their surroundings.

Recognition of metaprograms is very easy—you **just need to ask the right questions and carefully listen to the answers.** In most cases, these questions are not even necessary, because usual conversations quickly reveal particular patterns.

Remember that metaprograms are, after all, mainly about generalizations. If you recognize particular metaprograms in someone, it obviously **doesn’t mean they will always behave like this.** Metaprograms may change over time, according to different contexts. **Therefore, be observant and flexible; do not attach yourself to one metaprogram** when you discover that, for example, a person close to you is detail-oriented. There might also be some individuals who are not completely

specified by a single side of a particular metaprogram. They may be more in the middle, oscillating between one and another.

Hence, remember to **carefully listen to the other person's words all the time**, not only until the moment you specify their metaprograms for the first time. **Do not put people into boxes, but rather assume that the person is using the particular metaprogram at that moment and that is why and when you can use it.**

Use your head when trying to put your influence on others, bearing in mind the fact that the key to effective communication is matching your message to the way in which other people communicate. Therefore, respect their metaprograms and benefit from this knowledge. Wisely used, this may prove to be an extremely powerful tool. Practice checking what works best and in which context. Remember that when you learn how to utilize this knowledge in practice, you will naturally become very familiar with it at some point and you will become an even better communicator.

Chapter 17:

Meta Model

Meta Model is a pillar of the linguistic part of NLP. Mastery of this concept will not only help you to improve your communication with others, but also enable you to cope with your own beliefs.

Let me begin by telling you more about the concept of Meta Model and the assumptions built on its foundations so you become familiar with the most important language structures and questions, which can be used to undermine limiting beliefs—both yours and the people with whom you communicate.

Meta Model is the work of Richard Bandler and John Grinder. For a few years they observed and analyzed the actions of the best psychotherapists they knew. Based upon **Fritz Persl’s, Virginia Satir’s and Milton Erickson’s work**, they created the linguistic therapeutic model, which allows for effective problem solving during therapy. You can find a very exact description of the Meta Model in Richard Bandler’s book *The Structure of Magic*, which was also his PhD thesis work. It’s a great read.

To understand what the Meta Model is, it is worth the time to familiarize yourself with the concepts of deep structure and surface structure, which describe the formation of mental representations in an easier way.

Using our senses, we receive “raw material” from the world around us—what we see, hear, feel, taste and smell. **All of this**

sensory information is a deep structure. It's everything that we receive from the outside world, without mental interpretation. In order to function in the world around us, we need to simplify the raw material, because otherwise we wouldn't be able to embrace the whole.

We use language to represent our experience, as well as to communicate it. Using language, we create maps of reality and this is the advantage we have over other animals. **Our map of reality, which is a simplified version of raw experience, is the surface structure.** We respond to it on a daily basis. It's our beliefs and thoughts about the surrounding reality.

People who are successful and enjoy life in general are able to draw from the world in a direct manner. They do not dilute their experience by passing them through the filters of what they "should" experience or what they expect to experience.

Many people go to the cinema to see a movie with a set of beliefs about it. They were formed on the basis of the trailer, written reviews or the opinions of their friends. These filters make them receive the film differently than they would have received it if they saw it without creating the initial assumptions.

On many different levels of our lives, we look at the world through the prism of an entire set of generalizations, distortions and deletions.

Meta Model is a set of linguistic structures that are mainly questions. It is thanks to them we are able to obtain information that has been "hidden." We hide this information because then it is easier for us to communicate with others—we can provide each other generalized information.

Unfortunately, it often raises problems because we react to false beliefs that were formed, as a result of the creation of a general image of reality.

While you create a map of reality from the raw experience, there are three main processes: **removal (or deletion), generalizations and distortions**. Each of these processes cut out some information from our communication, which is why it is more difficult for us to communicate and understand each other.

In therapy or coaching, a Meta Model is used to help people experience the deep structure again. That is, the full description of a given situation. Responding to generalized thought patterns can often be the main or even only source of destructive feelings.

Deletions:

Deletion is the skipping of information that is relevant in any given situation.

- **Simple Deletion** – Speaking highly generally.

“I’m disappointed.”

What exactly disappointed you? What happened? What were you expecting?

- **Comparison** – Removal of information essential in comparing ourselves with others.

“They are better than I am!”

Who specifically? What are they better at? How are they better?

- **The Lack of Benchmark** – There's no noun in the expression. People involved in the situation have not been named.

“I was warned...”

Who was threatening you? Who warned you about it?

- **Indefinite Benchmark** – Those involved were listed in a general way.

“They cheated me!”

Who is cheating you? How did they cheat you?

- **Unspecified Verb** – The problem mentioned is not specified.

“She is hurting me by doing this.”

What exactly did she do? How did she hurt you?

Distortions:

Changing of a given situation or phenomenon's meaning.

- **Nominalization** – Changing a verb to a noun, reducing the whole process to a single thing or event.

“I'm down.”

How did you down yourself? This question also helps to regain responsibility for the process.

- **Cause-Effect (A Causes B)** – Explanation of one situation with another, which does not have a direct cause-effect with it.

“He doesn’t listen to me, so he doesn’t care about me.”

Does he never listen to you? How is one related to the other? Do you always listen to him?

- **Mind Reading** – Supporting your expressions with your conjectures and projections about the thoughts of other people.

“She thinks that I am hopeless.”

How exactly do you know that? What does she tell you about it?

- **Complex Equivalent (A = B)** – Where event A supposedly causes event B, but it’s only true for that person due to their beliefs and attitude.

“Christmas without snow is hopeless.”

How does one cause the other?

- **Anonymous Authority** – Supporting of the statement with an authority which has never been specified.

“We should not talk about this.”

According to whom? Who said so?

Generalizations:

Generalizations of phenomena and situations based upon a single or few experiences.

- **Numerals** – “Always,” “all,” “everyone,” “no one,” “none.”

“All entrepreneurs struggle with financial liquidity.”

Absolutely everyone? Do you know all of the entrepreneurs in our country and in the world?

- **Modal Operators** – “I must,” “I should,” “I can’t.”
“I can’t let it happen.”

What stands in the way? What or who is holding you back?
What exactly will happen if you do it?

- **Presumptions** – Hidden assumptions.

“Before you judge me, first think about what kind of man you are yourself.”

Where did the assumption that I will be judging you come from?

For me, the Meta Model has always been one of the most important parts of the entire NLP and the art of effective communication. I learned it to such an extent that it became a section of my unconscious mind, and so I use it naturally, spontaneously when I need it as a part of my competence. At a certain stage, good questions come intuitively. It is a very useful tool during coaching sessions.

Meta Model is one of the main topics within the framework of the majority of NLP trainings. For me, it’s one of the most crucial ones.

It is important to use Meta Model subtly and with moderation. The continuous asking of (even correct) questions may be uncomfortable for your conversation partners, because not everyone is willing to expose or admit

imperfections in their thinking. Meta Model should serve you to improve communication. Therefore, remember not to overuse it. You don't want to interrogate people. Always take care of the rapport with your interlocutor and feel if they're ready for a conversation, which to some extent can be therapeutic.

You can practice the Meta Model with someone who also wants to learn it. Make a list of limiting beliefs and ask each other questions from this chapter. This way, you will quickly get familiar with it and you will be able to intuitively choose appropriate questions.

Chapter 18:

Eye Accessing Cues

Do you know that eye movements can show whether someone thinks by images, sounds or feelings? “Sensory predicates and eye accessing cues” is a model of how man gets access to a specific type of information which is stored somewhere in the subconscious.

This assumption, developed by the creators of NLP, is based on the knowledge that the information related to specific senses is stored in different areas of our brain. Watching the eyes of the other person, you may be able to determine quite accurately what is happening in their heads!

Perhaps you have already noticed that people sometimes look in a few different directions while conversing with you. You were probably convinced that these looks are either random or something attracted their attention. In some instances, this could indeed be so. However, in most cases, this person probably tried to **access some information**, reaching into their memory, imagining the picture or speaking to themselves in their minds.

Sometimes, when people tell you about their recent summer vacations, they look up and to their left. Such eye movements are usually subconscious reflex action which helps them remind themselves, for example, how the view from the top of Eiffel tower looked.

Another time, someone looks down and to their left side, wanting to recall what someone told them. They are obtaining access to information stored as an internal dialogue, which is simply an audio projection of a memory.

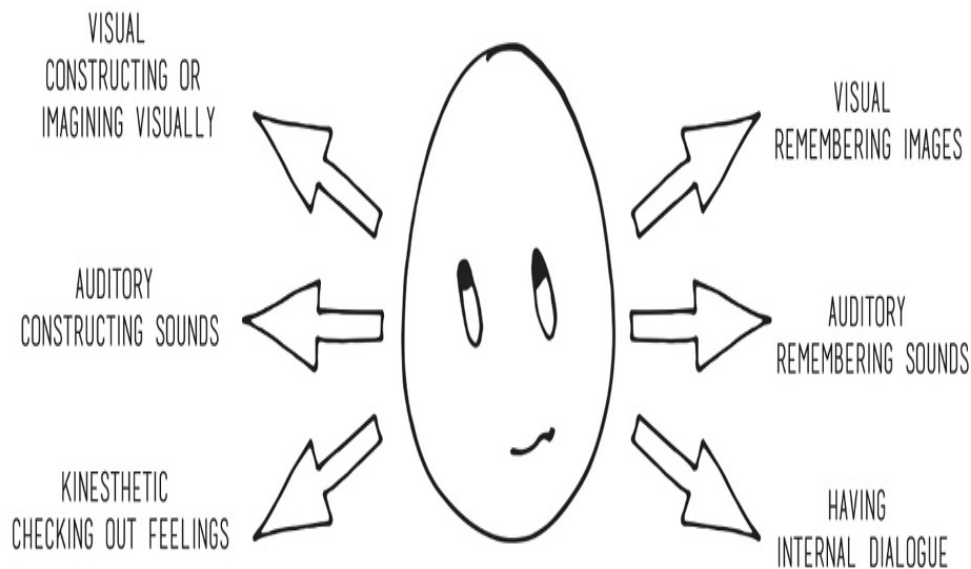
This knowledge allows you to discover what is currently happening in the mind of the other person. Of course, you are not able to find out what exactly this person is thinking about and it's not really a mind-reading technique per se, but knowing whether it is a picture, sound or a feeling gives you some great opportunities.

How does it work?

The vast majority of information we receive from the outside world is stored by our subconscious. Any time we want to access this database, we have to “move” the “files” from there to our consciousness. Sensory predicates and eye accessing cues tell us about the way in which most people reach for this information. This, of course, is a generalization, which is not true for all people in the world—but surprisingly often this model really goes along with what we experience.

The process of obtaining access to information is made either through a brief look in a particular direction or by looking there for a longer moment, reflecting on the answer. It is worth remembering that a look in a certain direction doesn't have to be made for the person to access specific memory—it is only a subconscious facilitation for a brain.

On the diagram below you can see the directions people look in order to gain access to a particular type of information.



(This is what you see when you look at the other person)

As mentioned earlier, the above diagram is a generalization, which means that it doesn't always have to be like that. However, even if a person is looking in another direction than the diagram states, usually the sensory predicates and eye accessing cues will be permanent and fixed for them. So, for example, looking to their left to remember sounds. The next time they want to access the same type of information, they will quite likely look in the same direction as it's a fixed habit type of process.

Directions may also vary in left-handed people—what should be on the left will usually be located on the right side. Remember that since the human brain is the most complicated mechanism known to man, you cannot take anything for granted during interpersonal relations. Always carefully watch the person with whom you are speaking.

I would not recommend using this model as a lie detection tool. I met some NLP-freaks who believed that if they ask, “What were you doing last week at this exact time?” and the person pauses to think of the answer while looking to their right side and up, then they’re lying as they’re creating an image instead of remembering it. This interpretation, however, may be far from the truth. Why?

Sometimes some of our memories are blurred or faded and we help ourselves by creating images. Sometimes when you ask someone about what their best friend’s voice sounds like, they will first look up creating a picture of the friend and then down, forming the sound of their voice. You need to take a lot of different options into account, so you can never be 100% sure about your interpretation, even after extensive CIA interrogation training. Moreover, some people are just extraordinarily talented at lying.

Let’s do a little experiment.

Anticipating that you will probably want to try it in practice, I have prepared a few questions for you that will allow you to test this model on another person. To each symptom, you will find three questions that correspond to a particular type of information. When you manage to convince someone to do this experiment, in any case, do not tell this person anything

about eye movements or about anything that is really the subject of this “research”. Simply say that you want to ask them a few questions.

Reminded Images:

- What color are the walls in your room?
- What do you see from the window in your office?
- What color was your t-shirt yesterday?

Created Images:

- How would your room look with pink polka dots on the wall?
- What would an elephant cross-bred with a tiger look like?
- Imagine a green square in a red triangle.

Reminded Sounds:

- What sound does the door to your room make when it slams?
- What is the ringtone you have set on your phone?
- What is the sound of your closest friend’s voice?

Created Sounds:

- How would a radio sound underwater?
- What sound would a drunk bird make?
- How would a scream made by five thousand people at one time sound?

Kinesthetic (Feelings):

- How does holding a snowball in your hand feel?
- How does it feel to dip your hand in a bathtub full of hot water?
- What do you feel when you touch sandpaper?

Internal Dialogue:

- What do you say to yourself when something does not go the way you want it?
- What tone of voice do you have when you're talking to yourself?
- Tell yourself something nice in your thoughts.

Ask these questions to someone else rather than yourself, because staring in a specific direction when accessing information is a process of the subconscious. If you ask yourself these questions, thinking simultaneously about where you are looking, you will disturb this natural process. It is best to ask these questions to a person who is not familiar with NLP communication techniques, is not a police officer, special agent, psychotherapist, etc. During this exercise, do not tell this person what it is about until you finish asking all the questions.

It is important that you get familiar with the ability to see even the smallest glances, as sometimes they only last for a part of a second. You have to be very attentively focused on observing what's happening on the other person's face.

If the person who you are asking questions to gives you the answers quickly without looking in various directions, it is worth it to ask them more detailed questions, forcing them to think. For example, “What color were the walls painted before the last renovation?”, “What color are the walls in the basement?”, or, “What if this hybrid of an elephant and tiger somehow also gets crossed with a hamster? What would it look like?” Play with these questions a little bit and have fun. More detailed or abstract questions will force your interlocutor to think deeply and will eventually cause eye movements.

When I decided to test this model with this set of questions on a few people, it worked on five out of eight cases. I was very positively surprised by the result. Now, watching people as I ask them questions (no longer in the context of the experiment, but simply during usual conversations) I often notice how unconsciously their eyes “escape” when they are looking for answers and it mostly sticks to what you see above.

This little trick can also be useful:

- When identifying whether a person thinks with images, sounds or feelings, which allows for **better communication and building a good rapport**. For instance, by using language of the senses, “See, it’s as clear as the summer sky!”
- When **referring to what someone said by using gestures**, e.g., “When you were relaxing on that beautiful beach, did you...” and point with your hand in the same direction or spot that person looked at while recalling their holiday.

- **As a fun fact**, showing others interesting information about how our mind works.

Discover it yourself by checking how frequently it works in reality. Consider where else you can find it useful and use it as much as possible!

You can also take a look at this clip on YouTube. It's a really good example of this subconscious reaction:

<http://tinyurl.com/eyecues>

Chapter 19:

How to Predict Future Behaviors

In this short but useful chapter, I'm going to show you one of my favorite tricks that few people know about: how to predict how anyone will act in the future. It's invaluable in many different situations, such as work interviews, dating, business meetings, etc. Have you ever been asked annoying and pointless questions during job interviews, such as, "So tell me about your approach to work," or, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" Well, by asking these questions, people usually want to learn something about your future behaviors and your mindset, but since no one would respond, "I don't give a crap about work and you know that; all I need is your money and my peace after five," or, "In five years I see myself chilling out in Tahiti with a drink in my hand," these questions usually don't make any real sense and aren't asked by HR professionals who know what they're doing, nor by effective communicators.

Don't just ask people things like, "So, tell me how you deal with conflicts?" because what you are going to get is a bland and pointless answer, crafted so that you hear what you want to hear. Unfortunately, their real behavior will be revealed only during the real conflict. Do you want to know what is most likely to show you future behaviors? **Past behavior—the best future predictor!** If you are about to ask someone a question

that is intended to discover how they are going to act in a variety of different situations, what you are going to do is to use this simple process: first of all, you need to ask them about a specific situation that happened in the past. Then, you want to ask them how they reacted initially to this situation. Lastly, you need to ask them how they resolved this situation.

So, for example, you might ask: “Tell me about a time in the past when you found yourself in the middle of a conflict about something very important to you. How did you react to that conflict, how did you go about resolving it and how did you work through that conflict?” When you ask questions formed like that, you force people to stop for a moment and really think about the specific conflict they were in, how they reacted, what steps they took and how they eventually resolved it. That’s when you’re really going to find out what they are going to do when a similar challenge arises with you or in your company/department/relationship/etc. That is going to be a great new skill to accompany you throughout your life. For example, if your date would tell you that she had a conflict in a previous marriage, found out that her husband was gambling and that the first thing she did was apply for a divorce without even listening to what he had to say, you would know that this person has a short fuse and is not really into long-term problem-solving. If she finds out something she doesn’t like, she will probably dump you in a second. With an answer like, “Well, I went online, found a good family psychotherapist and we went to our first meeting the very next day,” you would know she’s proactive and into conflict-solving. You can use this in all varieties of different professional and personal situations. So don’t ask, “What

would you do?” or, “How do you come about...” Instead, ask about certain situations from the past, using this format: “What happened, how did you react, how did you resolve it or how did that turn out?” With this simple yet powerful upgrade in your communication, you are going to feel like a sorcerer or an oracle. You will be surprised to see how often people do exactly the same things they did in the past.

Chapter 20:

How to Finally Start Remembering Names?

The ability to quickly and permanently remember peoples' names is an **extremely** underrated skill and a must-have feature of anyone who wants to communicate effectively and smoothly! Remembering names will allow you to make an awesome first impression and save you lots of trouble after forgetting someone's name after five minutes of conversation.

Some time ago, remembering names was a great challenge for me. Usually when two or three people told me their names, I forgot them after about a few minutes. I really wanted to remember them, but they would just vanish rapidly. It very often held me back from making a good first impression and from succeeding at job interviews, during the first days at a new school, university, in a new company, during business meetings or even during nights out with friends when I wanted to meet new people. From what I noticed, this is quite a popular problem. My dear friend almost lost the chance to have a date with the love of his life because he forgot her name and after one hour of talking, called her Jennifer instead of Jessica. It ended up in a painful but funny (for us, not him) face slap since she is a rather fiery and impulsive kind of girl. Luckily, I eventually managed to convince her that he's a very good man, just a little bit forgetful. I'm going to show you a

few tricks, thanks to which you will be able to impress everyone with your great memory for names and improve your social skills.

Remembering a name and then using it early in the first conversations is one of the best ways to make a **great first impression**. By using the name of the person who you just met, you will make them feel important to you. By doing so, you can easily open the door to creating a special relationship with that person.

“For most people, their own name is the sweetest and most important sound in any language.” - **Dale Carnegie**

Here’s how to go about it:

1. Commit Yourself

Decide today that you will remember names every time you meet someone new. Usually, when we talk to someone for the first time, we do not pay attention to their name. It usually disappears from our heads literally in a matter of seconds. That’s why **the commitment** to start remembering the names of people you meet is so important.

If you think, “I have such a bad memory for names,” then you are wrong and looking for excuses. There is no such thing as a bad memory for names. If you do not remember them, it means that you do nothing to remember them. Decide that from now on you will start doing something in this direction. Recall that undertaking whenever you expect to meet someone new.

2. Focus

When you are greeting someone for the first time, always be focused on this activity. You need to be present in the moment. Dispersion and lack of focused attention will simply hold you back from remembering names. Carefully listen to what people say, how they introduce themselves. Moreover, take notice of how each person looks. See what characteristics their faces have. You will need these details to create associations, which I will describe in the fourth point.

3. Repeat

Repetition of the name is a quick way to save it in your memory. You can repeat names in many different ways. For example, immediately using the given name. Let's suppose that someone introduces himself to you as Adam. And you say: "Hi Adam, nice to meet you." After a while of conversation you might ask, "Listen Adam, you've got a really cool accent, are you from...?" Another way to repeat the name is pronouncing it in your thoughts. In this case, after Adam introduces himself, you say in your head, "Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam..." The third possibility is to write this name on a piece of paper as soon as you have the opportunity to do so. Of course it depends on the circumstances in which you meet, but you can always save that name in your cellphone or somewhere else. The mere act of writing it will help your memory by a great degree.

4. Create Associations

Whenever you hear a new name, create images which include the associations of the name with an object or event. In addition, make this image vivid, funny or even absurd and overdrawn, colorful and in motion—it will make you

remember this picture and the name connected with it much better.

A few examples:

- You just met **Caroline**. Imagine her wearing a big, colorful necklace of coral beads. These corals are heavy, have a strange shape and bright colors. She bought this necklace in South Carolina.
- You just met **Adam**. Imagine him dressed as a dignified lady. She wears a long and beautiful dress and has a fan in her hand, which she uses for cooling herself. Now that it's not Adam, you should address him madam!
- **Kenny**. You just checked your pockets and you have no cash! You ask Kenny to lend you a penny, so you can grab a nice cold beer together.
- **Ann**. Imagine Ann dressed as a police officer and holding a gun. She has an oversized police hat on her head and a scared robber handcuffed to her wrist. Ann and her big gun.

As you can see, it's pretty simple. Anyone can create such funny or silly associations in a few seconds. When you do this, **keep the created image in your head for a few moments**. Now if you have to remind yourself of a particular name, the association will come immediately to your mind.

Note that you can create specific associations with many names. Then, for example, when you meet another Caroline, you will already know which image to use, without a need to create a new one each time. I believe that this is a great idea,

but since I find it quite amusing to come up with new ideas every single time, I did not decide to do this very often.

5. Ask Again

If for some reason you could not use these techniques or you've somehow already forgotten the name of someone you've just met—**don't be afraid to ask them to repeat their name.** This person certainly will be happy to tell you their name again. It's a much better solution than allowing for a situation in which you will have to use that name for a few hours and it's gone from your memory.

You can use all of these ideas at the same time, however in most cases you only need one technique (numbers 3 or 4). Therefore, it is best to first test each of them individually. **See which one works best for you and stay with it.** Using both repeating and associations is a sure way to always remember new names.

When I meet new people and we're still chatting, my strategy is to use their name often in conversation and additionally repeat it in my memory. As soon as I finish talking with them and I have a free moment, I create some funny association in my mind.

When the problem of remembering names is gone, you need to remember one more thing. **Use these names!** You have to show people that you remember their names. That's why when you ask someone about something, you should use their name as part of the question. If you stopped talking with them and you want to ask them about something again, start a sentence by saying their name. As this person hears their name and realizes that you already remember it despite the fact you have

just met, it will be a very enjoyable experience for them. You will make a great impression on them and your conversation will be taken to a completely different level.

Chapter 21:

Sixteen Ways to Have a Great Public Presentation

The ability to act in front of a bigger group of people is one of the most desired skills among people interested in self-development. It's because we perform all the time—not only during presentations, business meetings or trainings, but also in normal everyday situations, like when we meet up with our friends.

There are a lot of ways to make your presentation unique and remembered by all listeners.

During my HR and coaching careers, I had the opportunity to commit many errors, thanks to which I learned more from than any books I read. This allowed me to consistently develop my skills and led to the point at which I can share with you the knowledge gained from my personal experience so you can always achieve goals you have set for yourself while giving public performances and speeches.

Depending on the context in which you will use and benefit from this unique skill, your goals may be different. Among a group of friends, your intention may be to make all of them roll on the floor laughing. During business presentations, it can be showing your listeners a vivid vision of your idea, which they can see clearly and understand entirely. During school or college speeches it could be evoking a strong state of curiosity,

so that the students and professors listen to every word you say.

In short, you will be able to show yourself from the best side, presenting what you have in an interesting way and having a great time while doing it, along with your audience.

Here are 16 ways to carry out a great presentation:

1. **Prepare the material, but do not memorize it.** It is best to take a general outline of what you want to say and select the most important bullet points of your presentation. Use colors and underlines or drawings when you create this sketch, so you can easily recall bullet points and things you need to speak about. If you still forget them during your rehearsal, let the sheet lie somewhere nearby so you can look at it and immediately know what to say. There are two reasons to avoid holding pieces of paper in your hands during a presentation: firstly, you are blocking your hands and have limited opportunities to gesture. Secondly, you'll be probably looking at it all the time, which will spoil the impression of your competence and thorough preparation for the presentation. Also avoid writing down the exact content of your presentation and learning it by heart, because when you forget a single word, the whole presentation will fall apart. In addition to this, everyone in the audience will hear that you learned it all by heart. Give yourself more flexibility and your presentation will be natural.

2. **Get rid of stage fright.** First of all, you need to know that you will make some errors during your presentation anyway. Maybe you will say something differently than you intended or slightly change a fact that you used. This is perfectly normal and it happens to everyone. What is important to know, however, is that there is a 99% chance that NO ONE will even notice it. No matter what skills you have at the moment, you will probably sound a lot more informed than you think. Before your presentation, imagine that everything is going great, imagine how the audience is interested in what you say and how everyone applauds at the end. Before you start, do a few breathing exercises. The more you play, the better your presentation will be!
3. If possible, come **to the place of your presentation much earlier**, even before your listeners. Prepare the appropriate setting of chairs if you can, see how you feel while standing where you are going to speak. Then become a participant for a moment and sit in several places in the room—in the front, side and back of the room. See if everything will be visible from the perspective of a participant. On the basis of this knowledge, go back on stage and set everything so that the presentation goes smoothly and as you planned it.
4. **Clear your mind before getting on stage.** Stop thinking intensely about the material. When I started the adventure with public speaking, I would repeat the material I was going to present as close as one

minute before starting the actual speech. I could not relax because of this and I still wasn't sure if I remembered everything. I quickly realized that everything goes much better when, a few minutes before the start of my speech, I let it go completely and just trusted my subconscious. I also often meditate to calm my mind and have a fully relaxed, chilled-out vibe. When the event starts, I present what comes to my mind, often according to the previously prepared plan, but sometimes I say completely unplanned things. So it is easier and better overall. Let it go right before the presentation and put the plan and rehearsing aside.

5. **Take care of your posture.** Stand straight, putting the weight of the body on two slightly spaced legs. Keep your head high, so that your chin is pointing towards the horizon. This way you will give the impression of a confident person who is qualified in the subject. You should also work on your gestures. Use smooth gestures, which when used in an appropriate manner will picture what you are talking about. Gestures are the topic for a whole other book, but remember gestures should be peaceful, open and fluid. You shouldn't also gesture too high above your chest; it's best to keep your hands below the level of your chest, as some people see high gestures as overwhelming, annoying or explicit. Your body language should serve you as a powerful non-verbal message, which has great importance in the process of communication.

6. **Remember facial expression.** Thanks to the appropriate use of this part of the body, you can cause a lot of excitement in the audience, thanks to the so-called mirror neurons. That's why you should have a rich facial expression repertoire, smile often, raise your eyebrows and make expressions corresponding to what you are talking about. This will add depth and color to your presentation and make the audience understand what you have on your mind, better and faster.
7. **Modulate your voice.** Your vocal cords are a tool which can do absolute wonders, when used properly. First of all, make sure that you speak clearly. Remember not to speak too fast, because people may not follow. The best idea is to record yourself on a voice recorder and then listen to yourself speak several times over. It will give you insight on what you can improve upon in your style of speaking. When performing in front of people, you need to change your voice frequently to evoke different emotional states in your listeners, which will keep them from getting bored or distracted quickly. You can speak loudly at first, only to start whispering a moment later to make them curious. You can use different tones of your voice to accentuate different parts of the speech or to make people laugh. You can use pauses, so they start imagining what you want to tell them. The voice is one of the most crucial elements of public presentations, so put some time

into practicing it and play with it all the time to achieve your goals.

- 8. Look people in the eyes.** If it is a small group of people, you can look into the eyes of each person. If your group is larger, split it into some subgroups in your head and switch with your eyes between selected individuals in the group (then each member of the subgroup will have the impression that you're looking at them). Give your look and attention to all subgroups equally, jumping from one person to another. Don't do it too quickly—look in each person's eyes for about 3 seconds. At the beginning, it might be quite a challenge for you, but you will get used to it with time. Thanks to this your listeners will feel like you are talking directly to them. It's very important if you want them to listen carefully.

The points below are the basics of a good performance. **Work on every one of these points, expanding your knowledge and skills.** At the earliest opportunity, apply them to your life, putting this advice into practice.

You might be still wondering about many things, such as how to build your authority as a speaker, how to put wise suggestions into your presentation or how to motivate listeners for active participation in your speech. You will find answers to all these questions below.

- 9. Fit into the audience.** Before you start your presentation, consider who is going to be listening to you. What types of people are you are going to deal with? Will they be younger, older, students, sellers,

buyers, CEO's or nuns? Think about the experiences, beliefs and values these people might have. Depending on who you will be talking to, you're going to use different examples, tell different stories and refer to different values. Also consider what kind of language they use in everyday life. You will be speaking completely differently to a group of friends than you would to a group of, for example, vendors, bankers, rappers or teachers. Use their vocabulary and you will quickly establish a good rapport, thanks to which your listeners will quickly start feeling a stronger bond with you and will want to listen to you. The creation of such harmony gives amazing effects and creates amazing relationships between the professional speaker and the audience.

10. **Give motivation.** Without it, people won't need to listen to what you say. They need to know why this knowledge might be useful to them. The best situation occurs when there are two streams of motivation coming at them at once—both emotional and logical. At the beginning of your speech, you need to explain to them what the benefits will be (what can they learn, improve, etc.) if they listen to you carefully. Otherwise, they will feel no such need. If you build motivation skillfully, you will have their curiosity and attention provided for the rest of your presentation. Also, tell them why they need this knowledge. This element places your presentation's content in specific contexts of real life. Perhaps they will use it for building their career, relationships with

people or even while shopping. Remember to always give them a good reason for listening to you. Do it at the beginning of your presentation, before you start to present the prepared material.

11. **Refer to your personal experiences.** Every one of us has thousands of diverse life experiences, which can be used as examples in the presentation. It could be even the most usual experiences—perhaps some time ago you were stuck in a traffic jam for a very long time, which helped you observe an interesting social phenomenon. Perhaps you were talking to a friend and saw a unique pattern in his behavior. It's all worth sharing. Why? Because when you refer to your experiences, two very important things happen. First of all, the audience knows that you know what you are talking about not only from books, but also from personal experience. Automatically you become an authority in the subject, so they want to listen to you more and believe in what you say. Secondly, they get tangible proof that what you're speaking about works and has its context in real life, as opposed to being just another abstract and boring theoretical concept. Therefore, you can write down all of your experiences which you want to share and use them during your performance.

12. **Tell stories.** Not only from your own life, but also those found or heard from someone else. Stories can be used to invoke various emotional states in your audience. One of the easiest emotional states to encourage is curiosity. It's also the state that you will

need most during your presentation. If your audience is curious, they will listen carefully, craving more. It's good to include stories related to the topic that you are expanding on, but they don't have to be related directly. After you tell the story, you can explain what it has to do with your speech, even if the connection is slightly stretched. The story is not only supposed to illustrate your points, but also to evoke emotions. Learn the art of storytelling well and play with your voice and body language. Sometimes you can pause just before the final moment of climax to make their curiosity grow even bigger. Then you can change topic and start telling about the main topic of your speech, leaving the ending of your story for later and keeping the audience interested and excited.

13. Whether or not the content of your presentation is a typical self-development topic, **install good stuff in your listeners' heads.** Believing in your authority, they will take most of the suggestions you put in the presentation for granted. You might want to take advantage of this! You define your presentation with what you say. You don't want to say things like: "I know you are already tired, but..." because then they will start to feel tired and this is not a good state for them to be in during your presentation. Instead, you can ask with a smile, "How are you?" This non-verbally assumes the fact that they are doing great. They will probably not start to jump with joy all of a sudden, but they will certainly start feeling better.

You can also state that the topic of your presentation is very interesting. This works in your favor as opposed to a situation in which you would say, “I know it’s a bit boring, but...,” which would lose the interest of each and every listener. Pick suggestions that you use carefully. We suggest something almost all the time, but usually we do it unconsciously.

- 14. Never stop developing your public presentation skills.** The fastest way to improve leads, of course, is through frequent practice. However, if you do not have the option of making regular public speeches, you can always learn from other great speakers. You can model them (observe their verbal and non-verbal patterns and apply them to your own performances). You can use YouTube to look for world-class public performers and watch their videos a few or a dozen or more times, carefully watching what they’re doing. Then you need to see detailed elements of their style. Notice how they use their voice and how it affects listeners’ emotions. What are they doing with their hands, what gestures do they normally use and in which context? Notice exactly what they are saying, what kind of language they are using, how are they introducing themselves and how they end their performances. By watching them so many times, you plant the seed of the new skills in your brain. To make it grow, step away from your computer and start to practice speaking in a similar manner to the person you have watched. Try to imitate their way of speaking. Do so with different

speakers and gain new skills. Focus on only one speaker at a time and proceed to another one once you see all the patterns in their behaviors on stage. Don't worry, you won't be acting exactly like them and no one will call you a copycat; the new behaviors will blend with your own personality, giving you an entirely unique vibe and style.

15. **Ask for feedback.** Ask your audience what you did well and what you could do better during your presentation. It is best to do it during an individual conversation with the participants; you can also ask them to send you an email with the feedback. This is the best way to learn, because you get the opportunity to look at yourself from a completely different perspective. The audience noticed the things that you did not notice and their opinion is the most valuable source of knowledge that will allow you to develop your skills. Ask them for honesty, because the less awkward they feel giving you feedback, the better it is for you. If you can, record your presentation with a video camera or even with a voice recorder. Such material is also a very valuable source of learning.

16. **Have fun!** Because if you have fun, your audience will have a good time too. It will make your presentation stay in their memory for a long time. Therefore, smile as often as you can, crack jokes, play with the entire process. Talk about the things that are most interesting for you. Even if the presentation is about an uninteresting topic, talk only

about the most interesting things and find some engaging examples. Be fascinated about what you say and the audience will also be interested. Positive emotions during the presentation are crucial. Have fun with all you are doing during a presentation!

Now it's time to practice. Write down each of these points on a sheet of paper, in the form of a single sentence so you can carry it with you. Thanks to this, you will always be aware of what you want to work with. Of course, do not use all sixteen methods at your next presentation. Choose three or four elements and practice them before the presentation so that you are able to successfully apply them to your life at the earliest opportunity. As soon as you are successful with those elements, select other ways and start to practice them as well. Over time you will become a great public speaker, easily reaching the goals you seek for your presentations. People will listen to you with fascination and will remember your speeches for a long time.

Chapter 22:

Create Unique Personality in Business

Who are you in your professional life? What label do you believe you have? Regardless of whether you present yourself as a salesperson, manager, accountant or small business owner, you need to know that there are specific cognitive schemes behind all these concepts or labels in the minds of other people.

If you want to build a strong personal brand based on your individual characteristics and unique skills, you may want to consider creating a new personality that will be defining you in the way that YOU choose.

Think of the name tags people use to describe themselves: manager, headhunter, trader, coach, freelancer, etc. Each of these concepts is linked to a particular type of social anchor. Not all associations are beneficial, so pinning such a pre-defined badge to your chest can sometimes be risky. Sometimes the associations following a particular title can be positive, while other times it can be different. It all depends on your title, actual trends and who you are interacting with.

Is it enough to build a distinctive personal brand on the market? What about the fact that when you introduce yourself to someone you will still be a “business coach,” “salesman” or “tax lawyer”? You will fall into one of the drawers in your

interlocutor's head, where your title is already described in a more or less accurate way.

Even if a particular name on your badge makes you feel proud and you love wearing it, it will not allow you to create a strong brand based on your personal individuality.

There are a whole bunch of personal trainers, graphic designers, managers, physicians, IT engineers, sales people, lawyers, headhunters and so on—at some stage it can be really edifying to become one of them, but when you want to take a step further, you must go beyond the framework of your name tags. They are very limiting due to their predetermined place in the minds of people with whom you will communicate.

Imagine that someone introduces themselves to you. You ask, “What do you do?” and they reply: “I inspire people and show them how they can live better every day.” The reaction to that response is likely to be quite different than if the answer was, “I’m a personal trainer.” Thanks to this the person does not receive any predetermined label, but creates a new scheme in the interlocutor's mind, thereby **building their individual, personal brand**. Useful? You bet.

When I worked as an HR consultant, I conducted a training for one of the many European cosmetics companies. We came to the conclusion that the label of a “beautician” is a scheme that often makes it very hard to succeed in that industry. In that particular country, this identity was associated with rather average knowledge, little authority and low experience. It did not help in attracting new customers. We considered how we can create a new business personality while getting away from the “beautician” label at the same time.

The new cognitive scheme was supposed to present a thorough knowledge, substantial authority and high levels of experience. It was important to define ways in which employees of the company would build the new features of a freshly created identity. The first step was to get away from the “beautician” label—both in the minds of employees and when talking with clients. Then, a part of the training was about the technique of creating new features in the perception of the customer.

At the end, we called the new personality “XYZ Brand Specialist.” Introducing themselves as beauticians, the employees would often lose the opportunity to establish a long-term cooperation right from the beginning.

Of course, creation of a new personality in business is always a little bit risky—if you do not do this consistently and actively, your new personality can be weaker than one of the already established job tags you could also take. **It is therefore worth the time to remember you should not take a name which you can’t really “feel”.**

Now, close your eyes and think about who you would be if there were no official jobs and labels by which you can specify the occupations of people in the world. How would you describe who you are in your professional life, maximally in two sentences?

If some kind of creative answer comes to your mind and you feel “That’s it!”—perfect! **Start to use it and see what kind of reaction it evokes.**

Even if you have already assigned tag of, let’s say, manager due to your professional position, that does not mean that you

need to present yourself that way to other people. If you do so all the time, your brand would be lost in the mass of other managers. You can be a manager in your professional hierarchy, but you can talk about yourself as of someone who **schedules the work of highly motivated people in order to make them act efficiently and effectively**. Sounds much better and more interesting.

Rethink the pride that comes from telling others about yourself as someone who is considered “important”. Are you a director or president of a company? It’s really cool, but does such a label tell people about who YOU really are? I don’t think so.

Build your personal brand by showing your mission, your characteristics and your true personality. I like to think of myself as a **guide** of sorts, for people who are looking for their path. Other times, I think of myself as a **person who inspires people** and shows them that it is possible to live a fulfilling and happy life. Recently, I’ve also been known as a creator who uses his creativity to enrich lives with new ideas. My personal brand varies depending on what I am focusing on at the moment.

Who do you think you are, considering what you do for a living? **What personal brand can you build?** Once you’ve established this, pay close attention to the reactions of people you introduce yourself to. Their different reactions will make you smile many times.

Bonus Chapter:

Effective Networking

Think of your social network of professional relationships. Who accompanies you during your projects? Do you deal with everything on your own or do you have people to whom, at any time, you can turn to for help and support?

This is important, as every human you meet during conferences, seminars, various meetings or a tasty lunch break, may be your next great business partner. How do we change a new relationship into a permanent and fruitful professional relationship?

The ability to create networks of contacts can turn out to be a big accelerator for realization of your goals. It is also a great opportunity to **expand your comfort zone**. Getting to know people from different industries will enrich your general knowledge and will be a great training of your interpersonal skills.

Networking is most useful in business when you are looking for business partners, employees or customers. It is also important for those working regular day jobs, when looking for new employers and job opportunities, to strengthen their position in the company or when establishing a new crucial professional relationship.

Here are my eleven tips that greatly help me in establishing new business relationships, often ending up with the effective

joint implementation of a project.

1. Be where interesting people are. It's time to step out of your house! No excuses that you don't have time. Just go to a conference or live event. Look for a club bringing together the enthusiasts of particular business models, activities or professions. It is worth looking into LinkedIn's section of meetings. By selecting your city, you have the possibility to view the upcoming meetings, events, free lectures, conferences, etc. You can also try meetup.com.

2. Be aware of what kind of relationships you need. The biggest power in networking lies in the diverse network of contacts. Imagine that you are building a company and your relationships support the process of establishing it step by step. When you need legal advice, you call your lawyer friend. If you have invoicing related questions, you write a short email to a colleague who is an accountant. Your friend who works in an interactive agency will design your company logo, because a few weeks ago you helped him with something else.

The more diverse your network of contacts gets, the easier it is to achieve your own goals.

3. Networking is not about handing out business cards all the time. This is the least important element. If someone wants to find you, in today's online world they will be able to do it even without this piece of paper. Despite the fact that most people's behavior suggests otherwise, the number of business cards handed out does not correlate with the number of established business contacts. Give people business cards only if it really creates a new opportunity. If there is no such need, just leave it in your pocket or pouch.

Although your business/contact cards are one of the least important elements of the jigsaw puzzle, if you choose to use them, they should of course be well prepared. Both the material on which they're printed as well as graphic design should show that you care about the details and the high quality of what you are doing. It would be best if you hired a professional graphic designer to come up with a simple and creative business card design for you. It is worth putting your photo on the card—this will reinforce the mnemonic trace of you. Always use the best quality paper for your contact cards. The devil's in the details.

4. Be the initiator. Don't let excuses stop you from acting! Most people are always open for exchanging a few sentences or even for a longer chat. As the initiator of the conversations, you get the frame of a leader. Your conversation partner will have the impression that they're talking with a self-confident person for whom approaching people and building a network of contacts is a piece of cake. At conferences, I often start conversations by asking a loose, non-binding question such as, "Which presentation have you enjoyed most so far?" Notice how that question directs an interlocutor to enter into a positive emotional state.

If you are at a conference and would like to speak to one of the speakers, simply go to them while they're on a break and ask them a few questions connected with their occupation.

Here's how you do it. You approach a person and say, "Hi, I'm (your name). What brought you here?" It's one of these universal questions that can always be asked. Then you wait for an answer, and reply, for instance: "How do you guys know each other?" (if there's more than one person or you

noticed that person talking to anyone else) or any other generic question. Then you follow up with what comes naturally in the conversation, for example, “That’s cool, so what do you do?” A good idea might be to also make a statement about who that person is, if you have something positive to say. For example: “I get the impression that you are a very easy-going and relaxed, yet very professional person and you’re really serious about what you do.” Of course, you shouldn’t use that if you just started talking to someone and don’t know anything at all about them, but if you’ve heard something about that person before, been talking for a few minutes or that person was giving a lecture, speech or presentation, that’s a great way to lead the conversation. Always remember to ask just a couple of questions and then make a statement with what they said, as no one likes to be interrogated.

If you want or have to exit the conversation, just say, “It was a pleasure to meet you. Thanks for chatting and see you around!”

Don’t hold yourself back! People will be happy to talk to you (even famous people and main event guests, if they have enough time) and it may emerge into something precious and important. Easy peasy.

5. Put relationship before profits. It is surprising how often people focus solely on the possibility of achieving benefits from relationships, both in casual relationships and professional networking. When building a network of contacts, the most important thing is the relationship with another human being. **People like doing business with people they know and like.** Therefore, the option of cooperating or

exchanging favors in one way or another should be put on the back burner.

If you have the opportunity to speak with a newly met person for only a few minutes, focus on getting to know each other. If you want, try to arrange a next meeting at the end of the conversation, but wait a little bit until you roll the heavy cannons out. When I meet energetic people full of ideas, I want first to get to know them better. I won't decide on working with someone I do not really know.

When you have some very important business on your mind and you really can't wait to share it, do not beat around the bush—be straightforward and do not try to come by using “magic bullets,” “smoothly” and “accidentally” bumping into the topic that interest you the most. Networking often takes the form of a purely business conversation, without a real foundation of personal relationship. Sometimes it can be okay, but it will be much harder to build a long-term cooperation on that foundation.

6. Focus on the human element. Open up to people. Listen to them carefully and take notes in your mind to remember what is important for them in their life. Ask them interesting questions. Let them tell you about their projects, passions or dreams.

Don't think you have to talk much to make people like you. This is an incorrect assumption. The ability to listen is MUCH more important here. Be sincerely interested and you'll make the impression of a trustworthy interlocutor.

Tell them about your passions and projects when you are asked about them if the opportunity arises. If you wait for a

moment when you can finally put in the story about yourself, you become distracted and lose the ability to truly concentrate on what your interlocutor says.

After all, the contents of your conversation is not what really matters; it's about the quality of your contact. If something sparks, you will surely feel it.

7. Always aim at win-win. This means intentionally leading to situations where both sides benefit, not only you. In addition, be the first who **adds value**. Before the actual opportunity to establish a new business relationship, you should have a list of things that you can offer these people to improve their situation. It can be knowledge, contacts, skills, time, advice and even a product or service. It is possible that during the conversation it turns out that your interlocutors have a problem or challenge ahead of them. If possible, try to help them, sharing with them your perspective, ideas or resources. This is how Caldini's norm of reciprocity works. People whom you helped will feel the strong urge to help you.

8. Be honest. Authenticity is a rare feature which can help you to establish fruitful professional relationships. Do not try to build a network of contacts based on a personality that is not really yours or one that is pretending to be someone else. Working together with someone who thinks that you are someone else than you really are is not the best idea. I'm not necessarily talking about just saying that you're a rocket scientist when you're really a clerk, but rather telling someone things just to show yourself from a good angle, but far from the actual truth.

Even if you think that lying or saying half-truths in a given situation will be good for you because, for instance, you will sell more products or you'll get a faster promotion, do not entertain this illusion—in many cases it will ultimately turn against you. Solid businesses are always created on the foundation of true and honest relationships.

9. Take care of the already established contacts. This does not mean you have to meet with each person once a week. It is important, however, that once a relationship has been established, it should not be completely neglected. Otherwise, it will eventually shrink and vanish. It's always been a big challenge for me because of the number of projects I usually deal with, but I found that it does not necessarily require large amounts of time.

You can go with little follow-ups or “reminder” e-mails. Write a short message and ask what's going on. Minimalist version: “Hey, we met two days ago at the *XYZ* in *ABC*. How is your first day of a new work week? You are probably hustling to launch your new project soon. Thanks a lot for the great tips on *QQQ*. It was nice to meet you and I hope to talk to you face to face in the near future. In case I could somehow lend you a helpful hand, let me know.” You can also propose a concrete date of appointment or a brief conversation on Skype.

10. Have a neat record of your contacts. Just a simple spreadsheet in Excel is enough. Divide it into categories so you can quickly find the person you are looking for. Save all the relevant information: name and surname, phone number, e-mail address, web sites, and if necessary, any additional comments. Add a small photo of that person if you can.

From time to time, browse your registry to keep up to date. It will be much easier for you to decide whether it would be worth contacting someone, if you did not do so for a long period of time.

11. Find people close to you with a large number of contacts. They can be a sort of “door” to new relationships. Take a look. Maybe you already have someone like this in your surroundings. In a situation where you need a person that works in a specific occupation, simply ask about it. Remember the classic principle of reciprocity and share your contacts as well.

Remember—**always put people and real, sincere relationships with them in first place.** Let the potential profits and benefits remain on the second plan and they will come with time.

Conclusion

It doesn't take rocket science to figure out that effective communication is the most important skill to learn and master as a human being. I truly hope this book was able to bring you closer to this goal and to inspire you. Remember, the most effective communicators on this planet (historical, spiritual and new movement leaders, politicians and dictators with big impacts, hero spies, the best teachers, legendary seducers, celebrities loved by masses, big company owners, good parents, popular YouTubers, writers, journalists, psychotherapists, stand-up comedians, actors...) were not usually just born that way! Communication is a skill like any other and it can be trained. If others can do it, so can you!

I wish you all the best on your journey and hope you will get there soon! Remember: you are who you stick with, so the sooner you start socializing with people who also want to be effective communicators, the better. Look for your local Toastmasters or rhetoric group, practice with a mirror and camera, read more books about social psychology and body language and never stop growing! The main prize is totally worth it! I believe in you!

The Science of Effective Communication

Improve Your Social Skills and
Small Talk,
Develop Charisma and Learn
How to Talk to Anyone

Introduction:

Why Outstanding Conversation Skills Will Change Your Life

Wherever you go, whoever you are, and whatever you want to achieve in life, your success comes down to your communication skills. It's a simple fact that the best communicators get the highest grades, the best jobs, and the most attractive partners. They are the people who light up a room just by walking through the door.

Everyone wants to make friends with them, many envy them, and most of us long to know their secrets. **Thanks to this book, you'll discover exactly what they do that draws others to their presence.** It may look like magic, but you can learn how to use their strategies for yourself!

[In my previous book on this topic](#), I shared the very best methods, tips, and strategies that anyone can use to develop their communication skills. I'm proud to say that it has already helped people of many ages and backgrounds. The positive feedback I've received has been truly humbling.

However, I realized that there was room for a second book – a volume written to help people develop their conversation skills. In this guide, I'm going to show you how to talk to anyone about anything, and overcome social awkwardness.

You'll also learn how to avoid feeling like an outsider in a group situation.

Don't worry if you haven't read my previous book, as this guide works as a stand-alone volume. On the other hand, I'd highly recommend that you read both. That way, as long as you are willing to put what I teach into practice, you're guaranteed to become an excellent all-around communicator.

I'm not going to sugarcoat it – improving your conversation skills is hard work. It involves breaking the habits of a lifetime, and taking a few risks along the way. But when you consider what you have to gain, it becomes a no-brainer – you can't afford to let any poor conversation skills you may have become your biggest liability. There are so many benefits you stand to gain:

1. Enhanced Career Prospects

Think about the processes you have to go through in order to secure a job, succeed at your day-to-day tasks, build rapport with your colleagues, and sprint up the career ladder. At every stage, from the initial interview to your first speech as a member of the board, your social skills need to be outstanding.

If you can't talk to your colleagues, you won't be able to collaborate on projects. If you can't talk to your boss about any problems that you are facing at work, you will gain a reputation as a poor communicator. You get the point – you absolutely need to understand how to hold conversations with anyone and everyone if you are to land that dream job.

2. Better Business Relationships

Conversation is one of the pillars of great business relationships. If you've ever spoken to an extremely dull person at a conference, you'll know just how much of a barrier poor communication can be. You can be among the best in your field, but if you bore everyone you meet, you are unlikely to forge profitable, mutually beneficial deals and alliances.

3. Better Family Relationships

How many of us have tired ourselves out trying to make our parents and siblings understand us? That would be most people, right? Contrary to what the media would have us believe, most family relationships aren't naturally easy, and many actually require a lot of work.

Only when you have mastered the art of conflict resolution, know how to share your views without irritating others, and understand when you need to bite your tongue when necessary can you hope to build respectful, loving family relationships.

4. Better Romantic Relationships

Along with my employment problems, this was one of my key motivators when it came to reading up on communication skills. I had a couple of girlfriends in high school and college but, for the most part, I was not a success with women.

For years, I couldn't figure out where I was going wrong. When I went on a date, I would try to be warm, witty, and interesting. It took a long time to work out that

the secret to great conversation is actually to focus on the other person. Still, better late than never!

These days, I like to think I'm doing much better on the romance front. Whether you are a man or a woman, whether your relationship is casual or something more serious, you can look forward to fewer fights and happier times together when you improve your communication skills.

5. Improved Self-Esteem

When you enjoy success in your career, family life, and personal relationships, what's the inevitable outcome? Better self-esteem, of course. There is little so frustrating in life as the feeling you get when you aren't living up to your potential. **Have you ever had the feeling that if you had only said the right thing at the right time, your life would have taken a turn for the better?**

When you've finished this book, you'll never again have to wonder about those "what-ifs." The friendships and business relationships you forge will also serve to boost your self-esteem. We are social beings, and we thrive when we are surrounded by people that make us feel accepted and content. In turn, this helps us improve our social skills still further.

Why am I so interested in the art of conversation? It wasn't until my twenties that I realized that my social skills (or lack thereof) were starting to hold me back. I'd had my share of communication problems in high school and college, but once I was out in the real world, things got serious.

I knew I had talent to succeed at almost anything I set my mind to, but too often I would end up frustrating myself and others around me. Sometimes I even felt like a social outcast – I tried to make friends at work, for example, but never seemed to have more than a couple of buddies.

It's no exaggeration to say that had I been better at holding conversations, listening to others, and resolving conflicts, my career would have taken off much earlier. On the other hand, facing up to my problems kick-started an amazing journey of self-discovery. I'd always had an interest in psychology, but it took on a much greater significance once my future was on the line. If I was going to live up to my full potential, something had to change.

Having learned so much – through reading books, watching videos, attending seminars, and making many mistakes along the way – I wanted to pass my hard-earned knowledge on to as many people as possible.

Skeptical? It's time to think about a couple of erroneous beliefs that may be keeping you stuck in the same old comfort zone when it comes to communication. The first belief convinces you that communication isn't all that important in the first place. The second encourages a pessimism that can be fatal.

The Myth Of The Socially Awkward Genius

Some people know they are ineffective when it comes to making conversation and taking part in social situations, but console themselves with the thought that there is some kind of link between a high IQ and an inability to hold a decent conversation.

TV shows such as *The Big Bang Theory* encourage us to believe that really smart people are often socially awkward, but that it doesn't really matter because they are extremely clever in other respects.

There are two problems with this line of thinking. The first is that there is no proven relationship between genius and poor social functioning. There are also numerous individual examples that go directly against this theory. Albert Einstein, commonly regarded as one of the most brilliant individuals to have ever lived, was charming and socially successful.¹⁰ The second problem is that even if there were a proven negative correlation between IQ and degree of social skill, it's important to remember that most of us are not geniuses.

We couldn't all skate by on intelligence alone, even if it were enough to guarantee success in life. Given the fragile state of the human ego, this is a hard truth for some of us to swallow. Fortunately, whether or not you happen to be in possession of a brilliant mind, you can learn how to enjoy effective social interactions with others.

Can Conversation & Social Skills Be Taught?

If you've grown up with friends or relatives who have always excelled in social situations, you might think that social skills are innate – you've either got the talent required to talk with other people in a range of settings, or you haven't. This is a pretty depressing thought, but the good news is that it isn't true!

I know how it feels to compare yourself to others. My cousin Jason was always popular with his peers, his teachers adored him, and virtually all the adults in our family loved him

too. If he hadn't been so nice, I would have really hated him. His mother always said that he'd just been blessed with natural charisma. Unfortunately, her choice of words made me believe that charm and social skill were fixed attributes.

Luckily, I came to realize that most people can improve if they are given the tools necessary to help themselves. There are so many communication experts out there – Julian Treasure, Evan Carmichael, and Tony Robbins are just three examples I can name off the top of my head – who have helped so many people.

When I discovered the effect they have had on so many lives, I realized that I could also improve my social skills. Even if other people have told you that your conversation is flat and ineffective, you can choose to change. Today is the best time to start!

If you want further proof that social skills can be taught, consider the interventions offered to those with Asperger's Syndrome (AS). People with this diagnosis have a form of autism, a condition that impairs an individual's ability to communicate meaningfully with others.

People with AS often talk excessively about their personal interests, have problems maintaining eye contact, speak in a monotonous tone of voice, and fail to take an interest in what others think and feel.¹¹ As a result, they often have problems forming bonds with others, which can cause loneliness and alienation from society.

The good news is that people with AS can be taught how to behave in social situations, which helps them form positive relationships. Through role play and training lead by trained

therapists, they can learn how to “blend in” and function in most social settings.¹²

What should we take from this? The moral of the story is clear - even if you are severely deficient in social skills, you can learn how to interact with others, as long as you have the necessary determination.

In conclusion, there's every reason to believe that you can learn to hold great conversations, form solid relationships, and enjoy being around other people at both home and work. Even better – you'll get more accomplished with practice.

Don't worry too much about the past. We've all had our fair share of embarrassing situations and social mishaps. That's totally normal! The most important thing is that you stop berating yourself for past mistakes, and get ready to change your approach to social interaction. Turn to the next chapter to discover how to build the perfect foundation for success.

10 Orzel, C. (2009). *The Myth of the Abrasive Genius*. scienceblogs.com

11 NHS Choices. (2016). *Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)*. nhs.uk

12 Miller, A., Vernon, T., Wu, A., & Russo, K. (2014). Social Skill Group Interventions for Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Systematic Review. *Review Journal Of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 1, 254-265.

Part I:
Laying The Groundwork

Chapter 1:

Listening – The Most Fundamental Of All Conversation Skills

Great conversation isn't just about what you say, but when you say it. We all know that a conversation is made up of two people speaking in turn, swapping information for mutual benefit and (hopefully) enjoyment.

Unfortunately, too many of us don't actually listen to our conversation partner in the hope of understanding them. **In fact, we tend to listen just so we know when we can next take our own place in the spotlight without appearing too rude!**

This means that two people can have what appears to be a conversation, but is in reality a simple game of "When do I next get to speak?" Obviously, this kind of "conversation" is a complete waste of time, because no one gets the chance to learn anything new, and no real relationship is forged.

Not only are many of us poor listeners, but we struggle to remember what other people are telling us. Speaker and communication expert Julian Treasure notes that although we spend approximately 60% of our total communication time listening to other people, we don't really pay attention.

On average, we only retain 25% of what we hear.¹³ He believes that we have gradually lost our capacity for high-quality listening over the years. Why? In brief, technology has made us lazy.

Because we have become accustomed to using copies of information – books, videos, and so on – we subconsciously assume that it doesn't really matter whether we listen first time around, because we can always play or read it again later.

The trouble is, of course, that you can't just Google a conversation you had later on and fill in the blanks. You need to be listening and paying attention in the present moment.

How To Practice Directing Your Attention

Luckily, you can retrain your brain to tune in and pay attention to any sound in your environment. Close your eyes, and take a moment to consider how many different “channels” or “streams” of sounds you can hear at any given moment.

Give them labels – “people talking,” “rain on the windows,” and so on. This strengthens your ability to stay focused on what someone else is saying. Practice this exercise for several minutes each day, and you'll soon notice an improvement in your ability to concentrate.

What Kind Of Listening Do You Need To Practice?

Did you know that there are several ways in which we can listen to one another? These approaches are called listening positions. When we listen, we can engage in critical versus empathetic listening, reductive versus expansive listening, and active versus passive listening.

Most of us have heard about active and passive listening – and have been told that active listening is what we should always be doing – but listening is a little more complex than that.¹⁴ In any given conversation, you might adopt a critical, reductive, and active position, for example.

When you listen from a critical position, you are analyzing the facts behind a situation. For example, if someone is telling you about the new phone they just bought and how its features make it better than all the other models on the market, you might be evaluating their points as they speak.

You might consider whether the phone *really* has the largest screen size, the fastest processor, and so on. In this kind of situation, you are scanning each piece of information and forming your own conclusions.

In contrast, empathetic listening is the art of honoring feelings over bare facts. When you adopt an empathetic listening position, your main aim is to help someone express their feelings – simply by being present and paying attention.

[In focusing on someone's emotions](#), you will gain better insight into their thoughts and behaviors. This will show through in your facial expression, body language, and tone of voice. When your listening position is a good fit for the conversation topic and the other person's needs, you will both feel a sense of rapport.

You also need to understand the difference between reductive versus expansive listening. When you listen to someone in the hope that they'll get to the most important points as quickly as possible, you are engaging in reductive listening.

This listening position is useful in high-pressure situations, and when you are dealing in objective facts. For example, a surgical nurse listening to the lead surgeon's instructions in the operating room needs to engage in reductive listening. They must hone in on the facts as soon as possible, and then act upon them.

Reductive listening isn't appropriate if a speaker doesn't actually know what they think, what they want to say, or even how they feel. In this type of scenario, you need to take another approach. Instead of waiting for the other person to get right to the point, as you would when taking a reductive listening position, you need to sit patiently with the speaker as they work through their thoughts and feelings.

This strategy is known as "expansive listening." Expansive listening is similar to empathetic listening in the sense that both positions accommodate the speaker's feelings, but the former is more focused on fact-finding than providing someone with an emotional outlet.

The final pair of positions – active versus passive listening – are the most well-known. In brief, active listening refers to the process of consciously making an effort to understand what the other person is saying and reacting in an encouraging manner, perhaps by summarizing and asking questions.

By contrast, passive listening requires little effort. When you adopt a passive position, you may take some of the information in, but you aren't too bothered if you don't hear or fully understand it. Popular wisdom maintains that active listening is always preferable. This certainly isn't a bad rule to live by. After all, no one ever became offended because

someone listened too well! But sometimes, passive listening is all that's needed.

For example, if your father is telling you about his most recent day on the golf course – while knowing full well that you hate golf – you know that he's really talking for his own benefit, not yours. Taking a more passive approach would be fine in this case.

Learning about these positions gives you a quick troubleshooting tool to use the next time you feel as though a conversation isn't going smoothly, but you can't put your finger on why. Ask yourself, "Am I coming at this from the right listening position?"

Let's say that your friend is telling you about her divorce. She talks about how much money she will have to pay the lawyer, how many suspicious text messages she found on her soon-to-be ex-husband's phone, and so on – there is a lot of information coming from her mouth, and most of it is factual. You sit there, taking an active listening position. However, are you listening expansively or reductively, critically or empathically?

Your position will make all the difference in how your friend feels. If you are listening with the intention of just picking out the facts (e.g., how much the average divorce lawyer charges these days), or in the hope that she'll soon just get to the point (e.g. the date on which the divorce should actually be finalized), it will show in your demeanor.

Your friend will see that you are listening, but she'll get the sense that you aren't really tuning in to her feelings – you are not taking the active, expansive, and empathetic position she

needs. **If you get the feeling that someone feels as though you are not showing them enough care and understanding, check your listening position.** Are you more interested in how they are feeling, or are you just seeking out tidbits of gossip or intriguing facts?

Prepare To Be Surprised

Almost everyone has the power to shock. Always assume that when you begin a conversation with someone, you are there to learn something. If you start to view every conversation partner as a potential teacher, your social interactions will become much more enjoyable.

You can even make a game of it. Ask yourself, “What might I learn from this person?” Once your conversation has come to a close, reflect on how they have challenged your worldview. Not every conversation is profound, but almost anyone can teach you something new.

Do You Even Need To Be In This Conversation?

If you are usually a good listener, but you find yourself shutting down when talking with someone else, consider the possibility that your brain is trying to tell you something. Our brains are smart – they have evolved to help us maximize our resources, including our concentration spans. If we noticed everything around us at all times, we’d become overloaded. This is why we have clever neurological circuits that allow us to disregard repetitive stimuli.

For example, if we smell the same odor for more than a couple of minutes, we stop noticing it. That’s why air fresheners are only noticeable for the first few minutes you are in a room. Similarly, if we hear the same sound over and over

again, we stop registering it. It is as though your brain says, “OK! I’ve heard that so many times, I know what it’s like, so I can switch off now.”

This means that if a particular individual seems especially hard to listen to, it’s possible that they have become somewhat repetitive. We are all guilty of telling the same stories on more than one occasion, and we all have our hot-button issues that trigger us to make the same old complaints (unless we practice sufficient self-awareness and avoid giving into the urges, of course).

However, some people are especially inclined to tell you the same old thing over and over again. After a while, conversations with them are pretty pointless. I don’t like to label people with words like “boring” or “dull,” but some really are just that difficult to listen to. In other words, it’s not you – it’s them.

You have a couple of choices in such situations. Instead of beating yourself up for failing to listen properly, you can simply take a passive approach as they ramble on. This is only advisable if you absolutely must keep on good terms with the person involved, or value your relationship so highly that you are willing to be bored for a few minutes. For example, letting your spouse tell you the same story for the tenth time might just be the best option if it makes them happy.

The next option is to draw them onto another topic, which we will cover later in this book. The third option –the simplest and most effective of them all – is to bring the conversation to a close, or avoid getting hooked in the first place. Once you’ve

heard the same old stories or opinions on countless occasions, you'll learn the words and phrases that will set them off.

The moment you hear them, you can change the subject or make your excuses and leave. It will save you a lot of time! It's better to listen out for the warning signs than to resign yourself to yet another rendition of that anecdote you've heard on so many other occasions.

Never Try To Give The Appearance Of Paying Attention

In her TED talk, radio presenter Celeste Headlee spells out exactly what it takes to enjoy a great conversation. Naturally, she stresses the importance of listening. However, she also examines whether or not we should make the effort to look as though we are hanging on to someone else's every word.

You may have been told to "look interested," to nod along when someone makes a point, and interject with phrases like "Oh really?" and "How fascinating!" at regular intervals. Headlee points out that instead of learning how to give the impression that you are paying attention, you should practice the art of *actually* paying attention.¹⁵

Do not waste your precious mental energy worrying about the number of times you say "Oh really?" or whether you are nodding your head at the right moment. This will only distract you from your real mission, which is to work out what someone is trying to tell you. It's that simple, so don't try and make it more complicated.

Incidentally, Headlee also believes that it's best to avoid someone altogether if you aren't prepared to listen to them. Otherwise, you're wasting everyone's time. Respect yourself and other people by actually making the effort to listen when

someone has something important to say, but also knowing when to fold and walk away.

13 Treasure, J. (2011). *5 ways to listen better*. <https://youtu.be/cSohjYQI2A>

14 Nelson, V. (2017). *Conversations With Your College Student: What's Your Listening Position?* collegeparentcentral.com

15 Headlee, C. (2016). *10 ways to have a better conversation*.
<https://youtu.be/R1vskiVDwl4>

Chapter 2:

Tuning Up – How To Make Your Voice More Attractive

Along with your face, your voice is one of your most noticeable characteristics. You can be the most interesting person in the room, dressed smartly, and have great listening skills, but if your voice doesn't match up, people are unlikely to take you seriously. It might be unfair, but it's just human nature.

Within seconds, we judge the quality of someone's voice. Luckily, you can use this to your advantage. In this chapter, you're going to learn why speaking in an attractive voice improves your chances of a good conversation and positive social interaction. Just think – by changing the way in which you speak, you could boost your social status instantly.

You should aim to develop your voice so that it is always audible, clear, and easy to understand. Even if you have an unusual accent, voice training can go a long way in helping you communicate with other people. The ideal voice reflects the speaker's personality. At the same time, it should always suggest that you are assertive and expressive.

This doesn't mean that you have to shout and try to dominate the room. It means that you need to have confidence in both what you are saying and how you are saying it. Let's

have a look at some of the most effective exercises that will change your voice for the better:

Loosen Your Lips

People with the most attractive voices enunciate their words clearly. When you listen to someone who pronounces their words perfectly, you are more likely to enjoy the conversation, even if you don't actually agree with what they are saying or find their personality off-putting.

Along with good breathing, the key to good enunciation is to keep your tongue and lips relaxed. This trick also helps hide a lisp, which can increase your confidence if you suffer from this problem. If you tend to slur your words or just never sound them out properly, start practicing!

Read passages from a book out loud when you are alone, or simply practice repeating common phrases. Notice how your mouth, throat, and chest feel when you enunciate your words. Over time, you will know what each word is supposed to feel like, and adjust your speech accordingly.

Breathe From Your Diaphragm

The most authoritative speakers breathe from their diaphragms, not their throats. If you want to speak in a rich, full voice that doesn't wobble or break, you need to breathe deeply and evenly. If your shoulders rise and fall with each breath, you are probably breathing from your upper chest rather than your abdomen.

To engage your diaphragm and help you learn to control your abdominal muscles, laugh silently. Close your mouth, and

force yourself to laugh through your nose. Reading aloud can also help.

Find a paragraph in a book or article that contains sentences of various lengths. Inhale from your diaphragm just before the start of each sentence, and exhale as you move towards the end. This will keep your voice nice and even.¹⁶

Hum & Sing

Most of us hum and sing when we're alone (or even with others!), so why not use it to practice varying the pitch of your voice? When you hum or sing your favorite songs, think about the variation in your voice. Do you have a good vocal range, or does it feel somewhat narrow and restricted?

Experiment with the sounds you can make. There are few things so soul-destroying as being forced to listen to someone who speaks in a monotone. **You absolutely must learn how to vary your voice if you want other people to find you engaging.** Conversation is about melody as much as it is about content. Many of us have the habit of talking at a continually high pitch, which doesn't inspire confidence or communicate a sense of authority.

You shouldn't aim for a gravelly tone of voice – especially if you are woman – but in general, deep and rich is preferable to high and thin. Don't try to drastically change your pitch overnight. It will strain your voice, and your friends and family will probably ask you whether you've come down with a cold.

Instead, work on lowering it slightly, then in a few days' time, lower it again. Practice singing an "ah" sound at various pitches. Do this exercise regularly, and you will gain total control over your pitch.

Watch Your Intonation

Varying your pitch doesn't just make your speech easier and more pleasant to listen to. It also changes how people interpret

your message. This can have serious consequences if you get it wrong. For example, take the following question:

“Will you be home by midnight?”

On the face of it, this looks like a neutral request for information. But what happens if you vary the intonation? If you asked the question in a flat, almost disinterested voice, the person you are asking might infer that you don't really care whether they make it home safely or not.

They aren't exactly going to feel loved or cared for, and this might even lay the ground for an argument. Placing emphasis on specific words within the sentence gives a completely different impression. For example:

“*Will* you be home by midnight?”

“Will you be *home* by midnight?”

Say each version of this sentence aloud, and you will appreciate what a difference emphasis can make. In the first example, the speaker sounds a bit impatient or exasperated, as though they have already asked the other person for their schedule but have yet to receive the information.

The second example implies that the speaker wants their conversation partner to come home, but they aren't convinced that it's going to happen – they want reassurance. **If you are talking to someone and they aren't reacting to you in the way you would expect, evaluate your intonation.** Are you inadvertently communicating a specific kind of meaning? Might your conversation partner be taking offense as a result?

Move Your Voice Forward

Do you produce sounds in your throat, or near the front of your mouth? Ideally, you should feel as though your words are formed on your lips, not in your throat. The secret is to relax your jaw and throat muscles. There's a simple but effective exercise you can use to do this.

Lie on your back, and take deep breaths. Be sure to use your diaphragm. Always exhale through your mouth rather than your nose. Make a conscious effort to relax your jaw, mouth, and throat. Make sure that every exhalation feels smooth. Upon exhalation, say the "ah" sound. Repeat these steps a few times, keeping your mouth open.

At no time should you feel as though your muscles are under any kind of strain. Next, count to five during each exhalation. Keep doing this until it feels natural and comfortable. You should be able to speak each number aloud without much effort.

Remember, the point of this exercise is to train yourself how to relax your muscles so that your voice can flow freely. If it becomes difficult, you are probably not relaxed. You can also repeat this exercise sitting down and standing up.

Vocal training can work wonders, but don't overdo it. When you train your voice, you are forcing your vocal cords and muscles to work in new ways. It's important that you don't damage them. Toastmasters, the public speaking and leadership organization, tell their members to keep training sessions short (under five minutes) and to space them out over the day.¹⁷

Think About Rate & Timing

Take a moment to consider the way someone you really respect and admire sounds when they speak. Do they talk quickly, slowly, or somewhere in between? Most of us interpret a measured pace as a sign of confidence and authority.

However, there isn't a single "best" speed that everyone should use. The world would be a very boring place if we all tried to conform to a prescribed speaking rate. If you are naturally outgoing, extroverted, or a quick thinker, you will probably speak faster than someone who is introverted or likes to consider all their options before opening their mouth. Most people utter between 120 and 190 words every minute, which is quite a wide variation.¹⁸

To find out whether you are a fast or slow speaker, find a passage in a book or article and read it aloud. Time yourself. Repeat this exercise a few times. Do the math to discover which category you fit into. You might be surprised by the results, because many of us aren't actually familiar with how we sound.

It's hard to change your natural speaking rate, but if you are breathing properly and enunciating your words, most people will still be able to understand what you are saying. If you are having an especially important conversation with someone, you can choose to speed up or slow down.

What if you don't happen to have an engaging voice, and the exercises above don't seem to help? No need to worry – you can hire a voice coach. Few of us are born with unusually attractive voices, but you can develop one with a little outside help.

There's no need to feel embarrassed. Politicians and other people in the media spotlight get a little help all the time! They know that their public image depends in no small part on what they sound like, so if you suspect that your voice is holding you back, look up coaches and singing teachers in your area. If you enjoy the theater and performing, you could even take a few acting lessons.

Most singing teachers record their students during lessons, and then play the results back when assessing their pupil's progress. It becomes clear – sometimes painfully so – where you need to improve when you can actually hear your own voice.

This isn't much fun at the beginning. Be prepared to exclaim, "Do I really sound like that?" I personally found vocal exercises a bit traumatic in the beginning. The first time I read through a speech then played it back to myself, I was horrified by just how squeaky my voice was.

I liked to think that I spoke in deep tones. Needless to say, I was completely wrong. Luckily, I researched vocal exercises and have actually received compliments on my speaking voice! If I can do it, so can you.

If you recognize that you could use feedback from someone else but don't have the money or time to find and see a voice coach, ask the most eloquent friend or relative you have to give you some help. They might not know the mechanics of attractive speech, but they will still be able to correct you.

Just be prepared for negative feedback. If you are going to ask someone to be honest, brace yourself for the possibility that you'll hear something that doesn't make you feel too

good! Don't become discouraged. When you practice vocal exercises, you will soon start noticing a difference.

Sex Differences

As a general rule, both men and women receive more respect and attention when they speak in a warm, even tone of voice with suitable variation in pitch and tone. However, if you are looking to attract a member of the opposite sex, the picture changes slightly. For example, men tend to prefer women who speak at a higher pitch than men, and women seem to know this on an instinctive level – research shows that they automatically raise their voices when talking to a man they find attractive.

Women are drawn to men who speak with a lower tone of voice. Scientists aren't quite sure why this is. It's possible that it comes down to desirable mate characteristics. Men tend to prefer women who appear youthful, and a breathy, high-pitched voice suggests a young, attractive appearance.

Women tend to choose mates who are dominant, masculine, and self-assured, and a smooth, rich voice implies that a man possesses these traits.¹⁹ However, both sexes can sound equally dominant. Whatever your sex, you can use your voice to project confidence.²⁰

Size also comes into the equation. A deeper voice suggests a larger body size, whereas a higher pitch is associated with a smaller frame. Women usually look for men who are larger than the average woman, and vice versa for men.²¹

This means that if you are a woman, making the effort to raise your pitch will make you more attractive and feminine-

sounding. If you are a man, you should speak in a lower voice if you want a woman to find you appealing.

16 Toastmasters International. (2017). *Your Speaking Voice*. toastmasters.org

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Xu, Y., Lee, A., Liu, X., & Birkholz, P. (2013). Human Vocal Attractiveness as Signaled by Body Size Projection. *PLoS One*.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0062397>

20 Hughes, S.M., Mogilski, J.K., & Harrison, M.A. (2014). The Perception and Parameters of Intentional Voice Manipulation. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 38, 1, 107-127.

21 Ibid.

Chapter 3:

Why You Should Take A Digital Detox – The Power Of Face-To-Face Interaction

Can you remember the days when people didn't use email, social media, and messaging apps as a substitute for conversation? If you're under the age of 25, life without Facebook is probably unimaginable. For those of us with a few more years on the clock, the rate of change in this domain has been staggering.

I'm a big fan of technology, and love trying out new apps and sites that make my life easier. I wouldn't want to go back to the pre-Twitter era, and I think it's pretty cool that we can use the internet to talk to people around the world.

However, there's a dark side to social media. Ironically, it's not doing our social skills any favors. If you want to be a great conversationalist, you need to keep technology in its proper place. It's time to step away from the screen and make time for regular face-to-face interaction.

How The Internet Is Killing Our Conversation Skills

Much has been written about why our online lives are damaging our social skills, but in my opinion it boils down to several key points: The internet impairs our ability to listen, it teaches us to be lazy thinkers, it destroys our ability to resolve

conflicts in a constructive manner, and it sets us up to feel jealous of other people.

This is a recipe for poor relationships and a lack of high-quality conversation. Did you know that we have a raging loneliness epidemic in the Western world? We've known for a long time that elderly people often suffer from loneliness, but now this problem is affecting millions of young adults too.²²

You might think that with all the technology we have available, no one would ever have to feel lonely again. But actually, the opposite is true. It seems harder to make and keep friends than ever before. So what has gone wrong?

Online, You Don't Have To Listen

As you know, two people need to listen to one another if they are going to have a decent conversation. Online, there's no obligation to even pretend that you're paying attention. We can skim over emails, read instant messages at our leisure, and flick back and forth between our friends' feeds and whatever we happen to be watching on YouTube.

When we do want to pay attention to our friends, we can do so on our own terms. Needless to say, that's not how conversation should – or can – work in real life. But when you've become accustomed to switching your attention on and off when interacting with others, it becomes harder and harder to focus in face-to-face situations.

Online, you are only a few clicks away from something more exciting. When this habit carries over into your regular life, you'll start wishing that your conversation partners would speak more quickly, or talk about a topic of special interest to you.

Online, You Don't Have To Think On Your Feet

Have you noticed that it's unusual to see people really trying to consider someone else's point of view in discussion forums? Occasionally two or more people might have a constructive back-and-forth about a particular topic, but more often, it descends into the written equivalent of folks speaking over one another.

Usually, multiple people will randomly butt into the conversation. Think about it – is this a good substitute for real-life social interaction? Does it require sound conversation skills such as listening, thinking on your feet, and interpreting both verbal and nonverbal signals? I don't think so.

If you tend to derive most of your social interaction from the internet, you are teaching yourself to be lazy. When confronted with the prospect of an actual conversation, you'll feel somewhat exposed and underprepared. Your conversations will lack the rapid exchange of ideas that make lively conversations so much fun.

When you're online, you are also let off the hook as far as critical thinking is concerned. If you don't want to put together a coherent argument that takes into account multiple perspectives, you can just say, "I'm out of here," which is the equivalent of shrugging your shoulders and saying, "Whatever." In real life, you probably wouldn't talk to other people like this.

Online, you can take a break of minutes, hours, or even days before replying. You can use this time to gather your thoughts, put together a thoughtful response, and perhaps even use sound research to support your points. **That's great** –

everyone might learn something – but these skills hardly translate across to real life. When you're in conversation with someone else face-to-face, you can't suddenly disappear for a few days. You have to face the music, be brave, and actually accept responsibility for your ideas.

Anything Goes On The Internet

Social media, and the internet in general, gives us an outlet for criticism, complaints, and even hate speech. Anyone who has been online for more than a couple of minutes knows that a sizeable proportion of the human race seem to think that it's fine to spew their hatred and venom on the internet.

Even those of us who are generally nice, decent people are often guilty of dropping a sarcastic or unhelpful comment here and there. The problem is that when you type from the anonymity of a computer, you aren't held to account for your behavior. In fact, plenty of people don't even bother hiding behind the cloak of pseudonyms these days.

They just type hateful tweets under their own names, or post aggressive messages on Facebook. I can't find any research on adult-on-adult cyberbullying, but surveys show that approximately 10% of young adults have both bullied, and been bullied, online.²³ Judging from anecdotes I've heard from my friends and clients, I don't think this problem goes away in adulthood!

Sure, if you say something particularly awful on the internet, you might face repercussions. However, for the most part, you can get away with being overly critical, abrupt, and rude in many internet spaces.

Online, you don't have to face social disapproval. You don't have to justify your opinions. You can just dump them and run away – there is no obligation to return to a thread or comments section.

This isn't to say that you should always be nice to everyone, all the time. If you wouldn't mind saying it in person, then it's probably reasonable to say it online. But so many of us forget to follow this simple rule, and it results in hurt feelings and pointless arguments.

Worse, we forget how to actually argue and solve problems via proper conversations. This sets us up for a fall when we come up against interpersonal issues in the real world.

Why Social Media Makes You Feel Inferior To Others

Another problem you'll come up against if you spend too much time online? Social comparisons and feelings of envy. In case you didn't already know, social media tends to reflect the highlights of someone's life, not their bad days. Yes, there are people who use it to express how unhappy they are and voice their every grievance, but the majority use it as a promotional platform.

They post photos of positive life events such as a new job, moving to a new home, getting engaged, and so on. It's so easy to look at their upbeat posts and take them at face value. Even if we like to think that we're a good judge of character, we tend to fall into the comparison trap.

Appearances can be deceptive. Yes, your friend may have won that hard-earned promotion, but they may also be on the edge of a nervous breakdown from working the long hours that come with it.

Now, here's the kicker – if you don't actually have conversations with people face-to-face, you are unlikely to know the full story. **Conversation diminishes jealousy, because it allows you to gain a more authentic insight into someone else's life.** When you take time to get to know someone, you realize that they have their share of struggles. It also allows you to build richer relationships.

Rather than wait for social media updates, why not have proper conversations on a regular basis? You'll be able to practice your social skills, and you'll also feel less inclined to compare yourself to others.

In case you need convincing further, here's a shocking finding published in the journal *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*: When college students view social media profiles of (fictitious) people who apparently enjoy great health and social popularity, their self-esteem plummets.²⁴

If a single profile can trigger these effects, imagine what Facebook will do to your mental health if you spend too much time browsing other peoples' profiles. It's time to take a step back.

The Simple Solution: A Digital Detox

So what should we do? Quite simply, we need to think twice before spending hours "talking" to other people online. Last year, I tried a digital detox for the first time. Obviously, I couldn't quit the internet entirely – I need it for work, and I couldn't ignore my best friend's WhatsApp messages. However, I stopped logging into Facebook, I ignored Instagram, I cut my Twitter usage down to ten minutes per

day, and I didn't initiate text-based conversations with anyone. I vowed to detox for a week, and see how it made me feel.

I'll be honest – at first, I felt very isolated. I missed seeing what my friends were up to on Facebook, and the feeling that I might be missing out on something gnawed away at me. But then I had a revelation. If I really cared about what was happening in my friends' lives, I could arrange to see them in person!

To my alarm, I realized that although I live pretty close to most of them, it had been a while since we'd spent quality time together. I was feeling lonely by Day 3, so I put in a call to a buddy I hadn't seen in a few weeks. She was surprised to hear from me, but also delighted that I'd bothered to call her and ask to meet for a drink instead of firing off a few short messages.

We met at a local coffee shop and talked for a couple of hours about work, dating, and even current affairs. I left feeling positively uplifted. I'd forgotten how good it felt to have a proper conversation.

Yes, it's much harder to arrange to see someone and actually speak to them than it is to send a text message, audio clip, or a Facebook "like." But is it more rewarding? Definitely. The fact is, we speak much faster than we type, and so much of the meaning shared during conversation is in intonation and body language. It just isn't the same as actually sitting opposite one another.

Taking digital detoxes helps keep my conversation skills sharp, because it forces me to actually get out there and interact with people in real time. I can't hide behind a screen –

when you have a proper conversation, you have to think about what you are saying, as you are saying it. This means that you have to make the effort to communicate your ideas clearly, speak in proper sentences, and put together coherent arguments on the spot.

The more uncomfortable the thought of a detox makes you feel, the more urgently you need to take a social media holiday. If your friends and family live far away, and social media is your only means of communication, you can go on a modified detox instead. Use Skype or another similar app and use video rather than text.

Cut Down On The Unnecessary Emails

Finally, I want to make a point about online communication in the workplace. Perhaps this situation sounds familiar. You are working in the office, or maybe even at home. You get a notification of a new email or instant message. It's from a co-worker or family member – who just so happens to be a few meters away!

It sounds ludicrous, but many of us are so reluctant to actually get up and talk to people that we'd rather type a message instead, even when it would be quicker to rise from our chairs and deliver it in person.

From this point forward, vow that whenever you have the opportunity, get up from your chair and *talk to someone*. Our great-grandparents would be shocked if they saw how humans in the developed world “speak” to one another these days.

No wonder there are so many lonely people out there, despite the fact that our world population is growing daily, and

more people have access to the internet than ever before. You don't have to forsake social media altogether, but if you want to develop your conversation skills, consider logging on a little less often.

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Chapter 4:

How To Stop Fearing Judgment

Most people struggle not only with difficulty in finding the right words in conversation, but they are also terrified of being judged. In some cases, this can be completely paralyzing. People with Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) suffer from this to an extreme degree.

They often have panic attacks in social situations, or even suffer panic attacks that are triggered by the mere thought of having to talk to others. What they actually fear is not the act of conversation. They are more worried about being judged, or seen as “wrong” in some way.

The implications are obvious. SAD can lead to complete social isolation, because sufferers would rather avoid social interaction altogether than risk being on the receiving end of negative judgments.²⁵

In all probability, you don't have SAD (although if a fear of social situations is holding you back and causing you to have panic attacks, you should see a doctor), but you might still be worried what other people will think of you.

It's natural to care whether people like you. No one likes to be a social outcast. The problem comes when you care so much about other people's judgments that you stop expressing

your opinions, and lose out on the chance to start or build relationships.

I'm not going to lie – people do judge, and they will form their own opinions about you. These opinions are shaped by your looks, your mannerisms, what you say, how you behave, and dozens of other characteristics. It would be silly (and dishonest) of me to pretend that you can win the hearts and minds of everyone you meet.

Just as you have the right to decide whether or not you want to be someone's friend, they also have the right to make up their own mind about you. As the saying goes, you can't please all of the people all of the time. But you can choose to accept yourself, grow your self-confidence, and learn how to let go of even the harshest of judgments.

Step One – Build Self-Confidence

When you really and truly accept yourself, you will be less troubled by what other people think. If you are content and secure in your own skin, the prospect of being judged won't really bother you.

Sure, you might still be offended if someone says something unkind, but it won't rattle you for long. You'll be able to pick yourself up, dust yourself down, and remember that although you aren't perfect, you are just fine as you are.

Don't worry, I'm not just going to tell you to accept yourself and then skip ahead to the next step. I'm going to give you some useful starting points.

1. *Challenge your self-talk.* If someone were to stand next to you all day, muttering or even shouting

insults in your ear several times per hour, you probably wouldn't feel too great about yourself by the time evening rolled around.

Yet lots of us do this to ourselves! If you tend to berate yourself, put yourself down, or dwell on your failures and mistakes, you don't stand a chance of developing true confidence. I'm not saying that you have to compliment yourself all day, but you need to realize that negative self-talk will kill your self-esteem and your chances of social success.

Distract yourself, replace the insults with neutral statements, say "STOP!" out loud, see a therapist, or do whatever you have to do to fix this issue. Eliminating negative self-talk also helps you realize when someone is bullying or insulting you.

Some people are so used to putting themselves down that they can't actually tell when someone else is behaving badly – after all, no one can say anything worse than what is already going through their heads. This leaves them vulnerable to abusive and toxic relationships.

2. *Get good at something.* You know that warm feeling you get when you've succeeded in picking up a new skill? That feeling is a great basis for self-confidence. Learn something new, because it will shore up your self-belief.

You'll feel proud of yourself because you will have proven, without a doubt, that you are a capable person who can develop themselves and their talents. Not only

that, but your new interest will give you some high-quality conversation material.

Get a regular hobby, and you'll never again be stuck for something to say in response to the question, "So, what have you been up to recently?"

3. *If you can change something – change it!* In theory, you could be judged on almost anything – your hair, your opinions, your job – you name it, someone can judge you on it.

In most cases, there's very little you can (or should) do about it. For example, if someone finds you ugly, that's their opinion – there's nothing (aside from cosmetic surgery or heavy makeup, maybe) that you can do to change their minds. Even if you could, why waste time catering to someone else's aesthetic preferences?

However, there are some traits and characteristics that you can change, not only to avoid judgment, but to develop yourself as a person. For instance, if you have a specific fear that other people will think you are boring or ignorant, you can make the decision to become more interesting and more informed about the world.

This would be a win-win solution. Whether or not someone else decided you were boring or ignorant, you would feel good about yourself, knowing that you were becoming more entertaining and educated by the day.

Should You Fake It 'Til You Make It?

Some books will tell you that if you feel uneasy or panicky in social situations, the answer is just to pretend that you feel

confident. However, if you've ever suspected that most people (especially highly sensitive and empathetic individuals) are good at detecting false confidence and bravado, you're right.

If you think that you can get away with trying to fake your way to good self-esteem, you're wrong. Lots of people will see straight through you. Even if you happen to have outstanding acting skills, pretending to be someone else is just plain tiring.

After a while, the mask will slip, which will reveal how hard you've been trying all along. Using a fake persona will also leave you feeling like a fraud. You'll start to worry that people will judge you for being inauthentic, which will just add to your problems.

Good communication, just like a good relationship, is rooted in authenticity. When we try and quash our true selves, we get uncomfortable. The fear of being "found out" is never far away. In conclusion, I decided long ago that the cliché, "Fake it 'til you make it," isn't very good advice.

Here's some research to back up this point. A recent paper published in the *Journal Of Personality* shows that people judge the self-esteem of someone they have just met within a minute of exposure.²⁶

What's more, their judgments are usually accurate. That's right – when you meet someone new, they can tell within 60 seconds whether you hold yourself in high or low regard.

You have probably experienced this for yourself. For example, I recently met my mother's new neighbor for the first time whilst taking a trip back home. I was struck by how confident and secure he appeared.

I immediately found myself thinking, “This guy was probably someone pretty special back in the day.” I found myself drawn to him, and we must have chatted for at least quarter of an hour. Over coffee, my mother told me that her new neighbor was a retired Sheriff. It made complete sense, given his demeanor.

So why is it that some people appear more confident? The authors of the study believe that people subconsciously gather and analyze a lot of information within that first minute. When I met my mother’s neighbor, I picked up on several clues that told me a lot about his self-image.

He spoke with an even, deep voice. His posture was excellent for his age and condition, and he spoke without hesitation or any filler words. I have no idea whether this guy had ever taken a public speaking class or a self-development course. You know what? It doesn’t matter.

Whether he is naturally confident or cultivated it over time, the result is the same – he seems completely at ease with himself and others. With respect to the Sheriff, I doubt he was also an Oscar-winning actor – his self-belief was real.

Step Two – Stop Making Everything About You

You should know by now that I'm not one to beat about the bush. I'm going to be blunt here – if you are always worrying about whether other people are judging you, you're self-obsessed. When you ruminate about what everyone else thinks about you, you're basically saying, "Other people sure do think a lot about me. They probably put a lot of effort into formulating an opinion. What others think is really important. I really matter to them."

I hate to break it to you, but you aren't actually the center of the universe. Yes, we are all social beings who tend to judge others. However, once you have left the room or ended the conversation, the other person probably isn't going to spend hours thinking about you and your faults.

Even if you were to say something incredibly stupid at a party and the host then laughed about it with their friends the next day, they probably wouldn't give it much thought after that. People move on. Like you, they have their own lives to lead. When you find yourself sinking into a self-analytic rut, try this simple trick - focus on other people instead.

If you're talking to someone and feel as though they might be judging you, challenge yourself to learn more about them. See what you can discover about their lives, their opinions, and their favorite activities. This halts your self-obsession. Furthermore, you'll probably discover that they are - gasp! – a complex, flawed human being like yourself.

It's always comforting when we realize that someone who seems intimidating or judgmental is really just another person,

with their unique set of strengths and weaknesses. The more we get to know someone, the friendlier they usually seem.

Here's a final thought. Remind yourself that most of the judgments other people make are never shared. For example, you'll probably never know what a person at the party thought of you. The clerk at the store, the acquaintance you bumped into at a conference, even your closest friends – they are unlikely to tell you exactly what they think.

There is precisely nothing you can do about this. You aren't the thought police, so why worry? As the old saying goes, what you don't know can't hurt you. As long as someone isn't being a jerk, give them permission to have their own opinions! You can't force them to change their minds, so just let it be.

What About Rejection?

When someone turns you down for a date, a job interview, a joint vacation, or anything else that means something to you, it's natural to be hurt. When someone rejects you, it's easy to assume that they have weighed up the pros and cons of each option and decided that you just aren't good enough.

No doubt about it, rejection stings. I'm not about to argue otherwise. Did you know that the same parts of the brain responsible for sensations of physical pain are also activated when we experience social rejection?²⁷ If you've had a pain in your chest that made it seem as though your heart was in danger of breaking, you'll know this for yourself.

However, you have a choice to make when you are rejected. You may not have had a say in the other person's decision, but it's up to you to frame the situation in a way that helps you take a more balanced perspective.

Let's say that you are at a party, talking with someone you find really attractive. Everything is going well. By the end of the evening, you've been chatting for several hours and have both had a few drinks. Although you feel nervous, you decide to ask them for a date the following Saturday.

Unfortunately, they turn you down. They tell you that although they are flattered, they don't think it would be a good idea. Shortly afterwards they leave, never to be seen again.

In case you're wondering – yes, this has happened to me. I was 22 at the time, and it hurt like heck. When it happened, I automatically assumed that she didn't find me attractive, and I even started wondering whether I was ugly.

I couldn't wait to get home that night and bury myself under the covers! For the next few weeks, I felt very self-conscious about my looks. But let's look at the variety of ways in which I could have framed this situation:

1. "She rejected me because although we had a great time, she thinks I am ugly."
2. "She rejected me because she doesn't want to date or have a boyfriend at this point."
3. "She rejected me because although she likes me, she sensed we might not be romantically compatible."
4. "She rejected me because she has a boyfriend, and she just wanted an ego boost whilst at the party."

I'm sure you can think of many other possibilities to add to the list.

It doesn't matter whether or not you ever discover the truth. What matters is that you realize that you can control your response, and that's an empowering place to be. Not all rejection stems from a place of negative judgment.

What's more, even if it does, that doesn't mean it's going to happen again in the future. OK, the girl may have found me ugly. But does that logically mean that every woman on earth shares the same opinion? Given that I've dated quite a few women, the answer would have to be, "No."

By the way, a few years later I found out that the girl at the party was "on a break" from her boyfriend. They had a pretty rocky relationship, but they got married in the end! Who was I to stand in the path of true love?

That episode taught me a valuable lesson about rejection.
**Sometimes, you have no idea what's really going on behind
the scenes.**

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Chapter 5:

Using Empathy In Conversation

What's the most powerful force that can connect two people? Love, friendship, a shared goal? Maybe. Personally, I believe that empathy is the glue that really holds relationships together.

Empathy is the ability to enter into someone else's frame of reference. When you show empathy, you don't just listen to whatever it is they have to say. You don't try to understand it from a purely intellectual point of view. To be empathetic is to actively try and adopt the other person's position.²⁸

If you are just chatting about casual matters, you don't need to worry too much about being empathetic. It's when you start talking about the bigger stuff that empathy really makes the difference between an "OK" conversation and a meaningful connection.

If you've ever come away from a deep exchange feeling truly heard and understood, it's probably because your conversation partner showed you empathy. [Empathy](#) creates a safe environment.

It allows other people to open up, even when talking about their deepest emotions or most unpleasant memories. This sets the stage for life-changing relationships. If you want to help

someone out, you will need to understand what the problem is in the first place.

The best way to get inside their head is through harnessing your natural empathy. It's powerful stuff!

Showing Empathy In Conversation

How can you signal that you are ready and willing to take an empathetic stance? If you sense that someone wants to open up to you, here's how you can take steps towards understanding someone else's position.

1. Don't speak badly of others. Keep your tone nonjudgmental. Other peoples' actions and behaviors tend to come up in all kinds of conversation. Everyone gossips from time to time.

However, if you want someone to feel comfortable in opening up to you, you need to fight the urge to talk badly of others. Who is going to feel safe talking to you if you repeatedly demonstrate a willingness to stab other people in the back?

No one feels safe opening up to someone judgmental, because they worry that they'll also be judged! Obviously, you should also abstain from passing judgment on what your conversation partner is telling you.

You should also refrain from giving unsolicited advice. Assume that if they want you to make a suggestion, they'll ask for it.

2. *Show that you are taking an expansive listening position.* Remember, an expansive listening position

is one in which you happily and patiently follow the listener's train of thought, without judgment.

If you show even the merest hint of impatience, the other person will shut down. They will assume that you would rather get the conversation over and done with. This isn't going to encourage them to trust you.

3. *Ask them directly but gently whether there's something on their mind.* If your conversation partner seems a little distracted, and their body language is tense, ask them whether there's anything they would like to talk about. Don't be aggressive about it. Just give them the chance to speak if they would like to do so.

Of course, if they tell you that something is bothering them but they would rather not discuss it, you should show empathy by telling them that you understand, and if they change their mind they can still come and talk to you.

4. *Give them time to "empty the tank."* When was the last time someone truly listened to you, without leaping in with an interruption or judgment? We all know that sometimes, we just want to tell someone exactly what we are thinking and feeling.

If we are lucky, they will have empathy for our position, and go out of their way to give us as much space as we need. If you find yourself occupying the role of listener, allow the other person to say all the things they need to say.

When you interrupt someone, you are signaling to them that your personal thoughts are more important than their right to speak. This isn't the message you want to send.

5. *Try to show Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR).*

The humanistic therapist Carl Rogers used a concept called Unconditional Positive Regard when talking with his clients. He believed that everyone has all the resources they need to sort out their own problems, but sometimes they need the right kind of environment in which to work out the best solution.²⁹

This is a really helpful framework if you are trying to take an empathetic stance. Just as Rogers did, make a decision to accept the other person just as they are, regardless of their speech or actions.

This doesn't mean that you have to agree with what they have done, and it doesn't mean you should let them act in a threatening or inappropriate way. Think of UPR as a tool you can use to leave your personal biases to one side, and approach the conversation from a receptive point of view.

When you work from the assumption that the other person is at heart a good, rational individual with the capacity for change, you likely to show them true acceptance and react in an empathetic manner.

What To Say When You're Told Something Shocking

Empathy is one of the greatest gifts one person can give another, but it should come with a warning label. When you create a safe space for someone, there's every chance that they will share their deepest personal secrets with you.

This won't always make for easy listening. Some of these secrets will be sad, but relatively "normal." Experiences that most of us can relate to, such as feeling hopeless after losing a job, or feeling deeply depressed after breaking up a with partner, fall into this category.

On other occasions, you might find that your conversation partner tells you something that shocks you. No matter how prepared you think you are, or how much life experience you have accumulated, sometimes it only takes a few seconds for a conversation to take a surprising turn.

You might not be able to contain your outrage or sadness. As long as you don't make your own emotions the center of the conversation, it's fine to let the other person know how you feel.

You are not a robot. A simple statement such as, "To me, that sounds terrible," or "I can't help feeling sad for you" will leave them in no doubt that you care, but at the same time draws a firm line between their feelings and your own.

Always aim for honesty. If they ask you how their revelation makes you feel, let them know. [Be authentic and open with your emotions](#), because this in turn will allow the other person to feel safe in telling you what is going on in their mind and heart.

If you can't help but react strongly to something you are told, make sure that you tell the other person that they aren't to blame. Tell them that you are honored that they chose to open up to you, and emphasize that your feelings are yours alone to deal with.

Sometimes, the best answer is actually no answer at all. **Remember**, people do not always open up because they want or need someone to tell them what to do. Often, they open up because they feel the need to be heard.

A simple gesture can also do well in place of words. A light touch on their arm, a slow nod of the head, or even a hug (if you already have a close relationship with the person) can provide a lot of comfort.

Know When To Bite Your Tongue

What if you understand precisely what another person is experiencing, or share a similar history? For example, when someone reveals that they lost their mother as a teenager, you might be quick to reassure them that you know what they went through if you lost your father at the age of twenty.

I really do understand the urge to make a connection and to find common ground. **But you need to proceed with care.** Even if your experience sounds similar to theirs, even if you feel as though you can empathize on many levels, you are two distinct individuals.

You have different personalities, backgrounds, ambitions, and priorities. If you are too quick to draw a parallel between their experiences and your own, you run the risk of appearing insensitive.

Consider the situation from another angle. Have you ever poured your heart out to someone, or explained how a traumatic event made you feel, only to hear, “I know exactly what you are going through! I had the same thing happen to me. Back in the day, I...” and so on.

You might have ended up just sitting there whilst they told you their own story. Even worse, you might have ended up comforting them!

Do you ever dive in with a quick, “Me too!” and end up launching into a story of your own? Don’t worry if the answer is a resounding, “Yes.” No one is perfect. I know I’ve done this on occasion.

When my friend Sam lost out on an apartment he really wanted to rent, he was bemoaning his bad luck over a coffee. The poor guy only got a couple of minutes of airtime before I explained that back in college, I’d missed out on my first choice of accommodation. Therefore, I told him, I could relate to his experience.

Sam was too polite to tell me to shut up, but I later realized how insensitive I had been. Luckily for me, he’s very forgiving. On a couple of occasions, I’ve even come close to making the same mistake with my clients. When someone tells me that they have suffered from low self-esteem since they were a teenager, I’m always tempted to say, “Me, too!” and tell them all about my adolescent experiences.

I’ll never lose the urge completely, but I’ve got it under control. I remind myself that the conversation isn’t about me. If a session triggers some difficult memories, I debrief later with a friend, or just take some time out to relax and process anything that came up.

Of course, if someone asks you, “Do you know what I mean?” or “I don’t know if you’ve ever experienced anything like this?” then feel free to share your own story.

Don't be surprised if you feel drained after a deep conversation. Sometimes, showing empathy may be as simple as commiserating with a co-worker over heavy traffic on the route to work.

It doesn't take much effort to empathize with this kind of situation, and it is unlikely to sit with you once the conversation has ended. On the other hand, listening to someone talk about a bereavement, serious illness, or a divorce requires some serious emotional labor.

You don't have to be a human sponge. If you know that you are likely to have a deep discussion with someone when you next meet up, schedule some time alone for a couple of hours afterwards.

From time to time, I work with clients who have histories of complex psychological and emotional problems. These often stem from traumatic incidents. The stories they tell me are literally hair-raising. I'm happy to be empathetic and help them work through their problems, but I've realized that for the sake of my own emotional health, I need some time alone after our sessions.

Those of us who work with people facing tough times in their lives need to decompress regularly, or compassion fatigue can set in.³⁰ Never forget that your own well-being is just as important as that of anyone else.

²⁸ Benbassat, J., & Bauml, R. (2004). What Is Empathy, and How Can It Be Promoted during Clinical Clerkships? *Academic Medicine*, 79, 9, 832-839.

²⁹ Rogers, C.R. (2007). The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions Of Therapeutic Personality Change. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 44, 3, 240-248.

³⁰ Benson, J., & Magraith, K. (2005). Compassion fatigue and burnout. *Australian Family Physician*, 34, 6.

Chapter 6:

How To Let Go – Why You Don't Need To Share All Your Ideas

Sometimes, it feels almost impossible to keep a conversation going. (Don't worry if you have this difficulty – later in the book, I'll show you how to keep any conversation alive.) On the other hand, there are those of us who actually have the opposite problem. The conversation seems to be moving too fast, and we want to jump right in whilst someone else is still speaking.

Of course, you already know that interrupting someone is the height of rudeness. Yet it's easy to fall into the trap of voicing every thought that pops into your head. We all do it – there are no sex differences when it comes to interruption frequency, and studies show that everyone from young children to adults do it.³¹

This bad habit can turn even the best conversations sour. When you feel as though you are in rapport with another person, it can seem as though the pair of you share many of the same ideas and experiences. So what do you do? Rush to share your own stories, of course!

Unless you are accomplished in keeping a clear head and maintaining control over your feelings (for example, if you are well versed in the art of [mindfulness](#)), your mind will take you

down all kinds of tangents. This is totally normal. In itself, it's no problem.

The trouble starts when you feel the need to tell everyone what's going through your head. You may intend to add a quick anecdote or point to the conversation but, before you know it, you've completely hijacked the discussion.

What Goes Through Your Head When Someone Else Is Speaking?

To fully appreciate how hard it is to refrain from diving into a conversation, let's consider what tends to run through our heads when we listen to someone else speak.

1. *The desire to express total agreement.* A lot of us are quick to make it clear when we agree with something. We like someone to know that we are on their team, that we know what exactly what they mean, and that we approve of their opinions.

This makes sense, given that most of us thrive on approval and compliments. If we like positive feedback, then other people must like it too – right?

Yes, but only in an appropriate context. There is no value in barging in to a conversation just to explain why you think the speaker is completely correct in everything that they say.

2. *The desire to express total disagreement.* If someone is making a point that goes against our own belief system, the temptation to tell them precisely why they are so wrong can feel overwhelming.

We seem to believe that if we can just make them see things from our point of view – say, within the next three minutes – they will immediately retract their statement and agree that our own opinion is far superior to theirs. If you think about it, this never works in practice, but it doesn't stop us from wanting to try.

3. *The desire to correct the speaker on a trivial point.* If you have a pedantic streak, you will pick up on small inconsistencies or errors, such as a mispronunciation or a minor error regarding a date or name.

There is never a good reason to leap in with a minor correction. All you will gain is a reputation as an annoying pedant who can't see the wood for the trees. Pedantry is so irksome because it diminishes the point someone is trying to make, which disrupts the flow of conversation and undermines rapport.³²

If you act in a pedantic manner, people will begin to suspect that you just enjoy making others angry. It doesn't matter if you just want to help – keep quiet.

4. *The desire to sling a well-timed insult or cutting remark.* For those of us who enjoy banter and wordplay, an opportunity for a witty remark or retort is almost irresistible. If you are the type of person who loves to make others laugh, you need to remember that the speaker's right to have their say is more important than your right to flaunt your excellent sense of humor.

It's a matter of respect. If your sense of humor is really that great, then you can rest assured that it's only a matter

of time before you come up with another hilarious remark that you can share with others.

5. *The desire to ask a question about a topic, even though the speaker has moved on.* If you are actively listening to a speaker in the hope of expanding your knowledge of a particular subject, you might have a few questions you'd like to ask.

However, by the time you have formulated a great question, they will probably have started talking about something else! The best solution is to note it down. Forcing a speaker to return to ground they have already covered will break their mental flow. If you've been on the receiving end, you'll know just how annoying this is.

6. *The desire to make "helpful" practical suggestions as to how the speaker could solve a problem.* If you are the sort of person who enjoys solving problems and likes to help other people, you might want to share a possible solution to an issue raised by the speaker.

You might have the best intentions in the world, but unless someone asks for your advice, they probably don't want it. You might also be interested to know that when the average person gets some unsolicited advice that goes against their own impression of a situation, they are quite likely to reject it out of spite! So, unless someone has asked you for your input, it's often pointless to impose your own opinions anyway.³³

If you really must pass on your idea, wait until they have finished speaking, ask whether they would like to

hear your opinion, and then present your thoughts in a succinct manner if appropriate. Don't worry about letting some of your ideas go. You are bound to have lots more in the future.

7. The desire to answer a rhetorical question.

Rhetorical questions are intended to encourage the listener to think about a topic from a new perspective. They are not intended to be used as conversation starters. If you want to answer a rhetorical question, you can do so – in your head.

How To Keep Quiet

I used to be a chronic interrupter. If someone ever told me a story, I would often add my own contributions as they were speaking. Until my twenties, I believed that this tendency was just a sign of my enthusiasm.

It wasn't until a friend pulled me aside after a dinner party one night to ask whether I realized how much air I was sucking out of the room that the penny dropped. I trusted the friend in question, so my embarrassment was enough to get me to quit virtually overnight.

Sometimes it takes a bit of tough love before we fully appreciate where we've been going wrong. Asking a close friend for their honest opinion is a good step. Brace yourself for their feedback! If they confirm that yes, you are indeed an interrupter, ask for their help.

Agree on a simple hand signal they can use whenever you start hijacking a conversation. You will soon start to see (quite

literally) how and when you tend to interject, and this awareness will help you make changes.

Changing my attitude to thinking and conversation also made it easier to let go of my thoughts. Everyone has hundreds of thousands of thoughts every single day, and most are unremarkable. They come and go.

The next time you have a few minutes to yourself, just watch your own mind. A whole range of words, images, and ideas will flash in and out of your conscious awareness. Most aren't really that interesting, and hardly any stick around longer than a couple of seconds.

This exercise helped me work out that just because I might have a thought, there is no reason to assume that it must be shared with the world. Everyone has their own stream of consciousness.

Thoughts are transient. I realized that if I was still hung up on an issue by the time the speaker had finished taking their turn in conversation, it was probably important enough for me to bring up.

The next time you feel tempted to interrupt someone, sit with the thought instead. You'll be surprised at how much junk flies through your head, and how you'll soon realize that you wouldn't have added anything to the conversation by sharing it with everyone else.

Discretion Is The Better Part Of Valor

Not only do you have to know when to keep your ideas to yourself, but you should also know when to avoid gossiping about other people, or passing on confidential information. I

get it – it’s human nature to gossip. Reality TV shows are incredibly popular, and for good reason.

We all want to know who hates who, who loves who, and so on. When we learn a secret about a friend or relative, the temptation to pass it on can feel almost overwhelming. For some reason, negative gossip is even more alluring than good news.

Knowing when to stay quiet is partly a matter of maturity. As you get older, you start to realize that sometimes, it really is best to keep schtum. The short-term joy of passing on a secret isn’t usually worth the eventual fallout.

You can be assured that when you divulge someone’s secret, it will come back to bite you. Maybe not within a week, month, or even a year, but gossips seldom get away with their bad habit for long. Even if you manage to avoid offending a specific person, you will slowly gain a reputation as an untrustworthy individual.

If you’re talking to someone and are on the verge of giving away a confidential or highly personal piece of information concerning another individual, ask yourself these questions:

1. *Why am I so keen to share this piece of information right now?* Unless the other person absolutely needs to know a secret, there is no reason why you should pass it on. Ask yourself what your motives really are.

This might not be the easiest question to answer, because your reflections might reveal some rather unflattering truths. For example, you may be forced to

admit that your primary motive is to get some kind of revenge on the person you are about to betray.

However, passing on confidential information isn't going to help. You need to actually get to the bottom of the dispute, and resolve it at the source. Don't drag an innocent third party into the situation.

Or perhaps you are feeling low in confidence and want to make yourself look better in comparison to someone else, so you decide to spill the beans about their disastrous personal life. Again, what's the underlying issue here? In this case, you would need to address your low self-esteem, pronto.

2. *What might happen if this person passes it on?* Even if your conversation partner swears on their grandmother's grave that they will never divulge the secret to anyone else, can you really trust them?

After all, someone probably trusted you, didn't they? It's worth thinking through the worst-case scenario. Who could they tell, and what might happen as a result? Remember that you never know for sure who is friends with who.

You may assume that the other person doesn't know the person whose secrets you are about to divulge, whereas in reality they are close. Their loyalty might mean that things get ugly very quickly.

3. *Do I even know whether this information is true?* If you are going to pass on information that might change someone else's reputation – for better or for worse – make sure that you know it to be true. If you

heard it from the primary source, you probably have an accurate insight into the situation. Or do you?

Remember, everything can and does change. Your colleague might have told you, in confidence, that they are 13 weeks pregnant – but then had a miscarriage a few days following your conversation.

How would you feel if you discovered that you were the subject of very personal gossip? Of course, if you are simply going to invent rumors, you need to do some serious soul-searching. Once you have graduated elementary school, there is no excuse for this kind of behavior.

4. *What positive or uplifting messages could I pass on instead?* When I think about the worst gossips I ever met, I don't think that most of them actually meant to cause any harm. So why did they like talking about other people?

For much the same reason that people love talking about the latest reality TV show – it provides them with a topic of conversation. Back in college, I used to take a history class with a girl named Laura. We'd occasionally have coffee together just after class let out. Within a few weeks of knowing her, I realized that she seized upon any opportunity to speculate about the personal lives of our classmates, our professors, and even the janitor!

She was especially eager to tell me all about the time she'd seen one of our professors walking to his car late one evening with a much younger woman. I probably spent about two

hours in total listening to her ramble on about how terrible he was for cheating on his wife.

Of course, she was making assumptions. She had never seen him hold hands with this woman, or even kiss her on the cheek. Laura only shut up about it when she happened to see the professor at a college recital. He was there with his wife and the “other woman,” who just so happened to be his daughter. It turned out that she was taking an evening class at the school.

On reflection, Laura never had anything positive to say about anyone. I think her gossip served as filler, a way of guarding against any periods of silence. (Incidentally, you don’t need to talk all the time – it’s fine to have a pause here and there!)

If you have a habit of talking about other people behind their backs, ask yourself when you last had a positive, uplifting conversation about something other than everyone else’s dirty secrets. What other interests do you have? Do you ever feel compelled to pass on good news?

Perhaps you have the same old negative conversations over and over again with the same people? If so, you need to revise your conversation habits. Stick to positive or neutral topics.

There are literally thousands of other things to talk about. If you don’t have a hobby, get one! Stop subjecting people to your mindless gossip, and instead form constructive relationships based on intimacy and authenticity.

In summary, knowing when to keep your mouth shut is one of the key skills you must master in order to build

great relationships. The golden rule here is that if in doubt, don't keep talking.

Unless the situation is life or death, err on the side of caution. Don't risk your reputation and relationships for the sake of a few pieces of gossip.

³¹ Marche, T.A., & Peterson, C. (1993). The Development and Sex-Related Use of Interruption Behavior. *Human Communication Research*, 19, 3, 388-408.

³² Jabour, B. (2014). *So you're a pedant? It's nothing to be proud of.* theguardian.com

³³ Fitzsimons, G.J., & Lehrman, D.R. (2004). Reactance to Recommendations: When Unsolicited Advice Yields Contrary Responses. *Marketing Science*, 23, 1, 82-94.

Chapter 7:

Conversations That Revive Relationships

Reconnecting After A Fight

Iwrote this book to help people have better conversations with everyone – friends, colleagues, and relatives. But what if there’s a barrier between you and the person you want to talk to? Sadly, arguments between friends and relatives are all too common.

Before you know it, the months and years have flown by, and you start to miss them. You start to wonder, “Do I get back in touch? How can I reach out and repair the relationship?” This is where a lot of people hit a block. It’s an awkward situation – what should you say, and how should you say it?

In this chapter, I’ll teach you how to have conversations that get a relationship back on track. Even if you stopped talking after a full-scale row, there’s always a chance to revive your friendship.

Whether your argument was two weeks or two decades ago, follow these steps:

Step 1 - Check your attitude: First, make sure that you are psychologically ready to let go of the past. If you are going to make a sincere attempt at reconciliation, you cannot harbor lingering resentment or fantasies of revenge.

Neither should you expect the other person to “see the light” and admit that they were the one in the wrong. The key question is this: Are you willing to value their friendship over your need to be right? **Only when the answer is, “Yes, definitely,” should you try to repair the relationship.**

Otherwise, there’s a high chance that you’ll start fighting over the same issue. This doesn’t mean that you can’t talk about the past, but it does mean that you should be prepared to let the matter lie (forever) if you can’t reach an agreement.

Step 2 - Set up a call or meeting with an “I’ve realized” email: As a rule, I always value face-to-face interaction or phone conversations over emails. However, email (or even letters!) is the perfect tool for setting up a reconciliation. Why? Imagine yourself in the following scenario:

You have had an ugly row with a friend, and resolved never to speak to them again. A few months go by, and you’re busy getting on with your life. The phone rings. You pick it up, only to hear this person’s voice.

Coming out of the blue, it’s unnerving. It also places you on the spot – you are under pressure to make up your mind, in that very moment, as to whether or not you want to talk to this person. Even if you see their name on your phone’s screen and choose to ignore it, you still have to make a choice – do you want to call them back, or ignore them?

If you do call them back, you’ll need to think about what you are going to say. If you don’t call them back, you’ll probably worry that they will call again! In any event, a burden has been placed on your shoulders.

Now, consider this alternative chain of events: One day, you receive an email or letter from your estranged friend. Within a couple of paragraphs, they explain why they are getting back in touch, tell you that they would like to meet (or talk on the phone, if distance makes meeting impossible), and that they hope you will reply.

You can read and reread the email at your leisure. You can take a few days to digest it, and reply – or not. Either way, you don't have to sustain an awkward phone call with someone! You can also keep a copy, which could come in useful if you want or need to talk about this relationship with a third party at a later date.

At this point, you'll be wondering what to put in an email to an estranged friend. There are no magic words, but there is a phrase that sets the right tone. That phrase is, "I've realized."

Acclaimed mediator Dr. Tammy Lenski recommends that your message should include a brief summary of the things you've realized or learned during the time you have been apart.

This makes you appear thoughtful and sincere, but not overly negative. It doesn't demand answers from the other person, which means they won't feel threatened.

End the email by saying that you'd like to call or meet, and hope that they'd be willing to work with you to set something up.³⁴ The ball is then in their court.

Obviously, you will have to tailor your email to your specific situation and personality, but here's generic example:

Dear [Their Name],

I have been thinking of you recently, and how the silence between us has made me realize a few things. I wanted to get in touch and tell you about them.

I've realized that my friendships are one of the most important things in my life, and that I don't want to let the past come between me and one of my oldest pals.

I've realized that sometimes, it's hard for me to work out problems in my friendships, but that I want to be your friend again.

Thank you for opening my email. I'd love the chance to speak to you/meet up with you. Could we set something up?

[Your Name]

There is a chance that they might not reply. Make sure that you are prepared for this outcome before making contact, and be willing to let it go if you receive no response.

Step 3 – Meet up and talk. If either of you need to clear the air, raise the issue early in the conversation: In an ideal world, both of you would be able to move on from whatever happened between you. Sometimes, especially if you fell out for a trivial reason, that's exactly how the situation can unfold.

However, we don't live in an ideal world, and sometimes we must openly address what happened in the past. Otherwise, the underlying issue will continue to simmer until you have yet another fight.

This kind of conversation demands strong listening and conflict resolution skills. Remember, your aim is not to "win," but to have a constructive talk that allows both of you to feel

heard. You don't have to agree with every comment they make. [Aim to empathize](#), rather than to impose your opinions.

If their interpretation of events upsets you, tell yourself that at least you know where you stand. It's your choice to either walk away, or to rekindle the relationship under a new set of terms and conditions.

For example, if you and your friend fell out because you disagreed on a political matter, they might say that they are happy to be friends again – under the condition that you never again discuss heavy political topics.

Be prepared to adjust your view of events as the conversation progresses. If you realize that you caused more hurt than you imagined, swallow your pride and apologize for your actions.

Step 4 – Treat them like anyone else: Once you have moved past any initial negotiations and apologies, move the conversation back to the same kinds of topics you used to talk about prior to your big argument. If it's been months or years since you last saw the other person, refer to the section below for further guidance.

What If You Just Drifted Apart?

What if you didn't fall out with a friend, but just drifted apart instead? This often happens between college friends after graduation, or between two work buddies who go on to work for different companies. If there's no animosity between you, skip the email and go straight to a phone call.

Of course, if you don't have their number, an email or message on social media is fine. Tell them that you would like

to hang out and catch up, or if that's not possible (for example, if they live far away), to schedule a phone call to share what has been happening in your lives.

When talking to someone who hasn't been in your life for a long time, follow these tips:

Acknowledge that it's been a long time since you last spoke: Don't try and pretend that it's been ten minutes since you last spent time together – this will make you appear a bit odd!

Pair a comment about how long it's been since you last saw one another with a positive statement. For example, "It's been years! You're looking great, you always had style!" would be a good opener.

Harness nostalgia: I don't believe in dwelling on the past, but if you have a shared history that makes both of you smile, there's nothing wrong with a few references to the good old days. A bit of nostalgia will remind you of what you have in common, and will trigger old feelings of intimacy and familiarity.

Ask about mutual contacts and old acquaintances: Ask the other person whether they have been in contact with any mutual friends. This can be a fertile topic of conversation, and can help you reconnect with other people from your past.

Talk about dreams and goals: If your old friend has met their personal or professional goals, they will be happy to tell you about them, and this can be a good basis for an interesting conversation that gives you an insight into their life.

However, asking, "So, did you achieve X?" can be awkward if they have failed to achieve a goal. A subtler approach is to

ask them about their hopes and dreams for the future. This will usually develop naturally into a conversation that allows them the chance to bring up their past achievements. If appropriate, you can then say, “Of course, you always wanted to do X, and I’m so glad you succeeded!”

Move to the present tense: If you want to be a part of their life as it currently stands, ask them about it! You can always fall back on common topics (for example, family and hobbies) if the conversation isn’t flowing naturally.

Close with a concrete suggestion or invitation: If you want to keep the flame of friendship alight, end the conversation by inviting them to an event or arranging another catch up session.

Note that you should only do this if you truly want the relationship to continue. You might spend time with this person and discover that although you still like them, your lives are now so different that a regular friendship probably isn’t an option. However, you will at least have enjoyed a good conversation, and that in itself is a positive outcome.

How To Maintain A Long-Distance Relationship

The phrase “long-distance relationship” conjures up the image of two lovers kept apart by circumstances beyond their control. However, most of us living in the 21st century have at least a couple of long-distance platonic or familial relationships.

In days gone by, people tended to live in the same place for much of their lives, so maintaining relationships was quite straightforward. In an age where it’s considered normal to move to a new state or country, you can expect to be in at least

one long-distance friendship or family relationship at some point.

If you learn that your friend (or even your partner) is about to move hours away, don't give up! It's possible to maintain a close relationship even if years go by with no face-to-face communication.³⁵

Use The Maintenance Behavior Model To Keep Your Relationship Strong

As you might imagine, psychologists are interested in how we conduct our relationships – including relationships carried out from afar. One of the models I really like is the Maintenance Behavior (MB) Model.

This model is backed up by research that shows the best long-distance relationships are those that incorporate seven different types of maintenance behaviors.³⁶ Check that you've got each one covered, and your bond will remain strong!

1. *Assurances*: Don't assume that the other person knows how much you appreciate them. Let them know that you enjoy talking to them, and assure them that you are grateful your relationship is still intact.

Insecurity is a common problem in long-distance relationships, because one or both people may start thinking, "We are only talking via a computer or phone – wouldn't they rather be out having fun in the real world?" Regular assurance can stop insecurity setting in.

2. *Openness*: As with all relationships, a degree of openness is needed. Telling someone about your problems and innermost thoughts is a reliable way of

maintaining intimacy. However, openness also takes on extra meaning in a long-distance relationship.

It means that you need to be open when the distance is affecting you – for example, if you feel as though the two of you aren't talking enough – and how to overcome your problems. Don't panic if the other person tells you that they are finding the distance hard. Empathize, and then suggest ways of overcoming the issue.

For instance, if they feel as though they are no longer an important part of your life, suggest that you hold a weekly session in which you both make a point of telling the other about everything that happened over the past few days.

There is no magic rule that specifies how often you have to talk to one another – it must be negotiated on a case-by-case basis. I'd argue that quality is more important than quantity, but then again, I place a high value on efficiency!

If you prefer to spend twenty minutes per day in conversation rather than talk in depth for an hour or two once a week, for example, then that's fine – as long as it works for both of you.

You will need to be open in stating your preferences. You should also be prepared to be flexible. For example, someone might not have as much time to spare during the holiday season.

3. *Conflict management:* If you have a relationship problem and you live far apart, make it a rule

that you will only resolve your differences over Skype, not via text messages or the phone.

Two people need to see one another's body language to really understand what the other party is thinking or feeling. Text and even phone calls let you hide your true emotions, which can lead to conflicts going unresolved.

Your negative feelings will fester over time if you don't sort out your problems when they first arise. This will cause significant damage to your relationship.

4. *Sharing tasks and activities:* In a traditional relationship, two people usually engage in real-time activities, such as going out for dinner or spending time at the park. These activities build mutual experiences and a shared history. If you are far apart, the traditional approach won't work. So what can you do instead? Find some online substitutes!

You could play games together online, stream the same movie together, write a short story or poem using an online document, and even eat your meals together whilst keeping your webcams on.

Shared activities allow you both to focus on something other than the conversation, which will help you both relax rather than analyze whether you are talking about sufficiently interesting topics.

5. *Positivity:* Everyone appreciates positivity in their relationships, but it's particularly vital in long-distance relationships. It's depressing to think that you might not see someone for months or years, so

positivity is key in making you both feel better. Start and close every conversation on a positive note.

From time to time, tell them the positive impact they have on your life. You could even try to find the upsides of long-distance relationships. For example, the feeling you get when meeting up after months or years apart is bound to be particularly special. Suggest that you both note down three positive things that happen to you each day, and then share them during your next conversation.

6. *Giving advice:* When you are far apart from someone, you may feel removed from their life. Sharing problems and offering advice (if the other person wants it, of course) can go some way to compensate for this gap. It will help both people feel more involved in each other's offline lives.

7. *Drawing on social networks to support the relationship:* Don't feel as though you have to bottle up your feelings. If you really miss the other person and the distance is getting you down, call on your other friends and relatives for support. Encourage the other person to do the same.

You can also invite mutual friends to hang out online (for example, by taking part in an online game). This will allow your relationship to exist in a broader context, rather than in a little online bubble.

Keeping a relationship alive over a distance can be tough, but it can also be rewarding. **Choose video calling or the phone instead of emails and texts if possible, because this will make your conversations feel more intimate.**

Video calling is ideal, because you get to see the other person's body language as well as hear their voice. Don't forget that gifts and letters still have their place. Receiving a handwritten note in the mail can make someone feel special, so make the effort to send them once in a while.

If you start to feel as though your relationship is somewhat lacking, refer back to this model. Are there any areas that you've been neglecting recently?

If the other person is interested in psychology, you could even share this model with them! Working together to build a great relationship is well worth the effort.

³⁴ Lenski, M. (2016). *How to Email Someone After a Falling Out*. Mediate.com

³⁵ Parrenas, R. (2005). Long distance intimacy: Class, gender and intergenerational relations between mothers and children in Filipino transnational families. *Global Networks*, 5, 4, 317-336.

³⁶ Stafford, L., Dainton, M., & Haas, S. (2000). Measuring routine and strategic relational maintenance: Scale revision, sex versus gender roles, and the prediction of relational characteristics. *Communication Monographs*, 67, 3, 306-323.

Chapter 8:

Do You Feel “Different?” How To Overcome Outsider Syndrome

So many of my clients – even those who appear pretty confident – have told me that they feel “different” or “odd” when they are around other people. My theory is that this feeling – known in self-development circles as “Outsider Syndrome” – is much more common than you might think.

At some point in your life, you are going to feel like the odd one out. Perhaps you don’t have much in common with your colleagues, or maybe you’re in a class full of people who have known one another for years.

I’m frequently asked how to fit in as the new guy or girl in the office, or how to make friends with people who are already in established groups in the workplace. Most people can cope with feeling like an outsider for a while, but it soon becomes draining.

Even for the most introverted among us, social interaction is a basic human need. In fact, regular social contact is important for our mental health – psychologists have long known that isolation increases our risk of both mental and physical illness.³⁷ So how can you establish yourself as a member of the in-group?

If you have a disdain for small talk, get over it: If you spend a lot of time alone, other people will assume that you dislike social interaction. They may also wonder whether they have done anything to offend you! This can lay the foundation for a vicious cycle.

It goes like this: You feel like an outsider, so you don't want to approach them. They continue to leave you alone, and everyone gets used to this division – it becomes “How things are.” It therefore becomes even harder to try and make friends with those in the group...and the pattern continues.

Luckily, you can break the cycle. The first step is to start sending out normality signals. These signals should communicate, “I am a social being. I would be open to talking with you.” What's the ultimate normality sign? Small talk, of course!

When you can look someone in the eye, ask them how their weekend went, and express interest in their health, you are sending a clear signal – “I understand the basic rules of social interaction.”

Remember, other people know nothing (or very little) about you if you have taken on the role as outsider. Before committing to further social interaction, they will want to satisfy themselves that you pose no danger, and that you are friendly.

There are many differences between socially successful people and those who struggle to make friends. One key factor is their perception of small talk. I've worked with at least a dozen clients who have told me stories that go along these lines:

“I just feel different. I don’t think I’m better than anyone else, but I’m not like them. People are so dramatic! And all they do is talk about stupid stuff. I don’t like small talk, and I don’t share any of their interests. How am I supposed to make friends at work/network/get on with my partner’s family?”

I always tell them that, contrary to what some people would have you believe, mastering the art of small talk doesn’t make you look like a suck-up, and neither does it make you someone who is bound by the shackles of convention.

The truth is that casual conversation is the bedrock of everyday interaction, and those who don’t engage in it are at a serious disadvantage. This isn’t just my opinion – there is plenty of academic research out there to back it up!

For example, linguist Janet Holmes has spent hours in various workplaces, monitoring the ways in which people interact.³⁸ Her research, and that of other people, shows that if you want to make friends and influence people (as the classic saying goes), you need to be happy talking about the “little stuff.” Small talk breaks down barriers.

This type of client tends to say things like, “But I never had to go through the small talk stage with my best friend! We just got on well immediately. We just clicked.” Fair enough. But most friendships are first forged in the fire of casual interaction, and most co-worker relationships hinge on seemingly trivial chitchat. You are not too good for small talk, however smart or special you may feel.

If you think small talk is banal and pointless, you’re missing a trick. **Small talk isn’t really about exchanging information. It’s about reassuring one another that you are**

both functional human beings who can hold a conversation.

It's not enough to talk to someone once or twice, either. You are going to have to make a sustained effort. I'm talking weeks here, not a couple of days. Chat to people in the coffee room, talk to them immediately before or after a meeting, strike up small talk whilst waiting for the same bus – seize any opportunity.

You might be brushed off at first, or perhaps the conversation won't last for more than ten seconds. That's OK! Persistence is key. You'll soon see the rewards – you'll develop better relationships with your colleagues, and there will be less tension at work.³⁹

If you are stumped as to where to start, listen in on other people's conversations. You'll soon realize that most small talk revolves around the state of someone's well-being (e.g. "How are you?"), references to everyday events (e.g. "That meeting went on a long time, didn't it!" or "We had a lot of rain this morning!"), or compliments ("That's a really nice hat!").

Sometimes you might hear petty complaints ("Urgh, overtime again!") or clichés ("No rest for the wicked, eh?"). They all have their place. Think of small talk as a means of harmonizing with another person. It really isn't about what you are saying. It's about establishing a shared sense of trust and communication. Once you get to know someone, feel free to admit that you don't much care for small talk. You might discover that they feel the same way!

Read around, and make the most of your knowledge: Communication guru Leil Lowndes was right when she wrote that we should all be, in her words, “Renaissance men and women.”⁴⁰ What does this mean? Basically, make a point of reading widely, so that you are able to jump into conversations on many different topics.

Obviously, you can’t hope to become an expert in every field, but you can certainly give yourself a better chance at fitting in with practically any crowd by reading new books, magazines, websites, and so on.

When you have a solid grounding in many subjects, you’ll feel more confident when someone asks you for an opinion, and you will feel confident in carrying on a conversation.

Skim a couple of articles on random topics every day, and you’ll soon be able to contribute to even the most obscure of conversations. Pick a couple of interesting blogs that cover a variety of topics, and follow them.

Don’t worry about keeping up with everything that’s going on in the world. You just need the gist of major world events, and you’ll pick that up by spending a few minutes per day on Facebook. If something of earth-shattering significance happens then by all means read a news site.

However, as a rule, I recommend avoiding mainstream news media. It is built on a foundation of negativity, and it will drag you down. Not only that, but your negativity will come across in the conversations you have with others. This will not help you build constructive relationships!

When talking to people you don’t know, never exclaim that you find a particular subject to be trivial or stupid. You never

know who might have cause to feel offended. If you want to earn your place in a group, you need to show a nonjudgmental attitude. Once you have established a few friendships, you can afford to become a bit more opinionated.

If you don't have the background knowledge necessary to take part in a conversation, get curious: What if you are in a room of people who are experts on an obscure topic or technical area, and their conversations leave you feeling out in the cold? Fall back on sincere questions.

Admit that you don't have a clue what they are talking about, but make it clear that you are willing to learn. For example, if you are the only English Literature graduate in a room of statisticians, try something like, "I've heard a lot of people in here talk about loglinear modeling.

It sounds pretty impressive – what exactly does that phrase mean?"

Unless the person you are talking to is a complete jerk, they will gladly take the opportunity to either pass on their knowledge, or at least steer the conversation to another topic if they would rather talk about something else.

Don't be self-deprecating: Ironically, taking the time to explain how weird you are will actually make you look even stranger. Think about it. Suppose you just met someone who seems perfectly nice and normal. Suddenly they say, "I'm pretty weird! I don't have any friends, I don't think I have anything in common with you, and I've always felt out of place."

Would you want to stay in the same room as that person? Probably not. Don't share your inner turmoil with people you

don't know well. Save that for your therapist.

I used to make this mistake in college. If someone ever asked what I enjoyed doing in my leisure time, I'd answer with, "Ha ha, I'm pretty boring really!" or "Nothing that would interest you, just random weird stuff." Looking back, I want to cringe.

If only I had actually answered those kinds of questions and tried to keep a conversation going, I might have managed to make a few more friends. You have as much value as anyone else in the room, so conduct yourself accordingly.

Intervene directly: If you are feeling bold, wait for a natural lull in the conversation and then simply establish yourself as a participant. For example, suppose you are in the breakroom at work, and three of your co-workers are discussing their vacation plans. You aren't in their social group, and you feel like an outsider.

Suddenly, you hear one of them mention their love of San Francisco, which just so happens to be the city in which you grew up. You could say something like, "Excuse me, did I hear you talk about San Fran? That's where I grew up! I'd love to know what you like about it." People will be thrown off guard by this maneuver, but they'll soon get over it.

Establish in-jokes: One of the quickest ways to build rapport and lay the foundations for a relationship is to not only share a joke, but to establish a shared frame of reference. In-jokes should come naturally, so this tactic relies on an element of luck.

For example, let's say that you're talking with a colleague in the office about a recent memo circulated around the company.

Suddenly, the power goes out for a few seconds. This kind of incident provides you both with a shared experience, which can become a point of reference in future conversations.

During your next conversation on work-related matters, you could make a quip like, “It’s nice to be able to see who you’re talking to, isn’t it?” This kind of remark isn’t hilarious, but it shows that you are friendly, approachable, and have a sense of humor.

Establishing a positive reputation for yourself will encourage other people to interact with you not just for the sake of business, but also with the intention of becoming your friend.

Sneak “we,” “we’re,” and “us” in a few times: “We,” “we’re,” and “us” might be small words, but they are mighty. When you talk to your close friends and family, you probably use them a lot – “When we go to Grandma’s for Christmas, we’ll have a great time,” “We’re looking forward to trying out that new restaurant in town,” and so on. These phrases imply intimacy and shared experience.

You can use them with people you don’t know very well to imply that you are similar. This tactic works particularly well in the workplace, because you are all part of the same system and share the same objectives. Consider the difference “we,” “we’re,” or “us” makes to the following sentences:

“From what I understand, this project needs to be done by July.”

“It looks like *we’re* going to have to get this project done by July.”

“Did you see that email from the boss? Everyone has to attend the Monday meeting.”

“Did you get that email the boss sent *us*? *We* need to attend the Monday meeting.”

Over time, these small words create an impression of solidarity. They signal that you and the other person are on the same team. They will feel more inclined to think that the two of you are alike – and therefore, they will begin to feel more comfortable around you. After all, it’s natural to talk to someone who is similar to you.

Set up a conversation bridge: This works in much the same way as the in-joke technique described above, but it doesn’t rely on chance happenings or humor. If you are talking to someone you’d like to get to know, set up a conversation starter you can use later.

When it seems as though the conversation is coming to a close, wrap up by asking the other person to explain a particular idea to you another time, or tell them that you look forward to hearing the full story behind an event they have already referenced.

Ideally, this should relate to something the other person (or group) feels really passionate about. The next time the two of you talk, you can steer the conversation back to the topic in question. This sets the stage for a positive interaction that will help develop your relationship.

An example will show you how well this trick can help forge a relationship. I used to work with a pretty grumpy guy. I’ll call him Sam. Sam had a tendency to either get on really well with people in the office, or to shut them out. There was

no middle ground with him – you were either his buddy, or on the receiving end of icy politeness. For the first couple of months after joining the company, I was definitely on his “out” list.

Unfortunately, given that he occupied a senior position in my department, I couldn’t afford to ignore him. I knew I’d have to employ my best conversation skills if I was to build any sort of relationship with Sam.

One morning, we were both standing by the water cooler. The tap was broken, and no water was coming out. “Damn!” he exclaimed. “This thing is useless. I might as well be in the Sahara again!” I didn’t understand his reference to the desert. I was so puzzled that I found myself saying aloud, “You’ve been to the Sahara?” Sam laughed and said, “Yes, I’ve been to the Sahara, and some other seriously exotic places! Not that you’d guess by looking at me.”

I told him that I looked forward to hearing all about it over lunch sometime. He looked confused, but not annoyed. He muttered something under his breath, and returned to his desk.

Later that week, when getting lunch in the canteen, I realized that I was standing behind Sam in the queue. After we paid for our food, I asked whether we could eat together. Before he could object, I told him that I was serious when I said I wanted to hear the Sahara story.

He looked stunned for a few seconds, but we went on to have a great conversation about his adventures. It turned out that he was a veteran traveler who loved exploring remote places. He had journeyed all over the world in his college days, and had many tales to tell.

That lunch was the start of a friendship that continues to this day. Not only did I get to know Sam, but he made a point of introducing me to several other people in the department.

If you want to get acquainted with a group at work, look for the leader: As my story with Sam illustrates, striking up a rapport with a socially influential individual can be your gateway to further introductions. If you want to earn membership to a particular group, watch them in action. **You'll soon notice who holds the most power. Whilst it's best to try and build rapport with as many people as possible, the group leader is the one you really need to impress.**

If you can find some kind of common ground or just engage in small talk a few times each week, you can gradually build a meaningful relationship that will make your working life a lot easier.

Being an outsider can be an uncomfortable feeling, especially if you are an extrovert who loves to be part of a group. Luckily, it only takes a few little tricks to endear yourself to most people.

At the same time, I want to end this section on a cautionary note. Sometimes, it really isn't in your best interests to try and join a particular group. Occasionally, you'll come across a clique so toxic that the company they can provide comes at too high a price.

If your attempts to get to know someone get thrown back in your face, along with a side helping of intimidation or even bullying, stop with the masochism. Don't waste your valuable time on people who don't deserve it.

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38 Holmes, J. (2005). When small talk is a big deal: Sociolinguistic challenges in the workplace. In M.H. Long (Ed.), *Second Language Needs Analysis*, pp. 344-372. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

39 Ibid.

40 Lowndes, L. (1999). *How To Talk To Anyone*. Glasgow: Omnia Books Ltd.

Chapter 9:

Avoiding Excessive Negativity In Your Social Interactions

What's the most serious mistake most people make when talking to others? In my experience, both in my personal life and in talking with my clients, the quickest way to kill your social life is to infuse all your conversations with negativity. I'm not going to suggest that everyone should always adopt a Pollyanna attitude – that would get old pretty quick.

But what you need to understand is that grumbling, griping, and generally spreading negativity isn't going to win you any friends. Obvious, right? Sadly, it doesn't seem obvious to lots of people out there. In fact, some of the most negative people I've ever met seem totally oblivious to their own depressing conversation habits.

Negative Conversation Habits You Need To Kick

So how do you start combating the negativity habit? The below is a list of the most common mistakes I see in ordinary day-to-day scenarios. When you pay attention to your own conversations and those of others around you, you'll be alarmed by how often they come up!

Starting every conversation with a complaint: Have you ever asked someone how they are, only to be met with an

answer along the lines of, “Yeah OK I guess, too much work to do, and the weather isn’t great, but...”?

How does it make you feel? Negative answers to innocent conversation openers are not a good way to open a social interaction. Even if you have a legitimate complaint, try not to make your first response completely negative.

For example, if you have a headache, open with something like, “I’m doing OK, just got a bit of a headache!” This gives the other person an accurate insight into how you are doing, but doesn’t make you seem too downbeat and pessimistic.

Saying things that will earn you a reputation as a whiny, soul-destroying individual: How can I put this? If you suspect that you need to cut down on the amount of time you spend complaining about your life, you should probably follow your gut. Set yourself a challenge. **The next time you have a conversation of any appreciable length (say, more than ten minutes), count how many times you whine or complain. You might be shocked!**

The problem with being a chronic complainer is that you don’t just poison one particular conversation. You also risk developing a negative reputation that will shape how other people interact with you.

Remember, if you are building a relationship with someone, no conversation happens in isolation. It’s OK to vent a little every now and then, but after a few negative conversations, people will start to suspect that you harbor a toxic personality.

As a result, they will start to avoid you. Whenever you are about to start complaining or dumping your problems onto

your conversation partner, take a moment to reflect on how your behavior will affect your reputation.

Shutting down upbeat comments or perspectives: The best conversationalists take into account the feelings and moods of other people. We've all had days when everything seems to go wrong – the car won't start, we argue with our partner, we lose our phone, and so on – and then we run into someone who seems so darn happy!

This kind of situation is grating, even though we know that it isn't their fault that we are having a bad day. It's tempting to pass on your bad mood and shut down someone else's happiness into the bargain.

What do the most socially successful people do in this kind of situation? They spot an opportunity to ride the wave of someone else's happy mood, and use it to make both parties feel good.

For example, suppose someone had a hellish journey into work one morning, and then became drawn into a conversation with a very upbeat, smiley colleague. They could give brusque responses, grumble about their journey, and ruin both their own mood and that of their co-worker.

On the other hand, they could say something like “Well I had a pretty bad commute this morning, but I'm here now, and it's great to see someone looking so happy!” This type of remark sets the stage for a much more positive interaction.

Not only would both people in this situation enjoy the conversation, but the unfortunate commuter would grow their reputation as someone who took inconveniences in their stride. That's a good reputation to have.

Interjecting with a negative opinion for no good reason: We all have our own opinions, which is fine – but there’s no reason to tell everyone that you disagree with someone else’s ideas unless there is a sound reason for you to do so.

Saying things like, “I don’t agree,” or “I don’t like that” is not going to endear you to anyone. All it does is lower the tone of the conversation and possibly make other people feel uncomfortable. If there are some confrontational people in the room, you even risk triggering an unnecessary argument.

Giving pessimistic predictions that aren’t based on solid evidence: It’s always a good idea to remain realistic. I’ve got no problem with anyone who outlines the potential problems with an idea, if they really want to offer their help.

What annoys me – and what annoys a lot of other people – is someone who seems intent on projecting a bleak outcome just for the sake of it. Some people seem to get a weird rush out of playing the role of prophet. If this sounds like you, find another means of channeling your desire for drama.

Before pronouncing that the end is nigh, ask yourself, “Do I really have any evidence for this prediction?” If you do, present it in a clear, logical manner. If you don’t, hold your tongue.

Pedantry: Sometimes, pointing out other people’s mistakes is helpful. More often than not, it’s irritating. Unless someone makes a serious error, just let it go. After all, wouldn’t you want others to extend you the same courtesy?

Forgetting where you are: Not all conversation “rules” are applicable to every situation. I’m sure, as you’ve gone through this book, you’ve thought, “Well, that doesn’t always apply to

me!” or “I don’t need to think about this when I talk to my friends!” It’s a fair point – I can only give you general guidelines to follow.

However, it’s important to remember that every social group has its own conventions when it comes to how you express yourself, and this includes the degree of negativity you can get away with.

For example, if your closest friends enjoy making dark jokes or complaining about their everyday problems, then go ahead and do the same! The trick is to remember where you are. If in doubt, err on the side of positivity.

Bear in mind that if you tend to hang around with people who are comfortable with negativity, you need to check yourself when talking to more mainstream folk.

Diminishing other people’s experiences by one-upping them: If you’ve ever witnessed a game of one-upmanship (and who hasn’t?) between two or more people, you’ll know how destructive this habit is.

It’s fine to share good news with others, but subjecting them to long monologues about how much better you are than everyone else in the room is a sign of a narcissist – and who wants that kind of reputation?⁴¹

A few months ago, I was at a large family party. The atmosphere was great, and it was wonderful to catch up with relatives I don’t often see. I was standing around with two of my cousins, having a couple of drinks, when a guy I didn’t know came over to join us. I’ll call him Rob.

Rob, who turned out to be my female cousin's date, wasted no time in telling us all about his plans for the winter break. These plans just so happened to center around three weeks of skiing at one of Europe's most expensive resorts. We listened politely.

Finally, he slowed down a little and asked us whether we ever went skiing. I told him that I'd been a couple of times, but preferred snowboarding. My cousin Mike said that although he hadn't been skiing, he had been on a couple of snowmobiling trips.

Anyone would think that Rob was an expert in every winter sport on the planet. He didn't want to listen to our experiences. Everything we said was just an excuse for him to engage in some serious one-upmanship.

He talked at length about his snowboarding experiences, his snowmobiling experiences, and how his ski instructor had hinted he had the potential to compete at a professional level. He'd been to every resort worth visiting, he'd tried every sport worth trying, and his equipment was (obviously) much more expensive than ours.

I wanted to intervene and shut the conversation down but, at the same time, I found his sheer arrogance quite fascinating. Needless to say, we all breathed a sigh of relief when my cousin showed up and told him that it was time to leave.

Incidentally, she dumped him a few weeks later. I don't know the full story, but I have the feeling that his conversation skills (or lack thereof) had something to do with it.

Don't be like Rob. By all means share your experiences if you get the chance, but never try to outdo your conversation

partner. You'll look like a jerk, and who wants to be known as a show-off? **No one will want to open up to you in the future, because they'll just assume that you will attempt to show just how much "better" you are.**

Expecting someone else to do all the work: Some people, perhaps due to shyness or laziness, like to sit back and shove the responsibility for keeping the conversation going onto someone else. This is totally unacceptable. It suggests to the other person that you don't consider them sufficiently interesting to merit any effort on your part. You are inviting them to perform for your own entertainment.

Step up and take on your fair share! Pay attention to what they are saying. **Ask questions, and give thoughtful responses when they want you to provide more information.** If you can't be bothered to meet someone halfway, excuse yourself from the situation rather than force them to keep a one-sided interaction going.

Oversharing, or telling people too much about your problems: Have you ever met someone who felt compelled to open up about their most personal problems within ten minutes? How did it make you feel? In all probability, they came off as insecure and lacking in boundaries.

Letting all the skeletons out of the closet at the very start of a relationship creates a false sense of intimacy. It places pressure on the other person to either listen to your problems and put together a sensitive response, or disclose their own trials and tribulations (which may make them feel very uncomfortable). Keep your first few conversations light. If you

become friends with a new acquaintance, there will be plenty of time for sharing your grisly secrets later.

Questioning someone else's life choices: When it comes to childrearing, dietary practices, religion, and other potentially sensitive life choices, keep quiet. Unless you have been asked for your opinion, you should never, ever, ask someone to justify how they choose to live their personal life. Things often start to get ugly pretty quickly if you pursue these avenues.

Even if your conversation partner happens to be a close friend, you need to read the situation carefully. If in doubt, ask whether they would mind if you asked them a sincere question on the matter. If they seem at all reluctant, say that you understand their reticence and then change the subject.

Allowing a negative conversation to continue for too long: You might not have taken a conversation in a negative direction, but you can choose to turn it around or draw it to a close. Don't waste your time.

Repeating yourself to the point of becoming patronizing: Not everyone will be receptive to the points you are making. Sometimes, you might need to explain a point again from another angle. However, if you find yourself taking on the role of "teacher," patronizing your "student" and making the same point over and over again – stop!

Unless it's absolutely crucial that the other person understands what you are talking about, just let it go. Don't set up an imbalanced power dynamic. If you are both adults, a conversation should be an exchange between equals.

Do not talk down to anyone. If someone isn't able to understand you, maybe it's time to consider whether you are

explaining it properly in the first place. Never assume that the problem always lies with somebody else.

Reminiscing about the good old days with someone who is going through a rough patch: Resist the temptation to talk about how someone used to be. For example, if you are talking to a person who used to have a great job, but was then made redundant and had to take a new position that didn't come with the same salary and prestige, talking about their old role will make them feel like dirt. A more positive approach is to focus on what is going well for them right now.

Failing to keep your body language positive: However encouraging you are, the effect will be lost if your body language doesn't match your words. For example, if you are telling someone how much you enjoy your new job but sit with your shoulders slumped, they aren't going to believe you.⁴²

Can Anyone Learn To Be Positive?

Absolutely. We all have the ability to learn new ways of communicating with others, and leading a more positive life in general⁴³. Don't be discouraged if the list of habits above sound all too familiar. The key is to recognize that you need to change, and then to make yourself aware of your behaviors.

There's no need to alter your personality, just your communication techniques. **All you are doing when you decide to be positive is changing what you focus on.** If you have a reputation for being somewhat grumpy, your friends and colleagues might be a little surprised to see the transformation. However, within a few weeks, they'll be grateful that you decided to work on yourself.

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Chapter 10:

The Ethical Conversationalist – Getting Your Views Across & Needs Met Without Harming Others

Great conversationalists can wield significant influence. However, some people start to feel uneasy when I talk about social influence. I’ve had readers ask me to write about the ethics of good conversation.

How can you use your skills to build the relationships you want, whilst respecting other people? When is it acceptable to tell a lie? In this section, I’m going to tell you how to use your powers for the greater good.

Is It “Bad” To Try & Control The Behavior Of Someone Else?

If someone were to accuse you of being “controlling,” you probably wouldn’t take it as a compliment. Not many of us like to think that we gain satisfaction or enjoyment from dictating how other people should act. In some cases, the fear of being “too powerful” can even hold people back from developing their social skills.

I had one client who asked me in our second session, “I’m a bit worried. All these techniques you’re teaching me, they work! People are really starting to listen to me!” He hesitated,

then continued, “I’m not sure that I’m comfortable with this. I mean, it’s odd to be able to influence people.” He then asked whether it’s OK to deliberately change someone’s mind, or even persuade them to do something that they’d previously refused to do.

In answering such questions, I like to make two points:

1. *We all attempt to control one another, whether we intend to do so or not.* Conversation is supposed to be about exchanging information for a purpose, and quite often that purpose is to bring about some kind of change in other people.

To use a basic example, when you ask your friend to stop off at the store on the way to your house to pick up a six-pack of beer, you are (technically speaking) trying to control their behavior. When you knock on your boss’s door and ask them whether they have a spare five minutes in which to talk, you are attempting to control their behavior. It’s basic stuff. I think we can all agree that these situations are not in any way ethically ambiguous.

What about using conversation to try and change how someone feels and thinks? Again, many of us do this on a daily basis. For example, suppose you come home from work one day and go to greet your partner. They seem a bit tired. To cheer them up, you might tell them that you love them, and that you will make dinner even though it’s their turn to cook.

You are using your words to change their feelings, and there’s nothing malicious in it whatsoever. To use another example, if you are telling someone that you think they

should buy a particular phone because it has better specifications for a lower price than others they have been looking at, you are attempting to change the way they think.

Once you've spent a few minutes contemplating this kind of everyday example, you'll realize that benign manipulation is no big deal. When you learn to improve your conversation skills and gain the respect of others, you just get better at doing what we all do anyway.

Manipulation has a bad reputation, but if you look up the definition of "manipulate," you'll learn that the word denotes the act of handling something carefully and with skill, in order to elicit a desired outcome.

Provided you remain respectful of other people's basic rights, I see nothing wrong in [learning](#) a few tricks that will help you leave a powerful impression. Good conversationalists are indeed more influential and command more respect, but it's up to them to decide whether they will use their skills for better or worse. If you want a few guidelines to follow, bear these in mind:

Don't try to change someone's mind for the sake of it: Debating can be enjoyable and intellectually stimulating. Even playing devil's advocate can be fun – as long as both people are ready and willing to examine their opinions in a playful way. However, setting out to challenging someone's cherished beliefs just for the sake of proving your powers of persuasion is a waste of their time.

You could potentially leave them feeling confused and upset if you have succeeded in challenging their worldview. Moreover, some people just don't like verbal combat. If you get any verbal or nonverbal signals that they aren't in the mood for debating, drop it and change the subject.

Don't attempt to play two people off against one another: There's no denying it – drama can be interesting and even kind of amusing. That's why TV shows are full of it. In the real world, however, it's completely unethical to manipulate two or more people into arguing with one another. Vicious fights can upset even the most stable of relationships.

Always take on the role of peacemaker, not agitator. If you realize that a conversation is heading into dangerous territory that could culminate in an unnecessary and heated exchange of views, turn it in a safer direction.

Don't attempt to manipulate anyone who is clearly at a disadvantage: If you are talking to someone who is clearly less knowledgeable, significantly less intelligent, or much more naïve than you, make the conscious decision to play fair. For example, don't attempt to bulldoze someone into submission by bombarding them with jargon specific to your field.

Ask yourself whether your idol would admire you in any given situation: If you suspect that your behavior isn't based on positive intentions, think about whether someone you admire for their morals and integrity would behave in a similar manner.

Would you act differently if you knew that they were watching? Failing that, ask yourself whether you would be able to justify your behavior to your mother or father!

Given that so many people remain in a state of blissful ignorance when it comes to their own personality and social behaviors⁴⁴, I'd argue that [learning](#) more about how conversation works and how to persuade other people of your arguments is actually a responsible act.

When you know what to watch out for in yourself and others, you'll know when to press a point, when to back off, and how to make your point in the least intimidating way possible.

2. *Give other people some credit.* Most of us know when someone else isn't acting with our best interests in mind. Yes, some people are convincing liars and accomplished con artists, but the majority will slip up when trying to manipulate someone over a long period of time.

When you set out to change someone's mind or ask them for a favor, they will probably realize what you are trying to do. It's then up to them to decide how they want to handle the situation. Yes, you are responsible for how you treat others, but they are responsible for asserting themselves and taking a realistic view of any given social situation.

What About Lying & Omissions?

From an early age, we are told that deceiving someone else is a bad thing to do. However, it doesn't take long before a child realizes that adults do not tell the truth. Parents often

have to answer difficult questions such as, “If you said that Auntie Susan’s dress is really horrible, why did you say that it was nice when she came for lunch?” Even as adults, we end up in situations that make us wonder, “Should I have told the truth?” or “Should I keep quiet, and lie by omission?”

Lying is unethical for several reasons. First, most of us would agree that a relationship built on lies is intrinsically less “good” than one built on truth. Second, when we lie to someone, we rob them of the right to make informed decisions about their future, because they will be acting on inaccurate assumptions. Finally, as philosopher Immanuel Kant argued, the act of lying corrupts the liar.⁴⁵ When you gain a self-image as a liar, you might become content to deceive others on a regular basis. However, most of us realize that lying is sometimes necessary.

So When Is It Acceptable To Tell A Lie?

When it passes the “test of publicity:” Sissela Bok, a philosopher known for her work on the ethics of deception, states that a lie is morally acceptable if it “would survive the appeal for justification to reasonable persons.” In other words, if you think that most people would agree that lying was the right thing to do, you are probably OK.⁴⁶

When it relates to trivial matters: There’s nothing wrong with lying about minor things, such as the time you left the house on your way to a meeting (e.g. “I left at five,” when in fact you were running late and left at ten past).

To spare someone’s feelings, particularly with regards to minor issues: If your friend asks whether you like their new hat or car, it’s probably a good idea to tell a white lie and

pretend you think it's great. Telling the truth (e.g. "To be honest, I hate it!") isn't going to help anyone.

In situations in which lying is expected: For the sake of convention and harmony, most people say things like, "It was a pleasure doing business with you," "We'd love to see you again soon," and "Yes, we got your gift, and it was just what we wanted." Technically, these are often lies, but they are so firmly embedded in Western culture that we see them as not only acceptable but desirable.

Note that the act of lying is not always a straightforward endeavor. Even small social lies can come back to haunt you. For example, suppose that you attend a dinner party and the host serves you a dish that tastes unpleasant.

Because he put a lot of time and effort into the party, you may tell a social lie and assure him that you love his cooking. Unfortunately, your lie might encourage him to prepare it again in the future!

A lot of people believe that it's acceptable to tell a lie if doing so will result in a more favorable outcome than *not* telling it.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, what we don't often consider is that it's hard to predict the consequences of any given situation.

For example, you might feel as though it's acceptable to tell your friend that you think she is smart enough to get into medical school, even though you know that she probably isn't, just to spare her feelings.

However, if she then decides to pour a lot of time and effort into studying for entrance exams only to be rejected, how would you feel? When you tell a lie, you are taking a risk. You don't know how well someone will react to the truth, but you

can at least know that you have not deceived them and are giving them the right to make their own choices based on accurate information.

Another thing to consider is whether a particular lie will mushroom. The best kind of lies are small, delivered with the best of intentions, and don't require a load of other lies to prop them up. As Sir Walter Scott famously wrote, "O what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive." Often, it's simpler just to tell the truth.

Gossiping

Gossiping about other people is not only a quick and easy way of ruining your own reputation, but it can also damage that of another person. When you pass on rumors or speculation for the sake of entertainment, you are endangering their reputation (and risking a confrontation if they find out that you have been gossiping about them) for the sake of your own enjoyment. This just isn't ethical. Don't do it.

Humor At The Expense Of Other People

Humor is an effective tool in conversation, and it can build a great relationship between two people. You can even make jokes at the expense of other people – as long as you know for certain that someone will take it in the right spirit.

For instance, if you are hanging out with your best friend, you can probably afford to make a few jokes about their quirks, or playfully remind them about embarrassing or amusing incidents from their past.

However, if you aren't sure how readily someone else will take offense, it's best to stick to safer types of humor. Mocking

someone who isn't laughing along with you is just plain cruel. People are not there for you to ridicule, and words can cut deep.

A client once told me that the “jokes” her father made about her “chubby bits” during her adolescence damaged her self-esteem for years. To this day, she is especially sensitive to any wisecracks about her appearance.

You might not think that your remarks could have any serious effects, but you have no way of knowing whether you are poking at old wounds. If in doubt, cut the teasing and focus on positive topics instead.

⁴⁴ Chamorro-Premuzic, T. (2015). Why You Lack Self-Awareness And What To Do About It. fastcompany.com

⁴⁵ Mazur, T.C. (2015). Lying. scu.edu

⁴⁶ BBC. (2014). Lying and truth-telling. bbc.co.uk

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Part II:

Conversation Skills

Chapter 11:

How To Use The FORD Method To Keep Any Conversation Alive

We've all been there. You're talking to someone, everything seems to be going well...and then the conversation shows signs of slowing down, or even stopping altogether. Luckily, there's one little acronym that will save you every time.

Remember – FORD⁴⁸

What do people enjoy talking about the most? Themselves, of course! Even the most considerate among us appreciate the chance to air our opinions and share our life experiences. When you run out of things to say, just think FORD.

F - Family

This is a universally relevant topic of conversation. After all, everyone has a family. Even if they are estranged from their relatives or have a poor relationship with them, it all counts! However, take it slow. Jumping in with a question like, “So, do you get on well with your family?” will make you seem a bit too intense. Instead, direct the conversation to the topic in such a manner that it doesn’t seem forced.

You can do this by mentioning your own family. For instance, suppose you were taking a class taught by a professor who reminded you of your eccentric Uncle Andrew. You could mention this fact casually if you wanted to provide a natural bridge into a conversation about relatives.

You could say, “You know, our professor really reminds me of my Uncle Andrew – they’re both really fond of speaking ridiculously loudly!” This provides a natural opener for a discussion about families in general, quirky relatives, and so on.

Another way you can direct the topic to family is by mentioning a relevant news story. For example, you could say something like, “You know, there’s this new study out that says elder siblings are smarter than their younger brothers and sisters.” Most people would take the opportunity to respond in the context of their own experiences.

For instance, your conversation partner might say, “Well, I don’t believe that! I have an older sister, but she’s as dumb as a rock!” This would provide you with an opportunity to ask further questions about the number of siblings they have, why they think their sister is dumb, and so on.

Of course, you need to remember that some people have a history of family trauma,⁴⁹ and may not want to talk about the subject at all. If you get the impression they are at all uncomfortable, back off and transition to another topic.

Should the two of you become friends, the subject will probably come up at a later date, and they may feel happier sharing more of their background once they feel safe around you.

O - Occupation

Almost everyone has an occupation. Asking what someone does for a living is fairly safe, because most of us have been raised to think that it is a socially appropriate question. However, don't make the mistake of asking a series of obvious questions that put someone on the spot. Whilst asking questions is a sign of interest, and is generally a good strategy, you risk entering into interrogation mode or "interview mode" if you aren't careful.

For example, let's say that you have been introduced to a woman and ask her what she does for a living. She tells you that she is a nurse. In this situation, most people would then throw a volley of questions, such as:

"Do you work with adults or children?"

"How long have you been working as a nurse?"

"Where did you go to school?"

"Do you work night shifts, day shifts, or a mixture of both?"

The trouble with this approach is that it comes across as quite intense. It's better to ask the other person what they do for a living, give a thoughtful response to their reply, and then let the conversation develop naturally.

To continue with the nurse example, a comment such as, "Oh wow, I've always admired nurses. It looks like a really pressured job, and I guess you need to make important decisions every day," would be a good response.

Quite often, you won't have to launch into interview mode if you give this kind of reply, because the other person will feel

compelled to either build on what you have said, or correct you. This results in a natural conversation and better rapport.

If your conversation partner is not in work, you can take the same approach when asking about their college classes or what they like to do in their spare time. **Under no circumstances should you make clichéd jokes or remarks about someone else's occupation.**

They've heard them all before, and you will only make yourself look foolish. For example, no lawyer wants to hear yet another reference to ambulance chasing, and no vet wants to hear another "joke" about killing people's pets.

R - Recreation

Aside from work or study, what does everyone do? Engage in hobbies or pursue their interests, of course! Recreation can be a conversational goldmine if you seize the opportunity. Much like jobs and college courses, recreation is an area that people expect to crop up in conversation. It's therefore acceptable to simply ask, "What do you like to do in your free time?"

Don't panic if someone mentions an obscure hobby, or an interest that doesn't appeal to you in the slightest. Admit that you know nothing about their hobby, but make it clear that you want to know more about their lives and experiences. Say something like, "Oh, I don't know much about that, but I know that people who do it tend to love it! What do you most like about it?" Even if you aren't in a position to understand what they are actually talking about, you can still build rapport by asking about their feelings.

Occasionally, you might meet someone who is too busy working to enjoy any hobbies. These people value their work above everything else – even if they don't actually like doing it – and have few other interests in life.⁵⁰ (Resist any urge you might have to tell them that their work-life balance needs some adjustment, because they won't listen.)

There are two approaches you can take when talking to a workaholic about their hobbies and interests. If they seem to enjoy their job, make that the focus of conversation instead. If not, ask them what they would like to do if they had any free time.

D - Dreams

This is probably the most personal of the four topics, but if you can hold a meaningful conversation about someone's dreams, they will feel kindly towards you. Why? Because most people harbor some kind of ambition or secret longing, but rarely get the chance to share them with someone else.

Human beings want to be understood and validated. Therefore, if you can listen to someone's dreams in a nonjudgmental manner, and even encourage them to pursue them, they will think you a first-rate conversationalist!

Don't dive straight in by asking someone, "So, do you have any secret dreams or unfulfilled ambitions?" You need to take a subtler route. For example, you could use one of their hobbies or interests as a springboard, and make an educated guess as to what their dream might be.

If someone mentions that they love to read contemporary fiction and write short stories, ask them whether they have ever thought of becoming a professional author. It doesn't

matter whether your guess is correct, because it will move the conversation along regardless.

Another option is to move the conversation in a more existential direction.⁵¹ Ask them a question that prompts them to think, “What’s it all about?” Mention an event that made an impact on you, and tell them that sometimes you start to wonder whether you should be taking your own dreams more seriously.

This usually sets up a conversation about unfulfilled ambitions. You could take a more direct approach and tell them about something on your bucket list that you plan to do later in the year. This allows you to ask a question like, “Do you have a bucket list?” If they do, ask them what’s on it. If they don’t, ask them what they’d most like to achieve before their time on earth is up.

Getting The Most From The FORD Strategy

The four FORD topics are universal. They allow you to have a conversation with anyone from young children to the elderly, and everyone in between. However, they are most powerful when you use them to probe beyond the surface, and discover what really makes someone who they are.

The more you focus on feelings and meaning rather than facts, the greater the rapport, and the more meaningful the conversation. Don’t worry if the conversation takes an unexpected turn of events – these topics are intended as starting points that work well as points of discussion in their own right, but can easily develop into a fascinating exchange of experiences and views. The key is to avoid bombarding

someone with questions, and to maintain a fair balance by offering a similar amount of information about yourself.

Bonus Topics For Conversation

The FORD strategy gives you four broad areas you can mine for conversation, but there are a few more topics that can work to keep a dialogue going.

Current affairs: Once upon a time, people could make a choice to completely avoid the news. All they had to do was avoid newspapers and news programs. We don't really have that choice any more – major issues of the day pop up as trends on social media, and almost every lifestyle site at least touches on current affairs.

This is great news for you, because it means that almost everyone you talk to will have at least a vague idea of what is happening in the world. It isn't a good idea to watch the regular news too often – there's far too much negativity in most mainstream media – but keeping up to date with the headlines will help you find common ground in conversation. Try these phrases:

“Hey, did you happen to read about....?”

“So I was reading about [insert interesting event here – preferably something positive]. What do you think about that?”

“[Interesting topic] is trending on Twitter/Instagram/other social media platform today, did you happen to see it?”

One word of warning – if you are going to talk about anything remotely related to politics or religion, consider your

audience. Be prepared to divert the topic if it turns out that you hit upon one of their red-button issues.

If you have the suspicion that whoever you are talking to holds views that are rather different from your own, it's best to stick to lighter subjects. If in doubt, talk about the weather, celebrities, movies, sporting events, or any other issue that won't generate too much controversy. Don't let the conversation degenerate into a fight.

Pets: Lots of people own pets, and those who don't often wish they did. Pet owners form strong bonds with their animals. If you've ever heard a dog owner talk for half an hour about the way Fluffy likes to sit on the couch and bark along with the radio (yes, I have had this experience), you'll know that pets can be a gateway to a lengthy conversation. You can ask someone whether they have any pets, and if so, what they are like. Other avenues to explore include pets your family owned when you were growing up, and what pets you would like to own.

Your surroundings: This works in almost any situation. Quite simply, you find something notable about the location in which you are interacting with the other person, and comment on it.

For example, if you are at the beach and talking to a girl or guy you just met, you could comment on how beautiful the water looks when the sun goes down. This then provides the other person with an opportunity to agree, and add their own experiences or opinions (e.g. "Yes, although I prefer to come here in the mornings, because I like to run before work...").

Hypothetical questions: Questions that set up thought experiments can be a fun way of adding humor and creating rapport. Common variations include, “If you had to choose between X and Y, which would you pick?” and “If someone gave you the opportunity to change X, would you take it?” This type of game can allow you to get to know someone pretty quick.

Spotting the opportunities for topics is a skill that comes with practice. The first few times you use the FORD acronym or draw on the list of subjects above, you’ll be conscious that you are using a specific strategy designed to improve the quality of your conversations. However, over time, it’ll become second nature. You need never worry about running out of things to say ever again!

48 Practical Psychology. (2016). How To Never Run Out Of Things To Say –Keep A Conversation Flowing! <https://youtu.be/vU-ibdHkz4Y>

49 Ezpleta, L. et al. (2016). Development of a screening tool enabling identification of infants and toddlers at risk of family abuse and neglect: A feasibility study from three South European countries. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 1-6.

50 Smith, J. (2015). Answer these 20 questions to find out if you’re a workaholic. uk.businessinsider.com

51 Ibid.

Chapter 12:

The Art Of The Compliment

A good compliment can leave someone smiling for hours. If you want to be a great conversationalist, you need to learn how to give and receive them with grace and style.

What Do The Best Compliments Have In Common?

They are sincere: Never praise someone unless they deserve it. Do not give fake compliments. Those around you will realize what you are doing and, as a result, assume that you are ready and willing to manipulate people for your own ends. This hardly inspires trust.

They are given at just the right moment: Don't wait too long to deliver a compliment. The sooner it's given, the greater the impact. For example, if you have been to see your friend perform in a play, the best time to tell them how well they did is within a few minutes of the encore, not the next morning.

They should be specific: Don't leave your target wondering exactly what you meant by broad words and terms such as "smart," "organized," or "nice." **Focus on specific events and behaviors.** For example, "You are so nice," is wishy-washy and non-specific, whereas "You really listened to me, and it made all the difference when I was down earlier" is more powerful.

They are not given just to make the giver look good: Giving a sincere compliment will make you feel warm and fuzzy

inside, and will boost your target's self-esteem. Research shows that (as you might expect), that giving a compliment will usually make someone feel more kindly towards you.⁵² It might also improve your reputation in the eyes of anyone who happens to be watching.

However, this should be seen as a positive side effect rather than an end in its own right. **Don't try and build a reputation as someone who compliments everyone all the time.** Instead, become a person who passes on genuine praise when they feel it necessary.

They usually focus primarily on character traits and actions, rather than appearance: Everyone likes to feel attractive, but compliments often seem more meaningful when they hone in on someone's core characteristics and achievements. For example, "You were so kind to help me out during that tough meeting" or "That sponsored mountain climb you did was awesome, you're so brave for doing that!" often carry more weight than, "You're pretty" or "You're hot."

In short, complimenting someone's appearance is a potential minefield, and is best avoided in most situations. If you want to do it, pick out part of their outfit (e.g., "That color is great on you!") or tell them that a new accessory or hairstyle suits them. Specific comments about someone's face or body are liable to come across as creepy or offensive.

Note that there are, of course, exceptions to this rule. For example, if you are picking someone up at a party and want to make your intentions clear, it's fine to give a couple of appearance-based compliments.

Girlfriends, boyfriends, and spouses also like to be reminded that their partners find them attractive. However, even when the relationship between two people allows for this kind of compliment, it should still be sincere and delivered at the right moment.

Why You Shouldn't Always Deliver Compliments In Person

Rather than complimenting someone to their face, why not do it behind their back? All you need is a third party who knows the person you want to compliment, and who can be relied upon to talk to them in the near future.

When you talk to this third party, casually bring the topic round to your target. Make it clear that you admire something specific about them. For example, you might say to your co-worker, "I saw Ben give a presentation yesterday. He's such an engaging speaker!" Then, you would continue with the conversation as normal.

Sometimes the third party will forget the conversation, but more often than not they will seize the next chance to pass on the good news. If your target seems friendlier than usual towards you, there's a good chance that your "carrier" has spread the message. Sometimes, the carrier might even tell you that they passed on the compliment. You'll need to rely on luck to some extent, so don't try this strategy if you absolutely must ensure that your target learns what you think about them.

However, when it works out, it makes the target feel particularly special. They'll think that if you have been going to the trouble of telling others how great you think they are, your sentiment must be truly sincere. This approach also

reduces the risk that your target will interpret your compliment as a naked attempt to get on their good side. They will reason that if you just wanted to improve your standing in their eyes, that you would compliment them to their face.⁵³

If you have the chance to play the role of carrier pigeon, take it! Pass on all the compliments you can. Not only will you improve the relationship between the initiator and their intended target, but you'll also further your own reputation as a positive person who likes to make others happy. If everyone passed on "positive gossip," imagine how much more pleasant the world would be!

The Indirect (Or "Implied") Compliment

Rather than simply telling someone that you admire them for a specific reason, you can make a remark that implies that they possess certain qualities. Implied compliments work best in situations that call for a degree of problem solving. You can ask the target for help, and take the opportunity to admire their skills at the same time. For example, look at the following pair of compliments:

Direct compliment: "You're so smart."

Indirect compliment: "I don't get the points the author is making in this article, but you probably will. Could you help me make sense of it?"

Direct compliment: "You always look good. You have a real sense of style."

Indirect compliment: "I'm not sure what to wear for my sister's wedding. I need some expert help! Would you come shopping with me on Friday?"

Both examples make reference to a positive quality, but because these references are presented within a broader context, they are not as brash as a direct compliment.

Include A Question

Have you ever given someone a compliment, only to be met with an awkward silence? There's a simple trick that will ensure this never happens again. All you have to do is deliver the compliment, then follow it up immediately with a relevant question.

“You are so good at drawing!” is a nice compliment. However, “You are so good at drawing, how did you learn?” is better, because it provides you with a bridge to other topics of conversation.

It lets the other person talk about the time they went to art college, or the resources they use to teach themselves, or the hours it takes to create a piece of art, and so on. Ending a compliment with a question also signals to your target that you are not just trying to flatter them, but that you care about the broader context of their talents and abilities.

You should also remember that someone might be surprised to get a sincere compliment, and may not be able to respond for a few seconds. Even if you add a question on the end, they may need to gather their thoughts. Try not to take this personally.

How To Accept A Compliment

When someone gives you a compliment, always accept it graciously. We all know people who reject any compliment within a ten-mile radius. **I'm all for being humble, but**

resisting a sincere compliment is rude. When someone praises you, they are essentially saying, “I have made this judgment, and I want to share my opinion.” If you knock them back, you are implying that you doubt their ability to assess a situation and devise their own opinion.

The best response is a warm, “Thank you, that’s really nice of you,” accompanied by a smile.⁵⁴ Make them feel good for trying to make you feel good! **It doesn’t matter whether or not you agree with their appraisal.**

Think of a compliment as a gift. You’d never unwrap a gift and then throw it back in someone’s face, would you? Even if you don’t think a compliment is sincere, treat the giver as though they acted with the best of intentions.

52 Grant, N.K., Fabrigar, L.R., & Lim, H. (2010). Exploring the Efficacy of Compliments as a Tactic for Securing Compliance. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 32, 226-233.

53 Lowndes, L. (1999). *How To Talk To Anyone*. Glasgow: Omnia Books Ltd.

54 Whitmore, J. (2014). How to Receive a Compliment Without Being Awkward About It. entrepreneur.com

Chapter 13:

How To Ask Excellent Questions

Why do we have conversations in the first place? Often, it's because we need to gain insight into a particular situation, or because we want to understand what someone else is thinking.

Asking the right questions is a skill that will make all the difference in every area of your life. Being able to answer questions shows that you are educated and knowledgeable, but knowing how to ask them is the mark of good judgment and a willingness to learn.

Social Questions – Striking Up Rapport & Moving Beyond Small Talk

As you know, people who talk only about themselves are seen as rude and boring. Asking questions is the best way of switching the spotlight onto your conversation partner. A good question will encourage the other person to open up, thus creating a sense of rapport and intimacy between you.

If you've ever overheard a conversation between two people that was based on thoughtful questions, you'll know that they can soon turn complete strangers into two individuals on the fast track to friendship.

They can also help you deepen a relationship with someone you already know, but have yet to really understand or connect

with on any meaningful level. So, once you're past the small talk stage, how can you use questions to get to know someone better and pave the way for exciting conversations?

Share something about yourself before asking a personal question: There are a few useful findings from the world of psychology that I draw on when helping my clients ask better questions. First up, we have the principle of social reciprocity. This basically means that when someone does something nice for us, we feel compelled to do something for them in return.

Robert Cialdini, one of the most famous psychologists in the world, covers this nicely in his book, *The Psychology Of Persuasion*.⁵⁵ People who are willing to talk about personal experiences and opinions are usually perceived as more likeable than those who stick to impersonal or generic topics.⁵⁶ Finally, when we tell someone else about ourselves, we are more likely to feel kindly towards them.⁵⁷

Before you ask any personal questions, start off by disclosing something interesting about your feelings or life experiences. This creates an atmosphere of trust, and also encourages your conversation partner to share something of their own.

If someone tells you something personal about themselves or their life, respond in kind. If you aren't prepared to answer a question, don't ask it of someone else. Answering in advance will also put someone at ease.

For example, "I'd love to travel the world one day. What's your biggest dream?" is better than, "What is your ultimate dream?" Show that you are willing to be vulnerable, and they are more likely to trust you.

Questions That Build Intimacy: Arthur Aron's Closeness-Generating Procedure

In 1997, a psychologist called Arthur Aron carried out a study that was to become a landmark in the social sciences. He put pairs of strangers together, and then gave them a set of questions printed on slips of paper.

Half the pairs were given a set of personal questions, and the other half were given a set of small talk-style questions instead.⁵⁸ Strangers who asked one another the “closeness-generating” questions felt a greater sense of connection and comfort with their partners.

The moral of the story? Whenever possible, ask deep questions that go beyond facts and figures. To give you an idea of the difference between these categories, here are some examples taken directly from Aron's paper:

“Small talk” questions:

How did you celebrate last Halloween?

Where are you from?

Where did you go to high school?

“Closeness-generating” questions:

Would you like to be famous? In what way?

What is the greatest accomplishment of your life?

What, if anything, is too serious to be joked about?

You'll have noticed that the closeness-generating questions require “deep” answers, and are personal in nature. You will have to use your judgment when deciding when to move from small talk to heavy hitting questions.

Wait until you are in a state of strong rapport with the other person, and then you can gradually move from relatively “tame” questions to the deeper topics. Always be prepared to move the conversation to more trivial subjects if they show any signs of discomfort.

Use the “Parroting” technique to encourage further disclosure: The parroting technique helps shy people open up. All you have to do is take the final two or three words of their answer, and turn them into a question.⁵⁹ It’s an easy, unobtrusive prompt that can yield more satisfactory answers.

Parroting is also less formal than asking a question in its entirety. It might take a couple of rounds, but I’d estimate my success rate with this technique is around ninety-five per cent.

For example:

You: “Have you ever thought about what it would be like to be famous?”

Them: “Yes. I’m not sure I’d really like it. All those photographers.”

You: “The photographers?”

Them: “The paparazzi would come after me!”

You: “Come after you?”

Them: “Yes. Did you see that story about the movie star who...”

Listen for clues: If you pay close attention to the innocent (or not so innocent) comments someone makes, you will notice that they will make reference to the same topic(s) on multiple occasions. This gives you a valuable starting point for

meaningful questions that tap into their deepest passions. I'll show you how this can work in practice.

I recently met a new contact for a business lunch. As we sat down, she brushed a spot of dried mud from her skirt. "Oh, look at that!" she said, "That's my dog's fault. He's always jumping up at me when I try to leave the house." The conversation then turned to my contact's business, and their latest products.

She talked about their range of remote webcams and viewing apps. "Of course, they're great for parents who want to check on kids and babysitters," she said. "And dog owners like them too!" I started to get the message – this woman was crazy about dogs. **When someone is truly passionate about something, it usually pops up in conversation, even if the original topic is totally unrelated.**

The meeting was proceeding well, but it lacked that special spark that makes for a truly outstanding conversation. Over dessert, I casually mentioned that I was looking forward to visiting my sister soon. "It's always great to spend time on her farm," I said. "You know, to get away from it all. And she has these adorable dogs! You mentioned you had a dog...?" I didn't need to say much more.

That was all the permission she needed. When the time came for us to part ways, she insisted that we meet up in the near future, and that I was "such good conversation." Of course, all I'd done was ask a simple but well-chosen question. This trick can build rapport in seconds.

Frame your question as something worthy of excitement: Before you even ask a question, take the opportunity to

influence the way in which the other person will perceive it. If you say, “Now, here’s a good question...,” your listener is more likely to assume that whatever you ask is going to be interesting than if you say, “I know this is an obvious question, but...”

Ask meaningful “we” questions: If you can combine a “we” question with an issue that is important to your conversation partner, you’re on to a winner. Note that both parts of the equation need to be in place. A trivial “we” question, such as, “Do you think we’ll have to stay five extra minutes again at the end of this meeting?” is a nice piece of small talk, but isn’t going to build a high level of rapport or encourage personal disclosure.

However, questions like, “So, do you think we’ll be bought out by the end of the year?” or “Do you think we should all give more money to charity?” invite someone to think of you as members of the same team, and disclose their personal opinions at the same time. This will boost rapport and lead to interesting discussions.

How To Ask Questions When You Need Factual Answers

Of course, some questions serve one purpose only – to elicit factual information. You’ll use these in business settings, and when you need to hone in on objective facts as opposed to how someone is feeling. Before you ask the question, make sure you know what you want to achieve.

For example, you might be looking to gain an in-depth understanding of how a department in your organization works, or you may be keen to learn precisely how a particular medical procedure is carried out. Keep your objective at the

forefront of your mind, as this will guide you during the conversation.

Make Sure You're Asking The Right Person

The person with the most knowledge on a topic isn't always in the best position to answer your question. We all know people who have a great grasp of a subject, but are not very good at communicating information. Ideally, you need to ask someone who has relevant background knowledge, the ability to express themselves, and the confidence required to assert their opinions.

Obviously, you won't always have access to someone who perfectly fits that description, but these three criteria can help you narrow down your options. This is particularly relevant if your question is technical, or requires input from someone with a high level of expertise.

If you are approaching someone you don't know in the hope that they will help you answer an important question, do a little background research first. Consider where this person is from, their level of education, their interests, and even (if the information is available) their personality type.

Social media can be a great tool here! If you have a mutual friend, ask them for advice if possible. For example, you could ask, "I'm going to have a meeting with X, to ask them about Y. Any tips to help me have a productive conversation with them?"

Don't Waste Anyone's Time

Before asking a question, make sure that you've exhausted all the obvious avenues first. It only takes a few seconds to use

Google, after all. Even when your own research doesn't turn up the answers you need, you should still be willing to show that you've made the effort.

For example, "I've looked through the relevant chapter in the textbook and I've been doing some research online, but I just can't understand this topic. Can you explain it?" will get a more sympathetic response than, "I just don't get this. Can you explain it to me?"

My friend Jack is a computer science professor. He once told me that his weakest students are those who don't understand how to use their initiative. They tend to email him every time they hit a stumbling block, rather than making the effort to use the many online resources available to them. Jack doesn't mind helping his students out (he loves passing on his knowledge!), but fielding the same basic questions day after day really annoys him. He is much more likely to respond positively to a student who has made a genuine effort to help themselves before coming to him.

If you get the impression that someone thinks you have wasted their time, ask them what you could do to help yourself in the future. This gives them the chance to pass on links to books, websites and other resources that will allow you to come up with answers independently.

When it comes to actually formulating your question, bear in mind the following points:⁶⁰

Start with the basics if you need clarification: If you aren't sure what a piece of jargon means, ask! It's better to risk mild embarrassment than it is to stay quiet and make a costly mistake later.

Ask only one question at a time: No one likes to be on the receiving end of a barrage of questions, and combining multiple questions into one long rambling sentence is a sure way of annoying or confusing someone. Establish the questions you need answering, and think of the most logical order in which to ask them.

If possible, write them as a list on a piece of paper or as a note on your phone. This might seem a bit strange if you are talking to a friend or relative (as opposed to a boss or professor), but it's a useful tool that will keep you on track. If you are asking several important questions, it's a good idea to take notes or record the conversation for review at a later date.

If it's a complex question, let them know from the outset: Let the other person know if you need to ask them an especially difficult question. Give them the opportunity to clear their mind so that they focus their full attention on what you are about to say.

Know when to interrupt: Generally, it's rude to interrupt someone if they are speaking, and the rule still applies if you have just asked them a question. However, there are times when interrupting is the most sensible course of action.

For example, if someone answers your question but then begins to venture far away from the topic at hand, a simple, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I just want to clarify something" can work to get the conversation back on track. This trick also works if the other person didn't quite understand your question, and gave you an unexpected answer that doesn't make sense.

Don't get nervous if they pause for thought: If the other person stops talking for a moment, or waits several seconds before launching into their answer, don't take it as a sign that you asked the wrong sort of question. When someone pauses to gather their thoughts, they are paying you the compliment of treating your question as a matter worthy of serious consideration. Give them the space they need. Do not jump in and start talking just for the sake of filling the silence.

Do not lead someone down a particular path: If you want to know what someone really thinks, avoid asking them a leading question. Leading questions are those that encourage someone to answer in a particular way. For example, look at the following pairs of questions:

Leading question: "What problems are you facing on this project?"

Non-leading question: "Could you tell me how this project is going?"

Leading question: "Wouldn't it be a good idea to donate more money to this charity?"

Non-leading question: "What are your thoughts on the amount of money we currently donate to this charity?"

In the first example, the leading question assumes that the other person is facing some problems, which will encourage them to dwell on the negative aspects of their experience. The alternative allows for answers that focus on good news too, which would result in a more balanced assessment of the situation.

In the second example, the leading question suggests that donating more money to the charity is obviously a good idea, thus encouraging the respondent to agree. The non-leading question is open-ended, allowing the other person the chance to voice their true opinions on the size of the donation.

Try another approach if the first doesn't work: We all have our own quirks and preferences when it comes to asking and answering questions. For example, some people dislike direct questions, and interpret them as a kind of conversational assault. Don't be discouraged if you hit a wall. Think of a different way of phrasing the question.

Humor can also be a powerful tool in getting answers. A simple joke such as, "C'mon, the suspense is killing me here!" can lighten the mood, help your target relax, and therefore increase the likelihood that they will give you the answer you need.

Using Questions To Change Someone's Mind

Questions don't just work as a means of eliciting information. They can also be used to change someone's mind, or at least get them to consider alternative points of view. When trying to convince someone to change their mind, most people try to lay out a logical argument, or make a passionate plea as to why their view is right and the other person's opinion is wrong.

But when you take a minute to think about it, you'll realize that this doesn't often work. As soon as someone works out that you are on a mission to change their mind, the metaphorical shutters go down.

You'll have better luck if you ask well-chosen, open-ended questions that let a person challenge their own assumptions. **We tend to approve of an idea or suggestion if we thought of it first – or at least, if we *think* we thought of it first.** Therefore, encouraging someone to question their own worldview will often yield better results than trying to railroad them into accepting your opinion as fact.

Asking a chain of well-chosen questions gets someone to look at their own views from another angle, which might trigger fresh insights. This is pretty much what the best therapists do. They don't tell their clients what to think. Instead, they use the fine art of asking questions to help the client come to their own conclusions. When a therapist wants to suggest that a client looks at their situation in a new light, they only do so once the latter has had the chance to air their thoughts.

You can use the following questions to establish what someone thinks about a certain issue:

“Could you tell me what you think about that?”

“How do you feel about this particular issue?”

“I'm really interested in your opinion. Would you mind telling me what you think?”

Once you have a good understanding of what they believe, you can encourage them to evaluate their beliefs using the following questions:

“How did you arrive at that conclusion?”

“When people argue with you on this issue, what points do they try to make?”

“Are there any facts your theory can’t explain?”

“What evidence, if any, would change your mind?”

“Do you have any friends who hold opposing beliefs?”

Listening carefully to their answers without interjecting will make them feel as though you are truly interested in what they have to say. In turn, they will be more likely to entertain your own views as well as evaluating their own opinions.

Only once they are in a receptive state of mind should you then put forward your own perspective on the matter. Obviously, there is no guarantee that they will take your views on board, but at the very least, you’ll have enjoyed a respectful exchange of opinions.

Asking For A Favor – “Can” Versus “Will”

What about asking someone to grant you a favor? Appeal to someone’s sense of pride, and your chances of success increase. All you have to do is substitute “can” for “would” or “will.”

“Would you please help me find the conference center?” is less effective than, “Can you please help me find the conference center?” **When you ask someone whether they *can* do something, they immediately start to take assess their own capabilities.**

Internally, they will arrive at either a “Yes,” a “No,” or a “Maybe.” Their answer is more likely to reflect their capabilities, not their desire to help you. “Can I or can’t I?” is easier to answer than, “Will I help this person or not?”

Asking the right questions is a key conversation skill. **The next time you succeed in getting a helpful answer out of**

someone, reflect on how you asked your question, and file that strategy away for future use. Remember that what works with one person may not work so well with another, so be prepared to tailor your approach as necessary.

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Chapter 14:

How To Handle Heated Discussions

Arguments and heated discussions are inevitable. Unless you take a completely passive approach in every area of your life (which I wouldn't recommend!), you will have to navigate tough discussions from time to time. Luckily, there are a few easy tricks you can use that will make all the difference between a peaceful resolution and an ugly scene.

Stop fearing anger as an emotion: Anger, whether in yourself or someone else, is not intrinsically bad. Anger is a normal human emotion. In fact, it's healthy to get angry from time to time, because it forces us to recognize when something needs to change. **The problem isn't the feeling, but how it's expressed.** When you find yourself getting angry, give yourself permission to feel mad.

Remind yourself that all feelings are temporary, and you won't be angry forever. If you are on the receiving end of someone else's anger, remember that their fury is bound to fade at some point. **Shift your focus to conflict resolution, rather than worrying about how to overcome your underlying feelings.**

Let the other party know exactly what you want: If someone suspects that you have an ulterior motive, or isn't sure what

you are trying to achieve, they are liable to become defensive. This promotes an atmosphere of tension.

As soon as possible, state what you want to achieve, and tell the other person that you hope the two of you can work together in coming up with a mutually satisfying outcome. **Make it clear that you aren't looking to fight for the sake of it, but rather that you are attempting to solve a problem.** Don't aim to "win" an argument or prove your point. Try to build a positive relationship instead.⁶¹ Never resort to personal insults or snide remarks.

Whatever you say, say it at your usual volume: It's normal to raise your voice when you're mad, right? Yes, but it's not helpful. Yelling or screaming might intimidate someone, but it will not win their respect, and it definitely isn't going to help you hold a constructive conversation.

Think of conflict as a cycle. If you speak in a loud tone of voice, this signals to the other person that you are physically aroused and ready for a fight. Their nervous system will automatically kick in, and they will also get ready for combat. This happens on an automatic level, and the process takes just a couple of seconds.

The more aggressive you appear – and you will indeed appear aggressive if you talk loudly, or use confrontational body language – the more fired up the other person will become. This effect can result in two people screaming at one another. You can prevent this from happening by keeping your voice steady.

Do not fall into the trap of trying to yell over someone else in an attempt to make yourself heard. A better tactic is to

remain silent until they have finished speaking (or shouting). Tell them, “If you talk over me, I’m going to stop engaging with you, because it’s pointless for us to both talk at the same time.”

Know when to keep quiet: What’s the best thing to say when someone is so angry that they start ranting at you? Absolutely nothing. **Give them a few minutes to get their rage out of their system.** No matter what they say, or what you think of their opinions, bite your tongue.

Trying to interrupt someone who is on a verbal rampage is like trying to stop a rhino from charging. It’s pointless, and you may get seriously hurt. Someone in this state is beyond reason. They just want to vent their feelings, and reassure themselves that someone is listening to their point of view. Eventually, they will run out of energy and slow down. If you remain silent, they will realize that they are the only one speaking, and that to an onlooker, they appear rather ridiculous.

Stick to the issue at hand: Never assume that another person has good communication skills. Be prepared to come up against weak arguments and dirty tactics. For example, people with poor conflict resolution skills tend to drag up the past when they fight. This is known as “stockpiling.”⁶² If you’ve ever been arguing with someone who suddenly raises a long-forgotten conflict you thought had been resolved weeks, months, or even years ago, you’ll know how disorienting this move can be!

I remember witnessing a great example of stockpiling back when I worked as a middle manager in a large HR department.

I was in a meeting with several other members of the team, ranging from junior employees to the head of HR. The topic of conversation was the company's intern recruitment process.

Approximately one-half of those at the table thought that the existing protocol was just fine. The other half (myself included) thought that it warranted a thorough evaluation, because it had remained unchanged for three years. An argument broke out between two team members. As they slung points back and forth, it became harder to keep up with what they were actually saying.

However, we all heard one party when they yelled, "And you messed up when it came to organizing the Christmas party last year! You can't even plan a work social!" My boss then had to step in. It might seem ludicrous, but this kind of stockpiling is pretty common. When someone wants to make a point, or just hurt someone else, they will rack their brains for something to throw at their target.

Don't take it personally, and don't get drawn in. Stockpiling can also be a diversionary tactic – if you are getting close to the truth, or making a strong argument, someone who is annoyed at you might attempt to throw you off-track by bringing up random topics.

Ignore irrelevant points. Repeat the last thing you said before the other person went off on a tangent. You might have to do this several times to get your message across, i.e. that you are only willing to talk about the problems affecting you both in the here and now.

Keep restating what you need to know until they either provide you with the information you need, or the situation

escalates to a point at which it turns out that they are beyond reason. If they are literally incapable of an adult discussion, you can at least walk away knowing that you did your best. If you absolutely must work with this person to solve a serious problem, reschedule your discussion for another day.

When dealing with a really difficult person, asking a third party for help might be the best option. For example, if you can't seem to have a constructive conversation with a colleague about a situation at work, ask a co-worker or supervisor to act as mediator, or at least request that they sit in on the next discussion and take notes. Sometimes, just knowing that another party is watching the argument unfold is enough to make someone think twice before acting in an aggressive or unhelpful manner.

Don't make ultimatums: An ultimatum is a threat. What do people do when they encounter a threat? They go into fight or flight mode, of course! That's not what you want to happen when emotions are running high.⁶³ Stark demands such as, "You either need to agree, or be prepared to lose your job!" or "If you don't start making more time for me in the evenings, this relationship is finished!" don't help.

Ultimatums are especially liable to backfire when the other person has a short temper or a rebellious streak, because they will get mad at you for even daring to issue them with an ultimatum in the first place.

Do not try to feign indifference: Acting as though you aren't too bothered by the issue at hand is another quick way to make someone angry and upset. They will feel as though they have two problems to solve: The original issue that prompted the

discussion in the first place, and your apparent indifference. Listen to what the other person is saying, even if you think it's utter garbage.

If someone is goading you, call a halt to the conversation: Should you ever find yourself in an argument or discussion with someone who is just provoking you for the sake of it, it's time to call a time out. Once someone is in what I call, "Goad Mode," they lose the capacity for a rational exchange of views. Take ten minutes apart to cool off.

Do not tolerate verbal abuse: Anger is fine, and a heated exchange is sometimes exactly what is needed to clear the air. However, under no circumstances should you be expected to put up with verbal abuse. If someone is acting in an aggressive manner or using abusive language, remove yourself from the situation.

There is no point trying to reason with someone who is content to fall back on abuse as a substitute for constructive dialogue. You also have to bear in mind that verbal abuse may escalate to physical violence, so walking away may be an important safety measure.

If you absolutely must have a difficult conversation with someone who is prone to aggression, make sure you are not alone in the same room. Alternatively, conduct the conversation via phone or webcam, and keep a recording (check that this is legal in your state or country first).

How To Handle A Heated Meeting

If you are in a management position, you may sometimes need to play the role of mediator during meetings. When a

group of people gather to talk about sensitive matters, there is a strong likelihood that a heated exchange will result.

It's a good idea to think in advance of each meeting whether controversial matters may arise, and what you will do about them. Here are a few strategies that will help you run a meeting in which tensions are likely to run high:

Establish your authority early on: Make sure that you are the first to arrive. Welcome everyone as they come in. This signals that you are taking the meeting seriously, and that you will be paying close attention to what everyone is saying.

Ensure that you have as much background information as possible, both on the topic at hand and the people who will be in attendance. Your confidence will show through in your demeanor, and others will be more receptive to what you have to say.

As far as possible, structure the meeting in such a way that everyone will have the chance to voice their opinions on key issues. When people feel as though they are not being heard, or believe that they have been "shut out" of the discussion, they are liable to become angry and frustrated.

Make it clear from the outset that everyone will have the chance to share their perspective. Once you establish a reputation as a manager who runs meetings in an efficient manner, people who may otherwise take the opportunity to push their opinions in an overly aggressive way will think twice before doing so.

Shut down crosstalk quickly: The moment two people begin speaking over one another, hold up one hand and say, "Stop there please. X is talking. When they have finished, you will

have the chance to put your own view forward.” As long as you are consistent in applying this rule, most people will respect it.⁶⁴

Use “we” language to unite the group: When two or more people start to argue, identify the central issue that divides them and reframe it so that it becomes the group’s problem instead. This promotes a collaborative approach.

For example, if two people are arguing about which type of accounting software is the best choice for the company, you could take the specific point of contention (i.e. “X is better than Y!”) and tell the group, “OK, we have to consider which software we are going to use for keeping track of our accounts. Let’s brainstorm this as a group.” This takes the focus away from the argument between two people, and instead turns the problem into an issue for everyone to tackle together.

Slow down and summarize: If two or more people are putting forward ideas at a rapid rate, halt the meeting and tell those present that you are going to summarize the ideas expressed as you understand them. For example, you might say, “Adam, as far as I understand, you are proposing that we use this set of figures.” You would then give Adam the opportunity to correct you if necessary. You would then summarize the view of anyone opposing him. This allows each party to feel as though their views are being heard, and it also ensures that everyone present understands each person’s perspective.⁶⁵

Use questions to handle diversions and shut down hostility: Questions such as, “I’m not sure I understand - how does your argument help us find a solution to the problem?,” “Are you

saying that we need to move in a particular direction here?,” and “Can you summarize your conclusions for us?” can be an efficient means of encouraging someone to get back on track.

How To Handle An Insult

No one enjoys being on the receiving end of an insult, but once you know how to handle them, you’ll be prepared for even the rudest of remarks.

See the insult as an opportunity to impress anyone who happens to be watching: If someone insults you whilst other people are watching, everyone in the group will watch to see how you respond. If you handle the situation in a calm, dignified manner, they will respect you more as a result.

Make a decision on whether to call them out: Most insults are given with the intention of getting some kind of reaction from the victim. However, whether or not you should call the other person out depends on the situation.

Steve Dinkin, president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, says that mild or occasional insults – known as “micro-insults” - are best ignored.⁶⁶ If you can stay calm and avoid engaging with the person who has insulted you, they will receive no return on their investment. This means that you can “win” without actually having to do anything.

Remember that someone might just be having a bad day, or they may have failed to recognize how their remark sounded to others. They may not have intended to insult you at all. Who hasn’t said something that was intended as a neutral remark, or even a compliment, only to accidentally cause offence?

If there is any chance that the person who offended you might not have intended their comment as an insult, assume the best (i.e., that they just worded their thoughts in a clumsy way) and let it go.

On the other hand, if someone has just made an aggressive or vulgar remark to your face, or they repeatedly throw out micro-insults, you need to react. Otherwise, you risk appearing weak in front of others.

In these situations, a passive response will invite further abuse. I want to be absolutely clear – no one deserves to be mistreated. However, the way you respond makes a big difference to how an individual will treat you in the future.

There isn't a single, universal "trick" for calling someone out. The best tactic will depend on the situation, the number of other people present, the nature of the insult, and your personality.

Here are a couple of tips:

Ask a question: Etiquette expert Diane Gottsman, who specializes in business communication training, has some excellent advice on how to deal with a rude remark – respond with a question.⁶⁷ This strategy allows you to call them out on their behavior without resorting to aggressive or inflammatory remarks of your own.

The question you ask depends on the context. Sometimes, merely asking someone to clarify what they said can be enough to shame them into shutting up. For example, suppose you heard a colleague mutter, "You're so incompetent." You could ask loudly, "Sorry, I didn't hear you. I think you just said I am incompetent, is that right?"

Another approach is to simply ask, “Why do you think that?” If they give a nonsensical response, ask them the same question again. They will soon realize how stupid they look in front of others, which should be enough to deter them from insulting you in the future.

State your feelings and next steps: An alternative approach is to state how you feel about the comment, why it is unhelpful, and what you will do if they do not stop. For example, you might say, “I don’t like it when you insult me like that. It isn’t going to help our team solve this problem. If you keep insulting me, I’m going to leave the room.”⁶⁸ This is a calm, dignified way of handling the situation which may work well if you dislike confrontation and feel too intimidated to ask them a question.

This tactic also allows you to highlight the fact that they are behaving unprofessionally. If you remind someone that they are acting in a manner wholly unsuitable to the situation, this is often enough to shut them down.

For example, if someone insults you during a meeting, you might say, “I don’t think engaging in petty insults is very professional. Let’s focus on actually sorting out the problems on the agenda.”

Tackle them directly – but do so in private: If you have been insulted by a particular person more than once, and calling them out in the moment hasn’t worked, set up a one-on-one conversation (but in a public place, such as a café, so that you can leave quickly if the situation escalates).

In a neutral tone of voice, tell them how their behavior has made you feel. Tell them that if they continue to act in this

manner, you will take the matter to a person in authority or enact other appropriate measures such as issuing them with a written warning (if you are in a position of authority). Stating your boundaries lets the other person know that you are not going to tolerate their behavior.

Don't sling an insult in return: By responding with an offensive remark of your own, you are lowering yourself to the level of the other person, and increasing the likelihood of an all-out argument.

Use humor with care: If you have a quick wit, your first instinct might be to fire off a sharp retort. However, making fun of the person who is making fun of you sets the stage for needless conflict. If others are watching, you may be surprised to find that they begin to side with the original perpetrator rather than you, especially if you are great at coming up with really cutting remarks.⁶⁹

Insults are seldom a reflection of your character or flaws. As cliché as this may sound, they say more about the other person. Often, an insult is an attempt to grab power, or bolster a fragile sense of self. As a rule, don't take them personally.

If someone insults you, think of them as a schoolyard bully who is attempting to make themselves feel better and bolster their status in the eyes of the other kids watching. Pretty pathetic, isn't it? Remember, even if someone else is acting like a child, you can always make the decision to act like a responsible adult.

How To Apologize

No one is right all the time. On occasion, you need to apologize to someone, and admit that you made a mistake in

how you handled an issue or conversation. If you are wondering how best to make an apology, you are ahead of the game. Most people are reluctant to admit that they could possibly have screwed up in the first place!

Give yourself some credit for your good manners and [emotional intelligence](#). The best and most well-respected communicators understand the value of a sincere apology. Here's how to give an apology that will smooth over a difficult situation:

Show that you understand how the other person feels: Most of the time, someone who wants an apology is primarily looking for evidence that someone cares about their feelings. Use their own words if possible, in order to minimize the chance of further misunderstandings.

For example, if someone told you during a fight that they were “really hurt” by what you said, use these exact words when you apologize. “I know I caused you to feel really hurt by what I said, and I apologize for saying those things,” would be a good way of phrasing your apology. If they correct you, don't argue – they know better than you how they felt at the time!

Give an explanation, not an excuse: No one likes to hear excuses. Even a believable excuse is no substitute for a straightforward acknowledgement of your actions. By all means tell someone why you acted as you did, but always emphasize that you could have chosen to behave in a different way. Look at the example below:

Excuse-based apology: “Sorry, I know I said I'd call, but I was busy.”

Explanation-based apology: “Sorry, I know I said I’d call. Things got very busy at work and I had to stay late. However, I knew I should have sent you a text or email instead, and I’m sorry that I didn’t get in touch to let you know what was happening.”

The explanation-based apology is more thoughtful, and gives the recipient a chance to think about the situation in a broader context. Rather than seeing the other person as a thoughtless individual who doesn’t care enough about their feelings to make a quick phone call, they are more likely to see them as a person who meant to get in touch, but was under a lot of pressure at work.

Careful explanation-based apologies can open the door to better mutual understanding, which in turn can enhance a relationship. To continue with the example above, the recipient of the apology might feel compelled to ask, “You seem very busy lately – what exactly is the problem at work?”

Tell them what you are doing to make amends, and what preventative measures you plan to take: An apology isn’t much good if the same situation is likely to occur again. You need to let the injured party know what you are going to do to prevent it happening in the future.

For example, if your dog escapes from your yard and digs up your neighbor’s lawn, it’s not enough to merely apologize for the damage. You should offer to pay for a gardener to fix it, and then tell your neighbor what you are going to do to prevent your dog escaping again.

Don’t demand that the other person accept your apology: Social convention and good manners dictate that we accept an

apology, but you should never expect someone to say, “Thank you so much! I fully accept your apology, and now harbor no negative feelings towards you!” Life is rarely so simple.

The other person might want to clarify the issue by asking you some questions, or they might want to emphasize again how hurt they feel. Employ your best listening skills, and show that you are looking to understand how to avoid hurting them again in the future.

Once you have apologized, it’s time to move on from the situation. If the conflict is resolved and the other person accepts your apology, great! If they don’t, you need to accept that they might need some time to process what has happened.

Also, bear in mind that the other person might feel as though they are allowing you off the hook by accepting your apology. This is an emotionally immature approach, but some people know no better. Try not to take it personally. As long as you’ve played your role in repairing the relationship, all you can do is let it go.

⁶¹ Carrier Management. (2017). How to Keep Your Conversations on Track and Productive. carriermanagement.com

⁶² Goldsmith, B. (2009). Top 10 Tools to Avoid Ugly Arguments. psychologytoday.com

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⁶⁴ Eaton, S. (2011). 21 Leadership Tips for Chairing Difficult Meetings. drsaraheaton.wordpress.com

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⁶⁷ Gottsman, D. (2013). Business Etiquette: How to Handle an Offensive Remark. huffingtonpost.com

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Chapter 15:

How To Persuade Someone Of Your Opinion

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you needed to influence someone else? Changing someone's attitude isn't easy if you are unprepared. Luckily, persuasion is a well-researched area of psychology, and the field has yielded lots of useful findings. In this chapter, I'm going to share the magic ingredients that will supercharge your powers of persuasion.

When you were in school or college, your teachers probably taught you how to write a persuasive paper. That's all well and good, but it isn't adequate preparation for making a convincing argument face-to-face.

When you are dealing with a human being, logic and reason isn't enough. [You also need to be aware how to tap into their emotions](#), and take advantage of the factors people take into account when deciding whether they find a message convincing.

I'd argue that before you even think about how you plan to present your points in a logical manner, you need to understand how the average person processes information.

The father of persuasion research, Robert Cialdini, has identified several key factors that go some way in determining

the success of an argument. These include authority, likeability, reciprocity, and consensus.⁷⁰

Let's take these factors one by one, and look at how they can help you change someone's mind, or get them to follow a particular course of action. Later in the chapter, I'll give you a few hints on how to lay out your case in a logical manner.

Authority: Make It Clear Why You Are Qualified To Talk About The Issue

It's no secret that companies put testimonies by "experts" and [Ph.Ds.](#) on their products to improve sales. Put simply, when people see that an expert has (supposedly) approved of the product, they are likely to think that it must, by definition, be good. The same principle applies in the context of a debate.

If someone in authority says something, people tend to assume that it must be true, particularly if they are a renowned expert on the topic. This cognitive bias probably occurs because from an early age, we are taught that people with experience in a particular field, or those holding a special title, are naturally qualified to speak on a subject. Therefore, we find their arguments more persuasive.⁷¹

If there's a good reason why you're qualified to put forth your opinion, emphasize it! To use a simple example, if you are trying to convince someone that artificial sweeteners are not harmful to health, and you have a degree in the biological or chemical sciences, mentioning this fact adds to your credibility. Note that it doesn't really matter whether your qualification is actually relevant – it just has to *appear* relevant.

If you don't happen to have an academic or vocational qualification, don't worry – there are other ways to add to your credibility. The easiest way is to hijack someone else's authority by quoting or paraphrasing them. To continue with the example above, you might say, "I've looked into this issue.

I can tell you that Dr. X, an expert in this field, says that artificial sweeteners pose no threat to health." Offer to send the other person links to books and articles. Most people won't bother taking you up on it, but the fact that you are willing to send primary sources will send the impression that you have a lot of confidence in your argument.

You can also establish credibility by communicating that you have taken the time to gain an in-depth knowledge on both the issue at hand, and on subjects that are tangentially related.⁷² For example, if you are arguing that marijuana causes cancer, being able to speak confidently on cancer as a general topic will boost your authority. You will appear to have considered the issue at length if you seem to know a lot about the background issues, not just a specific point of debate.

Likeability: Do You Come Across As A Likeable Person?

Likeable people are at an advantage when it comes to putting forward an argument. Because our experience of the world teaches us that individuals usually agree with their friends, we tend to adopt the rule, "If I like someone, I probably agree with them."⁷³ Therefore, it's smart to tap into this unconscious "rule of thumb" by making yourself likeable.

By following the conversation skills in this book, you'll be off to a great start. Showing empathy, building rapport, and

showing a genuine interest in what another person has to say will make you more appealing. Compliments can also make you appear more likeable, but be careful not to overdo them, or the other person will feel as though they are on the receiving end of manipulation.

Psychologists have established that, in general, physically attractive sources are more persuasive than unattractive people.⁷⁴ However, this rule doesn't hold under all conditions. When people are heavily invested in an argument, they are willing to pay more attention to the finer details of the points someone is making, rather than their appearance.⁷⁵ Still, it doesn't hurt to make sure that you are looking good when putting forward your opinion!

Reciprocity: Does The Other Person Feel As Though They “Owe” You?

According to the role of social reciprocity, when someone does something “nice” for us, we tend to assume that we owe them a favor in return. Most of the time, this principle plays out over trivial matters.

For example, if you agree to look after your neighbor's dog whilst they are on vacation, they will probably agree to water your houseplants when you go on a two-week business trip.

However, this also applies in debates and discussions. If you appear to take someone's advice on board, or agree to one of their suggestions, you leave them feeling indebted to you. When you then ask them to agree with you, or to go along with one of your own ideas – which is what you are trying to do when making an argument – they are more likely to fall in line.⁷⁶

The trick is to pick your battles. Sometimes, going along with what someone wants for the sake of lowering their resistance to your own ideas is worth the payoff. For example, if you want to persuade your colleague to work from home on Thursdays instead of Wednesdays because it would be more convenient for your own schedule, your chances of success will be higher if you agree to one of their own requests in advance. Giving a “free gift” also works well. This doesn’t have to be a physical item.

For example, it can take the form of an offer to help on a project. For maximum effect, allow a few hours (or even days) to elapse between offering a gift/help and trying to persuade someone to change their attitudes or behavior.

Consensus: Can You Apply The Principle Of Social Proof?

Humans tend to fall back on a set of default rules when making decisions. Psychologists refer to these as “heuristics.” One common heuristic goes like this: “If lots of people like something, it’s probably good.” Another similar “rule” most of us follow is, “If lots of people believe that something is true, it probably is.” These rules save us time and effort. This heuristic is also known as, “The Rule of Social Proof.”

You can take advantage of this heuristic by telling someone that lots of other people have already adopted a particular opinion, or that their lives have improved as a result of adopting this view. This will trigger the other person’s natural desire to conform to what everyone else is doing.²⁷ For example, you could:

Tell the other person that X% of the population hold a particular opinion;

Tell the other person that most of their friends and colleagues have already been convinced of your opinion;

Tell the other person that you know someone else who adopted the very same opinion or approach that you are putting forward, and that they had great results.

Of course, this will not work on everyone. Some people make a point of evaluating an argument point by point. However, you'll find that most folk are swayed by social proof.

How To Lay Out Your Argument

Now that you have an appreciation of the factors that make persuasion more or less likely, it's time to plan how you will present your points! Follow these steps:

1. *State why the issue is important:* No one will bother listening to an argument that seems utterly irrelevant to their lives. Open with a statement or idea that will grab your listener's attention. For example, "If we don't address climate change, your food supply will be at risk!" is a captivating opener.
2. *Summarize your stance:* Let people know where you stand, and do so early. Don't leave them wondering about your motives. For example, "I'm absolutely against this new hiring policy, and I want to see it changed," is a definitive statement that prepares your listener for the points you are about to make.

3. *Establish your credibility:* Tell them why you are qualified to talk about the subject. For example, “As someone with five years of experience in accountancy, I’d argue...” establishes you as a trustworthy source.
4. *Use specific statistics:* Once you have laid the groundwork, you can start drawing on reliable sources. Make sure you are familiar with the numbers in advance, and be able to summarize them within a few seconds.
5. *Draw on case studies:* After establishing that your argument has some empirical backing, you should then use a case study or story to back up your point. Stories engage the listener’s emotions, and show how statistics (which can be a bit dull on their own) translate into everyday life. Add a sentence underlining why the issue is so significant.

How might this work in practice? Let’s say you are making a case to your HR manager. Their harassment policies are in dire need of an overhaul, and you want to persuade them to review their procedures.

You might say, “I read on Business Insider that thirty per cent of college graduates feel bullied at work. Think back to last year – we had six reported cases of harassment. One member of the Finance team had to take five weeks of leave from work. She lost her job, and is pursuing legal action against us. Harassment is a problem we can’t ignore if we want our workforce morale to improve.”

6. *Acknowledge the listener's counterarguments*: For a variety of reasons, such as personal biases or resistance to change, your listener might be reluctant to take your points on board. They might come back with some counterarguments.

Under no circumstances should you make them feel angry or disrespected by talking over them, or ignoring what they have to say. **Leave no point unaddressed.** If you can't provide a satisfactory answer, tell them that you will get back to them later. Never lie, because they might check up on your story later, and your credibility will be undermined if they discover that you tried to deceive them.

Demonstrating that you understand why people might be reluctant to accept your opinion or recommendation suggests to your listener that you have thought about the issue in depth. If you are feeling sufficiently confident, you can even preempt your listener's objections and respond to them before they come up in conversation. For example, "I know that you might think X, so I'd like to reassure you that Y" can work well in lowering your listener's defenses and making them more receptive to your ideas.

Tap Into Their Principles

If you can identify the other person's personal triggers, you can tailor your argument with their specific psychology in mind.⁷⁸ Note that everyone holds slightly different principles, [and processes their emotions in a unique way.](#)

For example, let's suppose that you notice that a couple of your colleagues have taken vacations at short notice, leaving the rest of the team scrambling to get the work done at the last

minute. As a result, you want to convince your manager that everyone in the department should be obliged to give at least four weeks' notice if they want to take more than five consecutive days of vacation.

If your manager has a reputation as someone who values equality and a level playing field for all, you could explain that if such a system were implemented, everyone in the workplace would be able to plan their work in good time – it would ensure that everyone in the department would receive equal treatment. This trigger word would tap into their personal priorities.

Bonus Tip: The Role Of Eye Contact

Has anyone ever told you, “Look me in the eye when I talk to you!” How did it make you feel? Intimidated, perhaps? It's true that a hard stare can inspire fear and compliance. However, dominant body language doesn't necessarily help someone win an argument. Aggressive eye contact certainly won't help your case.

Julia Minson, a social psychologist based at Harvard, has demonstrated that when people are forced to look a speaker in the eye as the speaker makes their case, they are more likely to cling to their old opinions compared to participants who are told to focus on the speaker's mouth.⁷⁹

If you really want to convince someone (not just intimidate them into submission), it's better to build rapport by mirroring their body language instead. Aim for assertiveness, not dominance. Otherwise, the other person's defense mechanisms will kick in, and they won't be willing to truly listen to whatever you have to say.

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Chapter 16:

How To Make A Complaint With Grace

Graham is one of my favorite clients. He's a quiet, unassuming man with a gentle sense of humor. During our first training session, I asked how his week had gone. "Oh, it's gone pretty well, I guess," he said. I had the feeling that he was holding something back.

After a few seconds, he grimaced slightly. "OK, so it's not been that good! Yesterday, I had to return a suit to a store, because it had a rip in the sleeve. I really hate making complaints. I feel like I'm being a jerk." Does this sound familiar? Graham certainly isn't my only client who feels a sense of dread at the thought of telling someone, "This isn't acceptable."

I have also worked with people who have no problem with the idea of making their dissatisfaction known, but find that their complaints never get the results they need. It seems that lots of us could do with a few lessons in making gracious complaints that culminate in a happy resolution. So how can you get what you want, without coming across as a jerk?

Practice stating your grievance aloud: When you make a complaint, you are by default making a negative statement. Whilst some of us feel perfectly entitled to ask for whatever we want, most of us would rather avoid confrontation.

If you feel nervous, your adrenal glands will kick in, and the adrenalin will make you feel even worse. Give yourself the best possible chance of remaining cool and collected. Practicing what you are going to say, whether it's on the phone or in person, can help you deliver your complaint in a calm manner.

Read up on your rights: Don't risk embarrassing yourself and wasting your own time by asking for something you aren't actually entitled to get. The Government has put together a website (ftc.gov) that outlines your rights as a consumer. When you know precisely what you are entitled to get, it becomes harder for someone to brush you off.⁸⁰ If you are making a complaint in the workplace, read your organization's policies beforehand.

Complain about a product or service, not a person: Getting personal might grab someone's attention, but it rarely does you any good in the end. No one likes to feel insulted, so referring to an employee as "incompetent," "foolish," or something worse will only aggravate the situation. If you are disappointed with the company then say so, but why take your aggression out on a customer service representative?

Most of the time, the person who sold you an item or set up your service isn't even the same person who will be on the receiving end of your complaint, so getting personal will often make you look plain stupid.

I was once standing in line to pay at my local hardware store. When the woman in front of me stepped up to the counter, she reached into her pocket before slamming down a packet of clothes pegs onto the counter. "I came in here last

week. You told me these would be great for hanging out linen!” she spat. “But they’ve creased my shirts something awful. What have you got to say about that?”

The clerk took a deep breath and said, “I’m sorry, Madam. I can give you a refund if you like. I think there must have been a miscommunication somewhere down the line, because I only started working here yesterday.” I could hear the guy behind me attempt to suppress a chuckle.

Do not say things like, “I demand that whoever served me be fired immediately!” This type of statement just makes you look self-important and ignorant – only the company (and possibly, enforcing bodies) can make those sorts of decisions.

Don’t be afraid to take it higher: If a customer service assistant or clerk can’t help you with your complaint, ask to speak with their manager. This request might put some employees on the defensive, so make it clear that you are not questioning their competence (even if you are), you just want to resolve the issue with someone in a position of authority. If you are making a complaint over the phone, ask to “escalate” the call.⁸¹

Use objective language, rather than value judgments: Value-laden words that denote subjective judgment are more inflammatory than objective terms. For instance, telling an employee that you hate their “stupid” products or “hopeless” customer helpline is not going to do you any favors. You will get much better results if you use phrases such as:

“It looks to me as though this product is broken because...”

“When I called the helpline on (insert date here), they told me that...”

“If you look at the lining of this sleeve, you can see a one-inch tear...”

Use closed questions if you want or need to have the issue resolved and wrap up the conversation quickly: Closed questions are great if you want to learn exactly what a company is prepared to do. For instance, “Are you going to give me a refund on this product?” cuts straight to the heart of the matter, and can save you time.

Of course, if you want to hear the reasoning behind a decision, open-ended questions are better. For example, if you have been refused a refund, you could ask, “Could you please explain your refunds policy to me, because I don’t understand how you arrived at this decision?”

Use the broken record technique with stubborn or incompetent employees: Not only are many consumers bad at making complaints, but a lot of customer service staff are poor at offering customer service!

Employees who don’t care about their work have little incentive to actually help you, and their primary objective will be to get you out of their hair as soon as possible. Some will try and fob you off with phrases such as, “Sorry, there’s nothing I can do,” or “No, we can’t help you once the warranty has expired.”

When you come up against these individuals, you need to make it clear that ignoring you isn’t in their best interests, because you are going to stick around until you get what you want. The moment they realize that trying to dissuade you from pursuing your complaint isn’t going to work, they’ll be forced to engage with you.

The best way of triggering this attitude shift is to use the broken record technique. Simply state what you would like to happen in a calm, clear voice, and repeat it until the other person complies with your request.⁸² The following are common phrases you may have to repeat several times:

“Yes, I understand, but the product is faulty. I want a refund.”

“Yes, I see your point, but I need to speak to the manager.”

“Yes, I see where you are coming from, but this is still covered under the warranty.”

“Yes, I see your point, but you have overcharged me.”

Note that each of these phrases contains a polite acknowledgement, which implies that you respect the other person. This helps prevent the situation from escalating into conflict. At no point should you raise your voice, use intimidating body language, or allow yourself to be diverted from your primary objective.

If someone really can't give you what you want, the broken record technique will still work – in most circumstances, they will at least feel obliged to grant you some kind of explanation for their poor service.

If you are complaining to a company, remind them that their reputation matters: The best form of advertising is still word of mouth, and a company lives or dies by its reputation. Tell the employee you are talking to that you won't be recommending their products or services to your friends and family, because you feel let down.

This is more likely to work on senior managers, as they are typically more emotionally invested in the company. If you can talk to the director or owner directly, raising the issue of reputation is especially effective.

If you happen to have a significant following on social media, or are a respected authority in your field, you could politely remind them that their reputation could be damaged if you were to tell your followers or subscribers about their poor customer service.

Letting a manager or director know that you could choose to exert your influence can be enough to sway them in the right direction. Don't threaten anyone, but if you have this kind of power, keep it in your back pocket as a last resort.

Set a deadline: If someone can't help you at the time, push for a reasonable deadline. This date should give the company sufficient time in which to make amends, without causing you undue inconvenience.

Tell them that if you do not hear from them by the agreed date, you will be in contact to let them know that your complaint will go to a higher level within the organization, or to an external regulator.

Tell them the whole story: I don't advocate telling lies to garner sympathy, but sometimes you can gain some leverage by explaining how and why your particular circumstances mean that a speedy resolution is really important.

For example, if your grandfather's new hearing aid breaks just days before his grandson's graduation, there's a chance that the thought of a proud, elderly man being unable to appreciate a highlight in his grandson's life might just

encourage a customer service employee to be a little more helpful.

Combine two or more strategies: A couple of years ago, my friend Sean ordered a beautiful diamond ring for his wife. He intended to give it to her as a 30th birthday gift, and had made it all the more special by having it engraved with a heartfelt message on the inside of the band.

Sean stopped by the jewelry store on his way home from work one evening to pick it up. He opened the box, delighted with what he saw – until he checked the engraving. He was upset to find that the jeweler had spelled his wife’s name incorrectly. Obviously, he couldn’t give it to her until it was fixed.

Sean immediately pointed out the error. At first, the sales clerk tried to convince Sean that he must have misspelled his own wife’s name on the order form. Fortunately, Sean had taken a photo on his phone for his own records, and could quickly prove the clerk wrong.

He then asked how long it would take for the jeweler to redo the engraving. The assistant store manager, who had been listening in, said that it would take roughly two or three weeks.

Sean’s wife’s birthday was only a week away, so he couldn’t afford to wait that long. He decided to change tack. “You know,” Sean said, “I chose you because you’re meant to be the best jeweler in town. Perhaps I was wrong.” He waited a moment. “My wife only had a basic diamond ring when we got engaged. I got this ring to make it up to her, y’know? It’s a milestone birthday for her, too.”

After a brief silence, the assistant manager suddenly decided that the engraving could be adjusted within five days. Sean had used two strategies – mentioning the company’s reputation, plus throwing in a personal story – to good effect. Complaining is an art form. Stay calm, tailor your plan of attack to the situation, and there’s no reason why you can’t get what you want.

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Chapter 17:

How To Have A Great Conversation On The Phone

Email, instant messaging, and video calls are all popular means of communication, but there is still a place for good old-fashioned phone calls. In many respects, the principles involved in having a productive conversation are the same that apply to face-to-face interactions. For example, whether speaking in person or on the phone, you need to listen attentively, know how to deliver a sincere compliment, and create rapport.

However, the phone presents a special set of challenges. Obviously, you can't see someone's face when talking to them on the phone – there is less intimacy compared with traditional conversation. Luckily, you can learn how to use the phone to your advantage. These simple strategies will help you enjoy productive, positive conversations.

Get a reading on their availability: If you are the one placing the call (and you haven't been given a specific time to do so), always begin by asking the other person whether they have time to talk. When you start talking to someone in a regular, face-to-face setting, you usually have enough contextual information to appreciate whether or not they will be receptive to holding a conversation.

On the phone, there is no way of knowing unless you ask! You should also give them an idea as to how long the call will last. Be honest. Don't pretend that your question will only take two minutes to answer if you really need an hour to discuss the problem. Give the other person a chance to make an informed decision as to how they will spend their time.

Compensate with words: When you talk with someone on the phone, they cannot see your face or physical gestures. This is an important point, because we usually draw on these cues in conversation to ascertain how someone else is feeling. So if someone cannot see your face, what should you do instead? Use your words, of course!⁸³

For example, let's say that your friend calls you up to tell you about their latest date – a guy they thought was very attractive and intelligent. However, once they actually started talking to this man over dinner, it turned out he was an absolute bore who could barely make eye contact. This news might come as a surprise to you, but your friend won't be able to tell from your facial expression. A simple exclamation such as, "That's surprising!" would convey your reaction.

Single words and brief phrases such as, "I see," "I get it," and "Really? OK" are the verbal equivalent of nodding. Monitor your gestures and shifts in body language, and translate them into words. For example, if you are smiling at a witty remark your friend or colleague has made, say so.

Another useful trick is work the person's name into conversation more often than you would in face-to-face interactions. It goes some way in compensating for the lack of face-to-face intimacy, and also catches their attention.

Pay attention to background noise: Be sensitive to the fact that the other person might experience interruptions. If you are calling someone at work and you hear another phone start to ring, or someone else saying their name, acknowledge the interruption and ask if they would rather continue the conversation another time.

Most people will choose to carry on the conversation (arranging a time to call back is often more hassle, and they will probably want to find out what you have to say), but they will still appreciate your good manners. Remember that you are not the center of the universe, and that other people can't always predict when something (or someone) else will come up.

Cut the ramble: Opening a phone call with a polite enquiry after someone's health or their well-being in general is fine, but rambling on for several minutes will just annoy them. When we talk to someone in person, we take in their face, their posture, and their gestures – there is plenty to grab our attention.

Not only that, but if we start to multitask or get distracted, it becomes pretty obvious. On the phone, all we have is a voice – and we can turn our attention elsewhere and get away with it. Don't drone on about irrelevant topics, because your conversation partner will soon focus their attention elsewhere. Establish early on what it is you want to talk about, then stay on topic.

Don't establish yourself as a negative caller: There are certain individuals – who shall remain anonymous for the sake

of this book – who cause my stomach to drop whenever I see their names flash up on my phone.

Why? Because whenever they call, it's always because they have some complaint to make, or because they want to use me as a sounding board for all their problems. Often, I let the call go straight to voicemail. It's a shame, because we are both missing out on the chance to have some constructive conversations, but I just don't need their negativity in my life.

Don't let yourself become one of those people who find themselves going to voicemail. Unless it's an emergency, never open with a complaint. If you approach someone in person and start talking, they have to make an effort to excuse themselves if necessary. However, if you call, they can just elect not to answer.

This means that the stakes are higher when you talk to people on the phone. The impression you give will have a significant impact on the way they will deal with you in the future, if they choose to answer your calls in the first place.

Even if you have been discussing serious matters, show that you are willing to look at the situation in the best possible light. **End every call on a high note.** This may be as simple as expressing confidence that everything will work out for the best, or reminding the other person of what is going well in other areas of their life.

When leaving a message, end it on a cliffhanger: How do you get someone to call you back? There are two main points to bear in mind. First, make sure that your tone is warm and friendly. If someone has failed to pick up your call, despite

telling you to get in touch at a particular time or on a particular day, you might feel irritated.

However, on no account should you let this become apparent in your tone of voice. Stay calm and professional! Second, you should grab the listener's attention with a cliffhanger. Be specific.⁸⁴ "Hi, I have the figures you asked for, please call me back to hear them!" will virtually guarantee that you will receive a return call, whereas "Here are the figures you asked for:..." probably won't.

Record your most important conversations: There are several apps available that allow you to keep an audio record of your calls. Why would you want to do this? Because if someone is giving you a lot of information, you'll be able to listen to what they have to say without worrying whether you have accurately recorded it on a piece of paper. You won't have to interrupt them either, or ask them to repeat themselves. This trick makes you look efficient and professional.

I'll show you an example of how this can work. My friend Sarah always records her calls whenever possible. As a marketing assistant at a large firm, her manager often calls her with information about upcoming trade shows. (For some reason, her manager prefers not to bother sending emails, but that's another story.) This information can be pretty complex, and Sarah is often bombarded with names, dates, and addresses.

However, because she records calls with her manager, she never has to worry about missing a beat. As a result, everyone in her department is impressed by her superhuman memory and attention to detail. She hasn't yet revealed her secret! I'm

confident that Sarah's professional approach will take her far – it makes her appear more productive than her colleagues.

Of course, you should make sure that recording your phone calls is legal in your state. As of 2017, most states allow one-party recording – as long as one party is aware that the call is being recorded (in this case, that's you), it's fine to record the conversation. On the other hand, in California, Florida, Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland, Montana, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Washington, you need the consent of all parties involved. Double-check the laws that apply to your state before recording without the other person's explicit consent.⁸⁵ This strategy will still impress people even if you have to ask permission, because it shows that you are taking whatever they have to say very seriously.

Send a follow-up summary: One disadvantage of holding a conversation over the phone rather than in person is that it doesn't automatically leave behind a paper trail. Recording conversations provides you with evidence that someone made a verbal commitment or particular remark, but bringing up recordings as a means of proving someone's intentions at a later date will appear hostile.

It's better to write a short summary of the points addressed in the call, together with actionable steps, and send it to the other person soon after the call has ended. State in the email that unless you hear to the contrary, you will assume that your interpretation of the situation is correct.

I have focused on business calls in this section, but you can also use these tips in your personal life. For example, your

friends and relatives will always appreciate it if you ask them whether they can spare a few minutes to talk.

Whatever your relationship to the person on the other end of the phone, use your words to paint a picture of your responses. The phone can be an excellent tool for building a relationship if used properly, but you need to be aware of its limitations.

⁸³ Lowndes, L. (1997). *How To Talk To Anyone*. Glasgow: Onmia Books Ltd.

⁸⁴ Seid, S. (2012). 8 Telephone Etiquette Tips. advancedetiquette.com

⁸⁵ Digital Media Law Project. (2017). Recording Phone Calls and Conversations. dmlp.org

Chapter 18:

Tips For Conversations With Non-Native Speakers

In our increasingly globalized world, conversations between native and non-native English speakers have become common in the workplace. This can present a few problems, and it can give rise to some awkward situations.

A lot of my clients work in multinational corporations, and therefore interact with people from around the world. Quite often, they ask me for tips on how to have productive, mutually enjoyable conversations with their colleagues who use English as a second (or third!) language.

Don't Yell

For some reason, many of us think that by speaking at a higher volume, we will help someone else understand what we are saying. This makes no sense whatsoever. Unless you need to call out to someone who is standing on the opposite side of the room, yelling will do no good at all. In fact, it's a really bad idea.

When you talk loudly to a non-native speaker, you will come across as patronizing. That's not the impression you want to give. Just speak at the same volume you would use in any other situation. There's one exception to this rule. If you are often told that you are an especially soft or quiet speaker, raise your volume a little.

Use Proper English

People who have learned English as a foreign language have usually learned “standard English.” This means that they will understand you better when you use correct grammar, pronounce words as they should be spoken, and avoid slurring two or more words together. For example, “Would you like a coffee?” will be much easier for a non-native speaker to understand than, “Do-ya-wanna-coffee?”

Avoid phrases or colloquialisms specific to your geographical region, unless they are essential in conveying your meaning. In general, it’s best to use short, simple words that come up frequently in everyday use. Take your lead from the non-native speaker. If they show themselves to be capable of using more advanced or unusual vocabulary, you can adjust your speech accordingly.

Filler language such as “Um, yeah,” “OK, I get it,” and “Literally, they...” can confuse non-native speakers, particularly if they are relatively new to using English. Filler words and phrases add no real meaning to a conversation, so don’t confuse someone by sprinkling them liberally throughout your dialogue.

Watch out for “likes.” Not only will you annoy native English speakers when you say “like” every ten seconds, but you will baffle people who have learned English as a second language. Overusing “like” suggests that you have poor social skills, that you have no idea how to conduct yourself in a professional environment, and that you have no confidence in what you are saying. Someone who has learned English from scratch and achieved a position of authority will think that you

are an idiot! “Totally” and “Oh-my-God” are other fillers to eliminate from your speech.

Answer questions in a direct manner. When you mean “Yes,” say, “Yes.” When you mean “No,” say, “No.” Using noises and utterances such as “Uh-huh” will only add to the non-native speaker’s confusion.

It’s usually best to use long forms rather than contractions. This is because non-native speakers often have problems distinguishing between a word and related contractions. For example, the difference between “should” and “shouldn’t” is subtle for a non-native speaker. This can all too easily result in misunderstandings.

Be Aware Of The Broader Context

If a non-native speaker doesn’t understand you, it may seem obvious that the language barrier is to blame. However, you need to appreciate that other factors might be at work.⁸⁶ Cultural barriers and expectations as to how people interact with one another might be to blame for miscommunication.

For example, if one speaker is from a culture that values a direct style of communication, whereas their conversation partner grew up in a culture that uses subtle hints rather than direct commands, there is scope for misunderstandings that actually have nothing to do with language.

If you aren’t certain whether a miscommunication is down to language, and the other person is from a different culture, a bit of background reading could help you figure out what is going on. You should also consider whether your miscommunication might have arisen as a result of differences

in age, gender, and prior experience of working within other company cultures.

Other Tips To Make Communication Easier

Repeat, then rephrase if necessary: When a native speaker doesn't appear to understand you, your first instinct is probably to repeat what you have just said. Do the same with a non-native speaker, because they may not have misunderstood – they might have simply failed to hear every word.

If they don't understand you the second time around, rephrase the sentence, replacing the most complex words with simpler terms. Repeat the whole sentence every time until they get the message. This might be more time consuming than repeating one or two key words, but it will be less confusing for the non-native speaker.

Give the speaker a fair chance to respond: If you speak a language other than your native tongue, you'll know that formulating a grammatically correct response can take a few seconds longer than usual. Bear this in mind when talking to a non-native speaker.

Ask someone to rephrase what you said in their own words: Instead of asking, "Do you understand what I just said?" ask them, "Can you tell me what you think I said?" This will let you clear up any misunderstandings early on.

Unless you are asked to do so, do not correct the speaker: When someone wants to learn English, they attend lessons with a teacher, or they make a point of asking those around them to offer corrections if they make a mistake. Resist the urge to leap in and tell them where they are going wrong. They

might appreciate your input, but it's more likely that they will be embarrassed or offended.

Minimize your use of words that mean different things across contexts: There are many words in the English language that carry various meanings depending on the way in which they are used. This creates conditions that may give rise to misunderstandings.

For example, suppose you tell a non-native speaker that there was a meeting “last Monday.” They may think you meant that the meeting in question took place on the final Monday (perhaps of the month), because “last” can mean the same thing as “final” in some contexts. It would be better to say, “There was a meeting X days ago,” or “There was a meeting on [date].”

Make your questions direct, with no preamble: If you have a habit of building up to a question with phrases such as, “If it's not too much trouble, I was wondering...” or “I'd like you to...,” streamline your requests! “Please can you do X?” or “Would you be able to do Y?” will be less confusing for the other person.

Use the active tense: The active tense is usually easier to understand as compared to the passive tense. For example, “Company X sold that product” will be less confusing than, “The product was sold by Company X.”⁸⁷

Keep a piece of paper and a pen to hand: Despite your best efforts, there may still be occasions on which you can't get your message across. This might be because you are using specific jargon, because you have a very thick accent, or the non-native speaker just doesn't have the vocabulary required

to understand what you mean. This is where diagrams come in to play. It's sensible to write down complex instructions if it's essential that the non-native speaker follows them to the letter.

Make use of gestures and facial expressions: Body language can provide useful contextual cues. Although people of different cultures vary in terms of what gestures they find distasteful, or the extent to which they believe public displays of emotion to be acceptable, most psychologists agree that almost everyone can recognize happiness, sadness, disgust, and fear.

You don't have to exaggerate your facial expressions and gestures, but there's no harm in consciously making sure that your nonverbal cues are reflecting the words coming from your mouth.

Think carefully before using humor: Humor can be hard to pull off in a corporate setting at the best of times. Throw language barriers and cultural differences into the mix, and you have a recipe for potential disaster.⁸⁸ Instead of making jokes, use friendly body language to put the speaker at ease. If it turns out that the language barrier is not as significant as you imagined, you can use humor once you have built come to know the other person a little better.

Give a non-native speaker every reasonable chance to prepare for important conversations: When preparing for a meeting with a non-native speaker, give them a clear agenda in advance. Keep the language simple. If you must use jargon or acronyms that are alien to the non-native speaker, make sure that the document contains a glossary.

If you don't understand the speaker, use "I" language: Imagine that you are trying to speak in a foreign language, and struggling to make yourself understood. Which would you rather hear – “Sorry, you’ll need to say that again,” or “I’m sorry, I didn’t understand that”?

When misunderstandings arise, take some of the blame. Emphasize that part of the problem is your own failure to comprehend what they are saying. This will help the speaker feel less self-conscious.⁸⁹

Always treat a non-native speaker with respect. If you have ever learned another language, you’ll know how challenging it can be to achieve fluency. Don’t be too quick to judge someone’s personality or intellect based on the quality of their conversation, because they may well be more expressive and better able to voice their thoughts in their native language.

⁸⁶ Cultural Awareness International. (2013). Communicating Effectively With Non-Native English Speakers. culturalawareness.com

⁸⁷ Marshall, L.B. (2015). Tips for Talking with Non-Native English Speakers. quickanddirtytips.com

⁸⁸ Bell, N.D. (2007). How native and non-native English speakers adapt to humor in intercultural interaction. *Humor*, 20, 27-48.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Chapter 19:

How To Put Your Views Across To Someone In Authority

So far in this book, I've assumed that you and your conversation partner are pretty much equal in terms of authority and power. However, as the emails I've had from my readers show, some of the hardest conversations we ever have are with those in positions of authority.

It's doubly difficult when you want to give your views – which might even go against what the authority figure happens to believe – without risking your reputation or job.

Here's how you can make yourself heard without appearing disrespectful:

Assume that they will be open to working with you: Authority figures are there to do a job, and most of them take pride in their interpersonal skills. Some bosses are complete nightmares – I wouldn't deny it! But, in my experience, most people in senior management positions are easy to work with when you treat them with respect.

Don't assume that they won't want to hear what you have to say just because they have a lot more knowledge and experience. It's actually quite annoying, even awkward, to watch someone grovel at your feet.

They were once in your position, and they probably haven't forgotten what it was like to feel nervous when standing in front of those in more senior roles. Even if they don't go out of their way to help you feel comfortable, they might be more empathetic than you first realize.

If you disagree, say so: The best communicators respect someone who is willing to put their opinions forward. When you are asked for your honest feedback, give it. Remain polite and diplomatic, but tell them what's really on your mind.

Think of it this way – if your boss asks you for your opinion and you give them a simple, “Yes, of course, whatever you say, Boss!” they aren't going to think very highly of you. Such answers are just a waste of everyone's time.

Use the “praise sandwich” or “positivity sandwich” technique: If an authority figure asks for your feedback and you need to break some bad news, use the sandwich technique. Begin with a brief positive remark, deliver your negative feedback, then finish on a high.

For example, let's say that you have been asked to give feedback on how your department is performing. You might say something like, “The sales figures are up this quarter, which is great. Unfortunately, our customer satisfaction has dropped by ten per cent. To address this, we are investing in a new training program.” Always take responsibility where appropriate.

Ask questions that show your respect for their authority: Going into interview mode isn't a good idea, but sneaking a couple of questions that acknowledge their expertise and

authority is a subtle way of showing that you hold them in esteem.

Asking questions like, “Whilst you’re here, could I ask for your opinion on X technology?” or “I heard you went to Trade Show Y last week – how was it?” show that you are mindful of their knowledge and experience. If you are dealing with an authority figure with a fragile ego, this tactic will reassure them that you recognize who’s boss.

Keep your body language assertive: Remember that authority figures are just people! They might have a special title or enjoy a great deal of status, but they are still vulnerable human beings with their unique strengths and weaknesses.²⁰ Remind yourself that they are in no way intrinsically “better” than you – it will show in your body language and overall level of confidence. Self-assured, successful people respect others who carry themselves with dignity.

Brace yourself for criticism, and thank them for their feedback: The average authority figure has to provide feedback – both positive and negative – as part of their job. The golden rule is to avoid taking it personally. Remember that unless you are an extremely small organization, they are unlikely to know you as an individual.

Even if they use an unpleasant tone of voice or make snide remarks, it’s your work that they dislike, not you. If they deliver negative feedback, thank them! Let them know that it will help you perform at a higher level. Make it clear that you understand why they are dissatisfied, and that it is your responsibility to improve your own performance.

Do not become defensive.²¹ Tell them that you look forward to making changes. You will gain a reputation as a mature, professional individual who values your self-development over your ego.

Stand up for yourself when necessary: There is no need to take the blame for something you didn't do, or to agree when someone makes unfair accusations against you, even if the accuser is in a position of authority. At the same time, becoming angry or hysterical will not help the situation.

If someone accuses you of something you didn't do, say, "I know this is a very serious situation, but I did not do that. I don't know what you are talking about." I won't deny that it's scary to stand up to authority figures, but remind yourself that telling the truth is usually the best course of action.

After all, you wouldn't want to lie to them, would you? One way or another, the truth usually comes out in the end. If you stood up to the authority figure at the time, they will respect you. If they never accept the real story and keep blaming you for something you did not do, then you can at least rest assured that you did all you could in telling them what really happened. Your personal integrity will remain intact.

Watch out for rhetorical questions: People in authority often use rhetorical questions as a means of asserting their power. These include, "What are we supposed to do now?," and "How I am meant to turn this around?" They create a dramatic atmosphere, and can also give them a few extra seconds in which to process their thoughts. They are not intended as an invitation for others to speak. Answering a rhetorical question will make you appear overly confident and socially naïve.²²

For example, suppose that you have been called in to speak to your boss because your team has failed to meet an important project deadline. If your boss says, “How could it have all gone so wrong?, What am I supposed to tell the Board?” you should realize that this isn’t an invitation for you to tell him how to do his job! If, however, your boss says, “What do you have to say about that?,” then it’s time to tell him your thoughts.

If you are nervous about a meeting or appointment with an authority figure, take an advocate with you: Ideally, you will be able to draw on your conversation skills when talking to someone in authority. However, if you are faced with the prospect of a tense meeting, you may want to take someone along for support.

For instance, if you have been told to attend a meeting with a senior manager at work in order to receive a formal warning, ask HR whether you can take an advocate or representative with you. If you need to attend a doctor’s appointment but are afraid that you won’t be able to talk about a personal or embarrassing problem, take a trusted friend or relative along.

If you find yourself crippled by anxiety, get help: It’s normal to be apprehensive when meeting with someone in authority. However, if you find yourself having panic attacks at the thought of talking to someone in power, it might be time to consider getting professional help.

This is because a strong fear of authority figures is often linked to other issues, such as social anxiety or unresolved issues with child-parent relationships.²³ The good news is that

even severe cases of social anxiety can be resolved with the right help and support.

90 Social Anxiety Home. (2017). Fear of Authority Figures: 7 Tips on How to Talk to Authority Figures. socialanxietyhome.com

91 WikiHow. (2017). How To Talk To Authority. [wikihow.com](https://www.wikihow.com)

92 Ibid.

93 Anxiety Boss. (2015). I Get Extremely Anxious When I'm Talking To Someone Of Authority. anxietyboss.com

Chapter 20:

Conversations Between Hearing & Hearing Impaired Individuals

Did you know that 48 million Americans live with significant hearing loss?²⁴ There's a good chance that you either know, or work with, someone who has a hearing impairment – or perhaps you are an individual living with hearing loss.

Either way, it can make communication difficult. Hearing loss is associated with social embarrassment and general isolation, because those afflicted often struggle to follow everyday conversations.²⁵

If you have a hearing impairment, these tips will help you enjoy more productive conversations:

Ask people to stand or sit in a position that works for you: If you hear better on one side than the other, either move so that you have a better chance of understanding what someone is saying, or tell them that you have a hearing impairment and you would appreciate it if they could speak from one side rather than the other.

In general, it is a good idea to let your conversation partner know as soon as possible that you have a hearing impairment, and the exact steps they can take to help you. Tell them that

following a conversation is easier for you if they keep their hands away from their mouths, speak clearly, and so forth. Don't hide your impairment – a well-mannered person will do everything they reasonably can to accommodate you.

Locate specific sources of difficulty, and give positive instructions: If you are having trouble understanding a particular individual, think why this might be. You can then make a proactive request that will make the conversation easier for everyone.²⁶ For example, if you realize that your conversation partner speaks unusually quickly, you could ask, “Please could you speak a little more slowly?”

Find an alternative to “what?”: It isn't your fault that you cannot hear clearly, but saying “What?” throughout the conversation may still appear rude.²⁷ “Could you please repeat that?,” “Sorry, I didn't catch that,” and “Pardon?” are all better alternatives.

Use suitable clarifying questions: If you heard part of a sentence but didn't catch a couple of words, ask for clarification using questions that show you were listening to the best of your ability. For example, suppose you are talking to someone who is telling you about their new house. You understood that they purchased the house recently, and that they have painted the living room, but you didn't catch the color scheme they used. Rather than saying “Pardon?” - this could be taken as an instruction to repeat the entire sentence - you could say, “OK, I got that you have painted the living room, but not the color scheme. Could you repeat that?”

Repeat back important details: If someone has given you some essential information, say, “I want to make sure I

understand this. May I repeat it back?” Your conversation partner will be glad that you have taken the initiative.

Suggest a “talking stick:” Keeping up with a conversation as part of a group is often difficult for a person with a hearing impairment, because the normal flow of interruptions and crosstalk can be too hard to decipher. If this is a problem for you, and you have a good relationship with the group in question, suggest that the group uses an aid to minimize interruptions.

The “talking stick” doesn’t have to literally be a stick – it can be any small object, such as a mug. The rule is that someone can only talk when they are holding the object. As a person with a hearing impairment, the “stick” will direct your attention to the right person and help you follow the conversation.

What can hearing people do to facilitate smooth conversations with someone with a hearing impairment?

Following these guidelines is a good start:

Understand how hearing aids work: Most people assume that hearing aids work in much the same way as a pair of glasses. When someone puts on their spectacles, their vision is completely restored. This isn’t the case with hearing aids. Aids amplify the sounds someone can hear, but they don’t always make those sounds clearer. Do not assume that someone can hear “normally” just because they are wearing a hearing aid.²⁸

Get their attention first: Before launching into conversation, say the person’s name. Wait until you have their attention, and then start talking. This approach reduces the likelihood that they will miss the beginning of a sentence.

Do not shout: Although it sounds counterintuitive, raising your voice can actually make it harder for someone to understand you, because it distorts your speech. Speak at your usual volume.⁹⁹

Face them and keep your mouth uncovered: Not all people with hearing loss have learned how to lip read. However, most will typically rely on recognition of common mouth shapes to help them understand what is being said. Ensure they can see your mouth at all times. Do not attempt to talk to them from another room.¹⁰⁰ Move to a well-lit space if necessary. Sit between three and six feet away from the person.

Spell out a word if necessary: If you have repeated a word a couple of times, but the other person doesn't appear to have understood, spell it out. Keep a piece of paper and a pen to hand in case you can't communicate what you need to say.

Ask whether one ear is more functional than the other: A person's hearing loss may not be symmetrical. Quite often, they will hear better in one ear than the other. If it's appropriate to do so, ask them whether they will be able to hear you better if you sit in a particular position.

Be prepared to rephrase or reword what you are saying: Sometimes, a person may find it hard to discern specific sounds. This means that they might find it difficult to comprehend certain words or phrases. If they look puzzled, try a different word or expression instead.

Ask them to repeat key pieces of information back to you: Even people who have intact hearing capabilities can confuse two words that sound alike. When you are giving someone with hearing loss names, dates, numbers, or times, ask them to

repeat them back to you. Be sure to phrase your request politely, so that they don't feel as though you are patronizing them. For example, you could ask, "You probably heard that, but could you repeat it, just for my peace of mind?"

Take your share of responsibility for any misunderstandings: Despite your best efforts, you might encounter an embarrassing or awkward misunderstanding. If this happens, be prepared to laugh at yourself and the situation – never at the person with hearing loss. Assure them that you will try to communicate more clearly in the future.

Always show courtesy. Never talk about a person with a hearing impairment as though they are not in the room – this is extremely rude. If you are in a group situation and the topic under discussion suddenly changes, pause a moment to make sure that the person with a hearing impairment has caught up.

You should minimize crosstalk and interruptions. If possible, provide the person with an overview of what the discussion will cover ahead of time. This will provide them with contextual clues.

⁹⁴ Hearing Loss Association of America. (2017). Hearing Loss: Facts & Statistics. hearingloss.org

⁹⁵ Athens Hearing & Balance Clinic. (2017). Effects of Hearing Loss. athenshearing.com

⁹⁶ Kricos, P.B. (2017). Communication Strategies. betterhearing.org

⁹⁷ Booth, S. (2017). Hearing Loss: Tips for Better Communication. webmd.com

⁹⁸ Eberts, S. (2016). Ten Reasons Hearing Aids Are NOT Like Glasses. livingwithhearingloss.com

⁹⁹ UCSF Medical Center. (2017). Communicating with People with Hearing Loss. ucsfhealth.org

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Chapter 21:

How To Excel In Interviews & Get That Job

It's no secret that people with strong interpersonal skills are more likely to be hired. In fact, the ability to hold a conversation and speak calmly under pressure can even go some way in compensating for a lack of experience and qualifications.

Why? Because an interview allows you to show not only why your skills make you a strong candidate for the position, but it also lets you demonstrate that you have sufficient social intelligence to function within the workplace.

What's The Point Of An Interview, Anyway?

Before jumping into conversation tips for interviews, let's review your aims as an applicant. First, you need to work out whether you are a good fit for the organization. You should always read up on the company culture prior to making an application, but attending an interview allows you another level of insight into how the organization is run.

For example, if the interviewer appears unprepared or nervous, this tells you a few things about their training practices! Unless you are in dire need of a job, move out of the "I'll accept any offer I can get!" mentality.

Instead, reframe an interview as an opportunity for both parties to see whether a job offer would be appropriate. I always tell my clients that making this switch is essential if you want to remain calm throughout the process. Calm people make for better conversationalists.

Your second objective is to show the interviewer that you have the qualifications, experience, and personal qualities required for the job. This will require you to speak in a succinct manner that communicates your main points, without appearing brusque or arrogant.

Interviewers usually ask competency-based questions too, and these require strong listening skills and a clear head (plus some advance preparation). It isn't enough to just rattle off the contents of your resume. If you really want to impress an interviewer and land the job, you need to build rapport. These tips will help you do just that:

Don't slow your speech: Well-meaning teachers and parents might have told you, "Slow down, or you'll appear nervous!" Actually, research conducted with over 100 students in mock interview situations has shown that slow speakers come across as anxious. Speak at your usual pace.¹⁰¹

Cut the filler: Few verbal tics undermine your credibility faster than fillers such as "um," "erm," and "y'know." They are distracting, and the interviewer might even struggle to focus on the points you are trying to make! Fillers also make you appear shy and unsure of yourself. In the days leading up to an interview, pay attention to the number of filler words you tend to use when talking to others. Work on cutting them down.

Ideally, you should eliminate them altogether. Career expert Jayne Latz advises that you should use no more than one filler word per minute.¹⁰² If you need to pause during an interview, ask for a moment to gather your thoughts, or buy yourself a few seconds by asking the interviewer to repeat the question. It's better than going, "Um...ahhh..." and so on.

Watch your intonation: I've never heard someone tell me that they enjoy talking to someone who uses an upward inflection at the end of every sentence. To create an impression of confidence, only speak with a raised pitch if you are actually asking a question.¹⁰³ When making a statement, deliver it as though you have no doubt that what you are saying is correct.

Don't qualify your statements: If someone told you, "I'm hoping to achieve my MBA within the next five years," or "I think I'll take a vacation in Italy," part of you will doubt that they really believe in their own goals.

On the other hand, if someone said, "I'm going to achieve my MBA within the next five years," or "I am going to Italy," you would be more likely to believe them. The same principle applies in job interviews. Use words like "hopefully," "perhaps," and "sort of" sparingly. If you are going to make a point, make it with conviction! "Weak speak" suggests that you are lacking in self-belief, which is not an attractive quality in a job candidate.¹⁰⁴

Marry together confidence and enthusiasm: Interviewers really like a candidate who is both qualified for the role and enthusiastic about their career. Public speaking coach Holley Murchison recommends a simple recipe for success based on

this principle. Prior to the interview, make a list. It should contain all the reasons why you know that you can perform the job. In other words, it should remind you why you are capable.

The next step is to move through each item, devising a reason why each competency inspires you, or makes you feel enthusiastic about the work.¹⁰⁵ This preparation will help you answer any questions about your skills and competence. Pairing confidence and enthusiasm will help you generate strong statements like this:

“In my 10 years as a HR consultant, I have learned how to create convincing, engaging presentations. This skill has helped me communicate key ideas to employees across a number of sectors, but the most rewarding part is using this ability to engage with workers in devising solutions to common HR problems.”

Stick to the 60-second rule: Long-winded answers will not endear you to the interviewer. To be blunt, if you can't answer an interview question in under a minute, you need to rethink your approach. Run a search on the most popular interview questions, and ensure you could put together a good response within one minute.¹⁰⁶

Use “we” language along with “I”: Very few jobs require a worker to carry out their duties in isolation. An interviewer will want reassurance that you are capable of working both independently and as part of a team. A good way of communicating that you have both abilities is to use both “I” and “we” language. For example:

“In our department, we always make a point of getting our projects completed in advance of the deadline. I have taken

responsibility for scheduling my team's working hours using our in-house time management software. Our most recent project was delivered a week ahead of the deadline.”

In summary, you need to communicate to your interviewer what it is that you do, and the ways in which you work with others to meet your team's goals.¹⁰⁷

Make friendly small talk: I've already told you why small talk is such a useful social tool, and my small talk tips also apply in interview situations. If the interviewer is escorting you to an interview room, they will probably try to engage you in small talk. This is actually part of the interview process – they want to see how you function in high-pressure social situations. Make a good first impression by engaging with the interviewer.

Don't make them do all the work to keep the conversation alive! If you have to talk to a receptionist or administrator before your interview, be sure to make a good impression on them too. You never know, the interviewer might just be good friends with the man or woman on the front desk. In addition, if you do get the job, you will want to start your working relationship off on the right foot.

How To Handle Those Awkward Interview Questions

After graduating college, I started lining up interviews for my first professional, full-time job. When I applied for a role within a company, I always took the time to read up on the organization's history, culture, goals, and recent performance.

I took the advice of my college's career center, and prepared answers to common interview questions. Sounds good, doesn't

it? Unfortunately, I was far too arrogant, and I was about to learn a valuable lesson the hard way!

I arrived early to my first interview. A few minutes later, my interviewer came into the lobby, greeted me warmly, and started walking me to the interview room. As she hung her jacket on the back of the door, she said, “So, tell me about yourself!” I opened my mouth to reply – but nothing came out. Did I know that someone would ask me that question? Absolutely. Had I prepared? Nope.

My young, naïve self-assumed that of course I would be able to think up an answer on the spot – after all, I knew who I was, right? I can’t even remember what I said, but I can tell you that I didn’t get the job. The moral of the story? Always prepare, however smart or self-aware you might be. There’s something about a job interview that causes even the best conversationalists to panic.

I’m not going to list every conceivable question an interviewer might ask you. There are lots of lists available for free online. Not only that, but according to career experts, there are only a few types of question you need to prepare for anyway.¹⁰⁸ Consider the following:¹⁰⁹

“*So why do you want this job?*” The interviewer knows full well that most people work because they need the money, not because they really love what they do. However, this question is helpful for weeding out applicants who haven’t bothered to do their homework. You should give an answer that proves you have thought about why the role is right for you. There are several ways you can do this.

You might tell the interviewer what it is you admire about the company, you might describe what aspects of the job advertisement caught your eye, or (if you have a background in another industry) why you want to change careers at this point in your life.

Make sure you know the company's history, the products and services they offer, their core values, their mission, their organizational structure, their recent successes and challenges, and where they hope to go in the future. All this information will be available online, primarily through their website. No one will believe you are serious about the job if you haven't even bothered to read up on the organization.

“What are your strengths?” Interviewers ask this question in an attempt to work out whether your capabilities will be a good fit for the role. This is no time for modesty! You should be able to talk about two or three competencies that would make you suitable for the job.

Do not give generic answers that suggest you can only meet the bare minimum standards of job performance (e.g. “I always show up to work on time!”). Instead, hone in on what makes you a unique, valuable candidate. You should also be able to give **at least one** recent example of how you used these skills to good effect.

“What are your weaknesses?” Some well-meaning career advisors will tell you that you should take a positive trait (e.g. perfectionism) and frame it as a negative (e.g. “I’ve been told I’m too much of a perfectionist!”).

This is an overused tactic, and it will only make the interviewer want to roll their eyes. Instead, be honest without

ruining your chances. Choose a relatively minor weakness that can be corrected with the right practice and training, such as a mild fear of public speaking.¹¹⁰

“What can you bring to the organization?” This question is actually a gift. It’s a direct invitation to sell yourself. Prepare a brief summary of your key skills, along with a description of how they can benefit the organization. Note that it isn’t enough to just list your main achievements. You need to put them into context. See the example below:

BAD: “I’m a hard worker and a good team leader, so I’ll be able to help your business grow.”

GOOD: “I’m a hard worker, which led to my appointment as team leader last year. Since then, our profits have increased by thirty per cent. I would love the opportunity to bring these skills to your organization.”

“Where would you like to be five years from now?” The answer you give to this question needs to suggest that you have given some thought to your career trajectory, and that you have applied for a particular role as a means of working towards your ambitions.

Talk about the kind of position you would like to take on within your industry, but don’t forget to mention the skills you want to pick up along the way. This will give the interviewer the impression that you aren’t just looking for status and money – it suggests that you are interested in broadening your skill set.

“What are your expectations with regards to salary?” The best response to this question requires a little preparation, but it’s worth it. Spend half an hour on Google looking up the

average salary for someone of your experience within your industry, and come up with a realistic salary bracket that takes this information into account. You can also look at other advertised jobs from similar companies – if they give salary information, this is another useful marker.

What Do You Do When It's Your Turn To Ask The Questions?

Towards the end of the interview, you will usually be asked, “And do you have any questions for me?” Your answer should always be, “Yes!” A candidate who just says, “No, everything sounds fine” has wasted an opportunity to show the interviewer that they are really engaging with the process.

Questions relating to training and development opportunities are usually a good bet. “What training will be available to me?” and “Are there many opportunities to advance in the company?” both show that you care about your career, and suggest that you have really thought about what it would be like to work for the organization within a particular role.

Do not ask questions about vacations, benefits, annual raises, or salary. Once an interviewer has answered your question, be sure to thank them for their time before leaving the interview room.

Tips For Phone Interviews

Most of the tips in this chapter also apply to phone interviews. However, phone interviews are often used as an initial screening tool rather than a means of making a final decision on whether to give an applicant a job. As a result, the typical phone interview will focus on your general skills and

profile, with less emphasis on the specific duties contained within a particular role.

You should be prepared to give brief but informative answers to the broadest interview questions such as, “Tell me a little about yourself,” and “What made you apply for this role?” You will also need to convey enthusiasm. Inject more energy into your voice than you would in a traditional interview. On the phone, the interviewer cannot see your body language or facial expression, so you will need to choose your words carefully when expressing your feelings and enthusiasm for the job.

If you have to take part in a phone interview, you can take advantage of the opportunity to make notes. For those of us who get nervous during interviews – and let’s face it, that’s most people! – notes can act as a security blanket. However, I wouldn’t recommend that you refer to notes during a phone interview. This is for two reasons.

First, you can never know for sure what an interviewer will say, and trying to make any prewritten answers fit into the situation, rather than devising an answer to fit the question, will cause you to become flustered.

Second, you don’t want to get into the habit of relying on notes during an interview, because you won’t be able to do this when meeting the interviewer in person.

Here’s a final tip – even if you aren’t going anywhere else that day, wear your best interviewing outfit during the interview. Our clothes have a big effect on how we feel, and professional attire can place you in a confident, business-oriented frame of mind. This will have a positive

psychological effect that will show in your speech. It should go without saying that you should always address the interviewer by their title and surname until you are invited to use their first name.

Remember That Social Skills Aren't Enough

You might have a great interview, but still fail to get the job. If this happens to you, don't take it personally. An interviewer's role is to figure out whether you will be a good fit within the organization. This goes beyond your conversation skills – it's also about your personality.

Sometimes, an interviewer will be looking for an extroverted person to fill a position, because that's the kind of individual a team needs at that moment in time. An introverted candidate may be able to do the job, but they might find it hard to integrate with those already working in the department.

If possible, ask for feedback following an unsuccessful job interview. You might not like reading or hearing the interviewer's answer, but accept it graciously – it could help you land a job in the future. Not only that, but if you apply for another position within the same company, you will already have established a reputation as someone who takes their personal development seriously.

Conclusion

You now have all the tools you need to take the quality of your conversations to a new level. Whether you want to improve your social life or secure a new job, your social skills play a huge role in your success.

Throughout this book, I've used everyday examples and scientific studies that prove this to be true. What are you waiting for? It's time to get out there and put your knowledge into practice!

In improving your conversation skills, you'll also improve your cognitive functioning. For instance, research shows that the simple act of making small talk in the workplace can boost problem-solving and planning skills.¹¹¹

Good conversation also allows you to strengthen your social networks.¹¹² Your relationships will become stronger, and you'll always have people to call upon if you need help.

As your skills improve, you'll soon see the positive effects begin to manifest in every area of your life. For example, you'll no longer feel stressed when a product or service doesn't work, because you'll know how to make an effective complaint.

You'll feel less stressed about moving to a new workplace or neighborhood, because you'll know how to make friends – you won't feel like an outsider.

If you need to work through a delicate issue with your boss or a difficult client, you'll know how to handle the situation. Family vacations and gatherings will be considerably less stressful when you don't have to worry about getting into the same old fights time and time again. Picking up this book might be one of the smartest moves you ever made.

In reading this guide, you've probably realized just how many people find it hard to hold a decent conversation. Why not take the initiative and help those around you improve their communication skills? If you are a manager, think about

whether your team's conversation skills could do with a boost. Perhaps it's time to consider a new training program, or to assign team members tasks that will allow them to develop their abilities.

For example, if they usually work individually, could you find ways of encouraging more collaborative working practices? If you are in a junior role, ask your manager whether your organization offers communication skills training. If not, request that they consider doing so.

If you are a parent, take responsibility for your child's communication skills. We all know that a good education, healthy diet, and regular exercise are essential in setting a child up for a solid start in life.

But how many parents ask themselves, "Is my child good at making conversation? Are they going to be able to make friends with people of different backgrounds? Are they going to feel confident walking into an interview room?" I don't think that most parents realize the importance of these skills until their child runs into problems, whether that's trouble getting along with their classmates at school, or failing to get a job after college.

The best thing you can do is model these skills. Give your child the chance to see you talk to a variety of people, and give them the opportunity to socialize with people from a range of backgrounds. Show them how to build friendships, sort out disagreements, make complaints, and argue in a constructive manner.

Some people think that arguing in front of a child is always a bad idea, but if conflict is handled well, it can actually be a

good thing. If a child witnesses their parents resolving their differences without shouting, dirty tactics, insults, or abuse, they will grow up knowing that arguments aren't the end of the world.¹¹³

Of course, arguments about topics that aren't appropriate for children should be held in private, and frequent fights can leave a child with psychological damage. Children are highly astute. Preschool children can tell the difference between genuine resolution and fake reconciliation, so don't try and pretend that everything is fine when the problem still hasn't been solved.¹¹⁴

Self-development, combined with lots of practice, is enough to make most people into capable conversationalists. However, you might find that you are still anxious in social situations. If you feel overwhelmed by the thought of talking to people, whether at work or in your personal life, consider seeking professional help.

This might take the form of counseling, or you might choose to hire a coach. You may be reluctant to spend the money, but think of it as a sensible investment in your future. If you need a reminder of why it's so important to develop sound communication skills, refer back to the introduction of this book.

On the other hand, you may discover that you have a real talent for engaging people in conversation. There are a number of ways you can take advantage of your ability. For example, you could build on your skills and learn how to become a captivating public speaker. Join an organization, such as

Toastmasters International, that will support you in becoming a first-rate orator.

If you work for an organization that regularly sends people to conferences and public events, start volunteering yourself as a representative. You could also offer your skills to charities – they always need engaging people to help their fundraising efforts.

I hope that this guide has been useful, and that you feel inspired to give your conversation skills an overhaul. I wish you all the best in developing your relationships, supercharging your career, and enjoying thousands of exciting conversations in the years to come!

The Science of Interpersonal Relations

A Practical Guide to Building Healthy Relationships, Improving Your Soft Skills and Learning Effective Communication

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Introduction:

Why You Need to Polish Your Relationship Skills

By the end of high school, most of us have started to date, and most of us will have been in love at least once.¹¹⁵ It's safe to say that romantic relationships are hugely important. It makes sense – after all, if we weren't interested in love and physical intimacy, our species wouldn't have lasted this long!

There's nothing quite like that feeling you get when you see someone who makes your heart race. When you fall in love, your brain releases a chemical called dopamine,¹¹⁶ which triggers your neurological pleasure centers. It's no wonder that some people fall in love with love itself, and that romantic relationships play such a powerful role in our lives.

But if love is so natural, why aren't romantic relationships easy? We all know that they can get complicated quickly. Falling and staying in love is one of the biggest challenges we face.

For example, how many of us have happily dated someone for a few months, or even a couple of years, only to watch hopelessly as it fizzled out? This doesn't happen by chance.

There are good reasons why some couples make it and others don't last the distance. True, compatibility plays a big role. **However, the magic ingredient that makes for a**

wonderful relationship is good communication. Once you understand how to really connect with another person and meet their needs, you can create deep, lasting intimacy.

As you might expect, psychologists and communication experts have spent a lot of time trying to pin down what it is that makes relationships so tough. It all boils down to a few key issues.

My argument is simple. If we all committed to improving our communication skills, we would all have much better love lives!

Here are the root causes of most relationship problems:

We have unrealistic expectations: Thanks to popular culture, lots of us grow up with a distorted view of romantic love. We are bombarded with movies, TV shows, and books that suggest love is easy. This means we might become dispirited when our relationships come up against even minor problems,¹¹⁷ and we get depressed when they don't live up to our grand expectations.

Another common problem is that people assume a partner can fulfil all of their emotional needs, and they stop looking for happiness outside of that person. This can result in claustrophobic, unhealthy relationships.

The solution? We need to learn to communicate our wants, needs, and boundaries.

We assume that if you have to work at a relationship, it isn't worth having: There is still stigma attached to couples therapy, and people tend to assume that if two individuals are having trouble relating to one another, they should split up.

This attitude doesn't exactly encourage a positive approach to conflict. I'm willing to bet that a lot of broken relationships could have been salvaged, if only both partners had known how to communicate with one another.

The solution? We need to learn how to argue constructively, and how to resolve our differences.

We want to be right at all costs: If you would rather “win” an argument than reach a compromise, your relationship will suffer. If you focus on your own needs and opinions instead of taking the time to understand your partner's perspective, the two of you will drift apart.¹¹⁸

Those of us raised in cultures that place a lot of emphasis on “winning” an argument can find it really difficult to set aside our pride and put our partners first.

The solution? We need to approach relationships as collaborative projects, understand our partner's communication style, and be willing to make ourselves vulnerable by admitting when we are hurt.

We are in a time of social and cultural flux: I'm all for gender equality, and I think it's great that men and women can now experiment with different relationship arrangements.

For example, both men and women can ask each other out on dates, pursue careers, stay home to care for their children, and speak up for their rights. The downside? We've lost the traditional relationship templates that told us how relationships are “supposed” to work.

In days gone by, everyone knew what men and women were meant to do when dating (or “courting”). The man would

initiate the dates, the woman would do most of the emotional labor that made the relationship run smoothly, and almost everyone got married before moving in together.

These days, it feels like anything and everything goes, which can make it hard for us to figure out what we actually want in a relationship. There's more analysis and problem-solving involved in dating these days, and it can all get pretty confusing.¹¹⁹

The solution? That's right – better communication! Being able to talk about our relationship preferences, and learning how to define our relationships, is the best way forward.

Those of you who have read my [previous books](#) will know that I'm passionate about communication skills. For years, I've been researching the secrets of the world's best communicators and teaching my clients how to apply them in both their professional and personal lives. So far, I have published two books on this fascinating topic: [“Communication Skills Training”](#) and [“The Science of Effective Communication”](#), both of which became Amazon Bestsellers and have been receiving very positive comments from my readers.

It's so rewarding when readers get in touch to let me know how much my books have helped them, and I'm always eager to learn from their feedback. When it became clear that my audience wanted help with their relationships, I knew what I had to do! I love passing on my knowledge, and so I was happy to write this guide to communication in interpersonal relations.

In the first half of the book, you will develop the right relationship mindset that will set the stage for healthy, mature love. You'll learn how to navigate the early stages of dating, how to draw your boundaries, and how to handle the "Where is this relationship going?" talk with grace and dignity.

Even if you are already in a relationship, going back to basics and rethinking your approach to communication will result in a deeper bond between you and your partner.

I cringe when I look back over my relationship history. I dated several women during my late teens and early twenties, but I never seemed to get into a good, steady relationship.

Somehow, I'd always end up in petty fights with the girl I was dating, or I'd just feel as though something was missing between us. It wasn't until I started taking an interest in the psychology of human interaction that a lot of my dating disasters started to make sense.

As you read this book, you'll start to realize that you have the power to transform your love life for the better. How exciting is that? In the second half, you'll learn specific communication tactics that will get you through even the toughest parts of any romantic relationship.

You'll find out why you and your partner tend to fight about the same things over and over again, how to keep the spark alive in a long-term relationship, how to provide the validation that your partner craves, how to say "No" without damaging your bond, and much more. A lot of this advice is applicable to friendships and familial relationships too.

I know what you're thinking. "Communication skills" doesn't sound very romantic, does it? When I started

researching this stuff, I found the science of relationships fascinating - but also a little depressing. I had to shed a lot of my illusions about love, dating, and marriage.

But guess what? Deliberately improving your relationship skills is a romantic thing to do, because it's the best path to true love. Learning how to engage with your partner, and actively working to make the relationship safe and happy, is one of the most loving acts of all.

Within a few weeks of reading up on the most common mistakes people make when trying to communicate with their dates, my love life started to improve. I noticed that the girl I was dating at the time suddenly started to make more time for me, and even began dropping hints that we might have a long-term future.

One particular incident proved that I was on the right track. We had decided to see a movie and grab coffee afterwards. She had picked the movie, and I hadn't realized until the opening minutes that it was an obscure arthouse title. To be honest, it was one of the most pointless, pretentious films I had ever seen.

After the film, my date asked me how I liked the movie. I opened my mouth to tell her precisely what I thought, but then something made me pause for a moment. I finally realized, at the age of 24, that this woman didn't actually want to hear my negative rant about subtitled French films.

What she truly needed was a validating, uplifting conversation, and an enriching exchange of views that would increase our intimacy and rapport.

Instead of launching into a tirade, I thanked her for the new experience, picked out a couple of things I managed to like about the film, and then asked her what she liked about it. I let her talk for ten minutes, and made sure that I validated her opinion the whole time. Only then did I offer any negative feedback. I kept my criticism brief, and emphasized that I respected her opinion.

Rather than focusing on the technical aspects of the film, I talked about how it had made me feel, and the old memories it had brought up for me. This encouraged her to open up about some personal events from her own past, and we grew closer as a result.

If I had not taken the time to learn about empathy and validation in relationships, that conversation would have ended on a sour note. She would have gone home after the date thinking that I was an insensitive jerk. As it was, we went on to date for another year before life circumstances forced us to break up.

It's worth noting that we are still friends today. Although she is now married, she has told me that I'm one of the most thoughtful, sensitive guys she ever dated. All I did was learn how to communicate with respect, empathize with her position, and share my opinion without triggering an argument. If I can do it, so can you!

I can't promise you a perfect partner or a perfect relationship. You should be suspicious of anyone who tells you that the perfect man or woman is out there, because they don't actually exist! But if you read and implement the advice in this book, I guarantee that your relationships will improve.

If you are single right now, this book still has a lot to offer you. Don't wait until you meet someone special. Brush up on your relationship skills now, and the next girl or guy you date will be blown away by your sensitivity, warmth, and fantastic personality.

I can't promise that everyone will fall in love with you, but this book will definitely improve your chances of finding The One. I'm a romantic at heart, and believe that there really is someone out there for everyone. But nothing worth having ever came easy! It's time to take a close look at how you handle your relationships. Turn the page to get started.

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Part I

Laying the Groundwork For Healthy Relationships

Chapter 1:

How Your Communication Skills Can Help You Choose the Right Partner

Communication skills aren't just crucial in holding a relationship together. They make all the difference when it comes to choosing the right partner, building rapport, and moving your relationship from the dating stage to long-term commitment. **I'm going to walk you through the strategies you need to filter out bad matches. Believe me, this chapter will save you a lot of time.**

Communication skills are important in two respects in the early days of a relationship. First, you need to know how to let someone understand who you are and what you want. Second, you need to be able to read the signs that indicate someone isn't on the same page as you or, even worse, that they have serious emotional or psychological problems.

Are you really ready to date?

You might know all about great communication in theory, but if you don't have the right approach to dating, it won't get you very far. Before you look for a partner, ask yourself some questions.

Psychological research has shown that you absolutely must possess personal insight, the capacity for mutuality, and emotional regulation skills before you can even hope to enter into a good relationship.¹²⁰ Think of these questions as your preflight check:

Question 1: Do you have insight into your own feelings, and do you know what you really want from a partner?

There's no point in trying to find a partner if you don't even know what you want! Think about the kind of relationship you need, the qualities you want in a mate, and what you can learn from past relationships. **If you are hazy on what you want, you'll waste time on people who aren't remotely suitable for you.** Self-knowledge and emotional intelligence are also vital for successful dating. Otherwise, when it comes to talking about your feelings, you'll find it hard to communicate with your partner.

Question 2: Are you willing to create a relationship based on mutuality?

Are you truly ready to get to know someone as they really are, and to compromise when the going gets tough? All relationships face problems. Using the techniques in this book, you'll be able to find solutions that work for both of you.

However, you need a lot of emotional maturity if you are to meet someone halfway.

Question 3: Can you regulate your emotions?

Have you ever had a partner or friend who used you as their personal therapist? I have! My high school girlfriend, Savannah, was a great match for me in a lot of ways. We shared a few similar interests, had the same sense of humor, and we found each other very attractive.

The problem? Savannah had the habit of talking – at length – about all her problems, no matter how trivial, every single time we were together. Whether it was a math teacher who had given her a low grade, her annoying little brother who played his music too loudly, or a friend of hers who had started copying her fashion sense, she wanted to talk about it – for hours.

Savannah was just a teenager. Surely, she would have developed better communication skills in her twenties, right? Unfortunately, I've seen too many people in their thirties, forties (and beyond!) who never learned how to regulate their own emotions. For example, they come home from a hard day at work and get snappy with their partner. **It's immature, it's unhealthy, and it's a big turnoff.**

You need to tolerate uncomfortable emotions without taking them out on your partner. If you aren't in a position to do that, you shouldn't be looking for a relationship. Your priority, for the sake of your own mental health and that of your future partner, [should be on developing your emotional intelligence \(EQ\) instead.](#) Learn how to recognize your own emotions, and develop some healthy coping strategies.

Reading the signs – valuable communication skills that will see you through the early days of a relationship

Assuming you are ready for a relationship, it's time to move on to the strategies you should use when you start dating someone. Let's review what you need to achieve on the first two or three dates:

1. You want to make sure that your date is searching for a relationship;
2. You want to make sure that they are capable of healthy communication;
3. You want to screen your date for red flags;
4. You want to make sure that the two of you are not fundamentally incompatible.

I'm going to take these points one by one, and show you how to quickly establish whether it's worth trying to develop a lasting relationship with your date.

1. Is this person really in the market for a relationship?

I'm sure I don't need to tell you that the dating world is full of people who just want quick flings, people who are only dating in a bid to get over their ex-partners, and people who aren't sure what they want from a relationship.

It's inevitable that you'll come across a few of these types, but you can become skilled at spotting them. Of course, you can't expect to form a relationship after just

one or two dates, but you can find out early on whether someone is searching for something meaningful.

Here's how to make sure that the two of you are on the same page:

Ask them insightful questions and see whether they reciprocate: People who are looking for a meaningful relationship want to get to know their date. Once you've moved past the small talk stage, ask them a few questions about their favorite dreams and most treasured goals.

If they ask you a few similar questions in return – and seem interested in what you have to say – this is a positive sign. It's not a guarantee that they want a serious relationship, but it's a good start.

Be on guard for repeated references to physical intimacy: How can I put this nicely? Sometimes, great relationships do start with casual sex. However, someone who is looking for a long-term partner won't usually make it their mission to talk you into bed within the first couple of dates.

If your date seems particularly keen to hint at their sexual prowess, or keeps asking you about your “preferences,” then they are probably only looking for one thing. Strange attitudes towards physical intimacy that are worlds apart from your own are also a big red flag, because someone who holds odd attitudes towards sex is likely to be dysfunctional in other areas too.¹²¹

Pay attention to any mention of ex-partners: All references to an ex should be brief, relevant, and positive. If they casually mention numerous ex-partners, this isn't

a good sign. It suggests that they have poor judgment when it comes to relationships, that they get bored easily, or that they are afraid of commitment. Proceed with caution! One day, they might decide to talk about you in the same way. This can ruin your reputation.

Look out for references to future scenarios that aren't compatible with a relationship: When they talk about what they intend to do over the next few months, consider whether they have accounted for a serious relationship. For example, if they tell you that they have just signed up to work for six months in a foreign country and that they leave in eight weeks' time, they probably aren't looking for a serious relationship.

If they have concrete plans that will take up a lot of their time in the near future, there's a quick and easy way to uncover their intentions: "That sounds exciting! I'm guessing it means you won't be looking for something too serious for a while, then?"

Ask questions that assess their overall outlook on life: Almost any question can be used to gauge your date's personality. For example, if you ask them what books they have read lately, a pessimistic person will seize the chance to give a scathing review, or at least to dwell on the parts they didn't like.

The most innocent of questions can reveal a lot about someone's personality. Even if they say that their goal is to find their soulmate, someone who is generally bitter and resentful when talking about everyday topics isn't

ready for a mature relationship. Let them go! You just don't need that kind of negativity in your life.

Once you are in rapport, you can ask whether they are looking for a relationship: Under no circumstances should you open a date with a question about the other person's relationship goals, but there is nothing wrong with asking them later on if the date is going well.

If you don't feel able to ask them outright, take a subtler approach by asking them about their goals for the next five or ten years. If they are looking for a long-term relationship, they will usually take the chance to offer up the information. If not, say something like "No wife/husband and kids in there?" in a light-hearted way. Their response will tell you everything you need to know.

Guess what? If they tell you that they don't want a relationship, or that they "aren't the type to settle down," your job is to believe them and move on. Yes, there is a slim chance that they will change their mind when they realize how great you are, but it's a poor bet. Be smart and focus on someone who wants the same thing.¹²²

2. Does this person have the ability to communicate in a healthy manner?

Try these tips to find out whether they have a history of good communication with other people, and whether they can handle everyday tension and conflict:

Ask them what kind of people they like to hang out with, or ask them to describe their closest friends: Psychological research backs up the "Birds of a feather

flock together” cliché. Most people prefer to hang out with people similar to themselves.¹²³

The scientific term for this is “social homophily.” This means that if your date tells you stories that suggest their friends are unpleasant or have poor social skills, you should consider yourself warned.

Try to get a handle on what kind of relationship they have with their parents: As you will learn later in this book, children who have a secure, healthy relationship with their parents are more likely to have healthy relationships as adults. This doesn’t mean that people with unhealthy family relationships cannot learn to become great communicators.

However, a troubled family background can be a warning sign if they haven’t deliberately worked on their interpersonal skills. People who grew up with poor communicators as role models can find it hard to relate to others.¹²⁴

Ask a few general questions about their family, and you will probably gain insight into the parent-child relationship. If they do not get on with their parents, they should be able to talk about the situation in a calm, straightforward way that suggests they have resolved any underlying resentment or grief.

Again, I don’t want you to write someone off just because their early childhood wasn’t perfect. However, if they tell you that their family relationships were (or are) especially dysfunctional, proceed with caution.

Ask them about the kind of people they work with, and whether they like their colleagues: If they complain that no one at work likes them, or that they have had one bad boss after another, beware! When someone is the only common denominator across many difficult social situations, it is likely that they are deficient in the skills needed to form and maintain relationships.

Voice an opposing view and observe how they handle it: Don't disagree with your date for the sake of it, but if you happen to hold an opinion that differs from their own, then air it! Watch how they react.

Hopefully, they will accord you respect and empathy. If their response makes you uncomfortable, consider the possibility that they are unaccustomed to dealing with disagreements, which doesn't bode well for the long haul.

3. Are there any red flags?

Some red flags are obvious. If they are married, tell you that they struggle with an alcohol addiction, or haven't held down a job in years, it's time to bail. But what about signs that they aren't good communicators? Take a look at this list:

They can't say "sorry:" Someone who can't give an apology, or who distorts reality to serve their own ends, is to be avoided. At best, they may have a bad memory. At worst, they could be a sociopath who takes delight in manipulating other people. If you catch them in a lie, forget about seeing them again – how can you trust someone who is willing to deceive you so early on?

By the way, this doesn't just apply to big lies. If they tell you stories that don't quite add up, or if they contradict themselves at any point, it's probably time to drop them and move on.

Their communication is sporadic: Is your date lively and engaging one day, then cool or even ambivalent the next? If their energy levels ebb and flow for no apparent reason, it's time to back off. Someone who wants to impress you will be consistently attentive.

They talk a lot – but don't really say much of value: Have you ever walked away from what felt like a great date, only to realize that you hadn't learned much about the other person? Don't ignore this red flag, because it suggests that they have trouble sharing personal information with other people. If you suspect that they are hiding something, you are probably right.

They claim to have never been in love: If your date is well into adulthood (say, over the age of 30) and maintain that they have never been in love, tread carefully. Unless they have lived under a rock or in a rural commune, there's probably a good reason why they haven't managed to develop a close bond with someone else.

It feels as though every conversation is a minefield: When you can't hold an ordinary conversation with someone unless you tread carefully at all times, this suggests that they have never learned how to regulate their emotions or work through differences in opinion. They aren't a good relationship candidate, so back away fast!

They press for too much detail too soon, or they give you far too much information: If you have been on dates with people who seem aloof, a person who opens up within seconds can be a refreshing change. But watch out – people like this often have poor boundaries, and their inappropriate communication style suggests that they have no concept of privacy.

Someone who claims to love you after a couple of dates, or talks about marriage and children within the first few weeks, is probably bad news. People like this prefer fantasy over reality.¹²⁵ Steer clear!

These red flags don't necessarily mean that your date is a bad person. Sometimes, there is an innocent explanation for odd behavior.

For example, if someone is nervous and worried that they will not make a good impression, they might start rambling on about generic topics that don't encourage deep conversation.

However, you should think carefully before giving them the benefit of the doubt. You are not there to play the part of therapist. You deserve someone who is ready to date right now, not in some hypothetical future in which they have sorted out their issues.

4. Do you have any reason to suspect that the two of you are simply incompatible?

We've all been guilty of trying to overlook someone's faults just because we find them attractive, or because we are sick of being single and want to find a partner. It's human nature.

Unfortunately, there are some points of incompatibility that are insurmountable.

Note that an incompatibility doesn't indicate that the other person is "bad," or that they couldn't be your friend, just that you are never going to work out as romantic partners. Your job, as an excellent communicator and emotionally mature adult, is to pick up on these problems early and handle them in a dignified manner.

Let me tell you a story. My friend Matt was on vacation last year. Whilst hanging out at the bar one evening, he met the woman of his dreams – or so he thought. I'll call her Sasha.

Over the next few days, Sasha and Matt spent almost every hour together. Matt discovered that she only lived two hours away from him, so there was a chance that they could continue their romance after the vacation was over. He couldn't believe his good luck!

On the last night of the trip, Matt made his move. He asked Sasha whether she would like to try dating once their vacation had ended. "Sure," Sasha said. "But of course, my daughter will always come first."

Matt was stunned. Why? Because in their six days together, Sasha had never thought to mention that she had a child. He backtracked fast, telling her that he didn't think it would be a good idea for them to carry on seeing one another.

Not only had Sasha demonstrated an ability to drip-feed someone the truth at a pace that suited her, but Matt had known for years that he never wanted children – a fact he had mentioned to Sasha during their first evening together.

When he told me this story, he looked sad and uncertain. “Was I too hasty?” he asked. “She was pretty much perfect otherwise, and maybe I could have grown to like the kid eventually.”

Needless to say, Matt was not “too hasty.” He’s an emotionally mature guy who realized that Sasha’s strange relationship with the truth would only set him up for pain in the long run.

He hasn’t found the right woman yet, but I can tell you with 100% certainty that it wasn’t Sasha. Poor communication skills, plus a key point of incompatibility (in this case, attitudes towards children), is a recipe for misery.

Whether it’s politics, religion, attitudes to childrearing, or general perspectives on life, some differences should send you running in the opposite direction.

The difficult part is not so much identifying obvious differences, but in letting go of your hopes that this person could have been a perfect match for you. **However, keeping yourself rooted in reality is the only path to a healthy relationship.** Keep your eyes and ears open!

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Chapter 2:

Identifying & Handling Codependency

We seek relationships because we like to feel good about ourselves and, ideally, to make someone else feel good at the same time. Interdependency – a state of feeling connected to other people - is healthy and normal. Human society thrives on it.¹²⁶ If everyone chose to remain alone, we would never be able to collaborate on projects or nurture the next generation.

Hugging, touching, and being in a state of strong rapport generates feelings of pleasure and excitement, which encourages us to keep on seeking contact with others. We are literally made for relationships!

What is codependency?

Unfortunately, many of us don't go into romantic relationships willing and able to see a partner as our equal. Ideally, a relationship allows two separate people to meet and build a strong bond that respects both their identities.

You should feel secure in yourself as an individual, and respect your partner as their own person with their own set of needs, wants, and desires.

Sounds good, doesn't it? The trouble is, this kind of relationship requires a strong sense of self-esteem and self-

reliance. Lots of us grow up in homes that don't encourage healthy interdependency.

Instead, we learn that relationships in which neither person is quite sure where they end and the other person begins are normal. If you are in a codependent relationship, you will always feel as though your emotions and personality overlap with those of your partner.

Uncovering codependency

If you are codependent, you will have a distinct style of relating to, and communicating with, other people. Here are a few helpful questions you can ask yourself as a kind of self-assessment:

Do you tend to “absorb” someone else’s moods?: If you meet up with a friend or partner who seems sad or angry, does your own emotional state suddenly decline? Do you find it impossible to be calm or happy when you know or suspect that someone else isn't feeling good?

If you are codependent, you will find it hard to stay in touch with your own feelings. Instead, you automatically look to other people to help you “decide” how to feel. Codependent people take on responsibility for other peoples' emotions. If you feel compelled to make someone else's bad mood “right,” you might well be codependent.¹²⁷

Do you question your decisions and life direction when someone disagrees with you?: A sense of general indecisiveness and a willingness to change your plans if and when someone disagrees with you is a hallmark of codependency. Codependent people don't like conflict, and

would rather go along with what someone else suggests that put forward their own suggestions.

Do you panic when someone even hints at leaving you?: Abandonment issues are a key element of codependency. Because a codependent feels “lost” without someone by their side, the prospect of someone ending a relationship is scary.

Do you try to control your partner's behaviors?: Codependent people rely on others to shore up their own sense of self, but this doesn't mean that they are always meek and mild. In fact, a lot of codependent people expend plenty of time and effort trying to change other people. Creating a sense of control helps them feel safe in a relationship.

Do you have trouble separating your partner's problems from your own?: If you assume that it's your job to control every area of your partner's life and solve all their problems, you are setting yourself up for a lot of stress. Worse, you'll be distracted from your own issues! If this sounds familiar, you are likely to be codependent.

Why do people become codependent?

There are two factors at play here. The first is a person's experience of childhood relationships. If an individual grows up in an unsafe home environment, they have had to draw on emotional survival tactics to keep themselves safe.

For example, someone who grew up with abusive parents might learn how to calm them down in the hope of reducing the risk of further abuse.¹²⁸

Our most basic need is safety, so a child will do whatever it takes to feel secure. The problem starts when these patterns

carry over into adulthood.¹²⁹ To continue with the example above, the child might grow into an adult who assumes that unless they keep everyone calm and happy, something terrible might happen.

The second factor is cultural pressures. Codependency is actively encouraged by Western culture. The phrases “other half” and “better half” are frequently tossed around in conversation.

They set up an expectation that when we get into a relationship, the other person will magically solve all our emotional and psychological problems. **This doesn't exactly encourage healthy, balanced relationships.**

In a healthy relationship, two self-defined people build a strong bond that enriches their lives. In a codependent relationship, two people do not build a relationship that joins two complete individuals together.

Instead, they rely on each other for validation. Some codependent people want their partners to tell them how to live their lives, what to believe, and even how to conduct the relationships they have with their family and friends.¹³⁰

Communication strategies for codependent people

Don't despair if you recognize yourself as a codependent person. With time and effort, you can change. You will need to approach your relationships in a new way – and this starts with your communication strategies.¹³¹

Start acknowledging that you have normal human needs: Codependent people often erect a façade in their relationships. They usually say that everything is fine, that they are perfectly

content with the way things are, and that they are happy to put everyone else's needs before their own.

Putting on an act stops other people getting to know the real you, and it will also make you feel like a martyr. Instead, you need to start having authentic conversations. **If a partner or friend asks how you are feeling, tell them!** Let yourself be vulnerable by admitting that your life isn't perfect, and that you need help from time to time.

Stop expecting other people to read your mind!: Remember, in a codependent relationship, two people become so enmeshed that they start to feel as though their emotions and personalities are one and the same. In case you hadn't already figured it out, this is a ridiculous way to conduct a relationship.

No one can possibly know exactly what someone else is thinking at any given moment, and to believe otherwise is asking for trouble. Don't assume that someone who really loves you will magically know what you want and need. Stop making assumptions.

Here's a classic example of how "mind reading" plays out in codependent relationships. Let's say that Kelly, a codependent woman, is in a relationship with a man called Jim. Jim realizes that Kelly's birthday is two weeks away, so he asks her what she would like as a gift.

Kelly tells him, "Whatever you get will be fine. I'm sure you'll choose well!" In her head, Kelly tells herself that Jim will probably get her the gold necklace she was admiring in a jeweler's window the last time they went shopping. She

thinks, “He must have noticed that I really loved that necklace.”

Jim, who takes Kelly at her word, goes to the mall and chooses a gift he thinks she will like – a silver bracelet with a heart-shaped charm. He picks out a card to go with his gift, and also decides to buy Kelly a box of gourmet chocolates.

Imagine his surprise when Kelly looks disappointed with his selection! He has no idea that he was supposed to read Kelly’s mind, and Kelly can’t understand why her partner failed to realize that she actually wanted the gold necklace.

A woman with no codependent tendencies would have told her partner that she wanted the necklace, because she would know that it’s unrealistic to expect her partner’s thoughts to somehow merge with her own.

Learn to assess someone’s advice on its own merits: A codependent person finds it hard to stay true to their own decisions and values if someone disagrees with them. If this applies to you, it’s time to start listening carefully to what other people say, and then disregarding their “advice” if it isn’t helpful.

Don’t assume that they are right! Ask questions like “Why do you think I should do that?,” and “Do you have any other ideas?” Digging deeper will give you the bigger picture. Do not blindly trust in another person’s judgment.

Stop offering unsolicited advice: Not only do you need to think twice before taking someone’s suggestions on board, but you must also train yourself to stay out of other people’s affairs. Unless you are asked for your input, hold back. I know, I know – trying to take charge of a situation makes you feel

safe. But you cannot have a balanced relationship unless you give the other person the freedom to make their own decisions (and their own mistakes).

Challenge judgments: Codependent people are scared of being judged, because they tend to assume that when someone criticizes them, the criticism is probably justified. They also assume that if someone criticizes them, then they are “bad” and might be abandoned as a result.

Neither assumption is true. To break out of codependency, you need to start asking whether the person judging you is objectively correct, or just voicing their opinion. Think like a journalist – consider the source! As you [build up your own self-esteem](#) and identity, you will start to care less about what others think.

Identify and stop passive-aggressive communication: When you don’t feel as though you have the right to voice your true needs, you might pretend that everything is OK whilst secretly dwelling on your problems.

The trouble with resentment is that you can’t keep it hidden forever – it can and will rise to the surface. This pattern of behavior, commonly known as “passive-aggressive communication,” is harmful to relationships.

I’ll address assertive communication later in this book, but for now, start thinking about how you can begin to say what you really mean rather than what you think others want to hear.

Focus on individuals, not outcomes: Codependency is exhausting. A codependent individual will pour their energy

into imposing their will on their partner, rather than truly listening and learning what the other person needs.

Instead of having the courage to have an authentic conversation, they are attached to an outcome. They treat their partners as players in a hypothetical situation, not as fellow humans with their own needs and free will.

Freeing yourself from codependency means letting go of your need to control people, and instead focus on reaching agreements that work for both of you. Good listening skills, a willingness to accept reality, and conflict resolution strategies will all help here.

The ultimate tool for codependent people

The above strategies will help you build healthier relationships and work towards interdependency rather than codependency. However, there's one tool I've left off the list.

Overcoming codependency relies on the separation between yourself and other people, and the behaviors you will and won't tolerate from those around you. In therapy circles, this is referred to as "setting boundaries."

Without boundaries, you will never have a good relationship, because you will feel responsible for other people's actions and feelings along with your own. Boundaries are so important that the next chapter is devoted to the topic! Turn the page and learn how to stand up for yourself, no matter what the situation.

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Chapter 3:

Setting & Defending Boundaries In A Relationship

A boundary is the psychological equivalent of a fence. To lay down a boundary is to tell others that they must not engage in a particular behavior and, if they insist on doing so, that there will be consequences. The art of setting and defending boundaries relies on strong self-esteem and good communication skills.

Self-esteem allows you to decide what (and who) you will and won't tolerate in your life, and your communication skills help you hold others accountable if they try to trample on your rights.

When people don't know how to use their words to communicate boundaries, they will use unhealthy strategies instead. These tactics include screaming, shouting, and withdrawal. As you can imagine, this approach hardly makes for good relationships! In this chapter, I'll teach you how to keep your boundaries intact in a calm, dignified manner.

Why are boundaries so vital for a healthy relationship?

If you are not used to standing up for yourself, the concept of boundaries might make you uneasy at first. Those who are used to putting everyone else's needs ahead of their own can feel as though upholding personal boundaries is selfish. This is completely untrue.¹³²

Believe it or not, establishing your boundaries will benefit the people in your life. As a rule, human beings respect those who stand firm in their convictions, act in a predictable manner, and know their own self-worth.

If you have children or manage other people as part of your job, setting and defending boundaries will make you a positive role model. Working on your boundaries won't make everyone like you, but it will make you less of a target for bullies and negative people.

Choosing your boundaries

It's up to you to set your own boundaries. We all have different tastes, preferences, and personalities. For example, I'm open to hearing other people's life stories.

I'm also happy to share some personal information quite early on in a relationship, because that has always felt natural and normal to me. However, I have a few friends who prefer to keep their personal lives private until they have had a chance to build up trust with a new acquaintance.

This means that my boundaries around sharing personal information are quite relaxed – you have to push me pretty far before I tell you to stop asking me questions - whereas my friends' boundaries are stricter.

For instance, they wouldn't be happy talking about their health problems unless they already had a bond with their conversation partner, so if the issue came up early on, they would quickly let the other person know that the topic was off limits.

Neither approach is "right" or "wrong." As long as you have the self-awareness to choose boundaries that work for you, and the skills needed to communicate these boundaries, you'll be just fine.

If you aren't sure what your boundaries are, think about the following:

Physical boundaries: These relate to physical proximity and touch. For example, some people are perfectly happy to hug friends and acquaintances, whereas others prefer to keep their distance.

Someone with appropriate personal boundaries knows how to stop others from touching them inappropriately, and can make their own decisions when it comes to social contact such as kissing and hugging.

Think about what makes you feel uncomfortable, and the boundaries you might want to set. For instance, you may not want to hug someone unless they are a close friend who has been in your life for a long time. "I don't hug people unless I know them very well. Being forced to do so is unacceptable to me" would be a useful boundary in this case.

Emotional boundaries: How far do you allow someone else's emotions to influence your own? Do you have clear boundaries around how often other people can share their deepest feelings with you?

When you have strong emotional boundaries, you stop acting as a sponge for other people's feelings. You can draw a line between yourself and another person. In other words, you stop being codependent!

If you find yourself acting as an energy dump for other people and it's bringing you down, it's time to set some boundaries. For instance, you might decide that you will not engage in any negative conversations with anyone after 9pm in

the evening, because you need to wind down in preparation for work the next day.

“I do not answer my phone after 9pm, unless it’s an emergency” would be a suitable boundary in this particular situation.

Communication boundaries: These boundaries concern the ways in which someone addresses you, and the language they use. “I will not permit someone to shout at me,” and “I will not allow someone to mock me” are two great examples of communication boundaries.¹³³

Sticking to your emotional boundaries protects you against manipulation. When someone is able to make you feel guilty for no good reason, you are vulnerable to emotional blackmail.

When you have the ability to tell someone that their feelings are not your responsibility, they might not like it – but they will no longer have a hold over you. This is true emotional freedom!

Some of your boundaries might be flexible, whereas others will be nonnegotiable. For example, you may decide that if a friend drinks heavily or takes illegal drugs, you will leave their home – no exceptions.

On the other hand, you might be more flexible when it comes to working occasional overtime at the office. It’s up to you! The important thing is that you get comfortable with letting others know your limits.¹³⁴

Words and phrases that set out your boundaries

So let’s get down to it – what are the magic words that establish boundaries? Here’s how to talk to someone who tries

to violate your physical or emotional space:

Use “I” statements: When you share your own perspective (e.g. “I need you to stop...”) rather than pass judgment on what someone else is doing or thinking (e.g. “You always...”), you are less likely to receive pushback.

After all, someone can argue that your interpretation of their own emotional state is wrong, but no one can deny that you know your own thoughts and feelings.

Do not use euphemisms: When laying down a boundary, call a spade a spade. Don’t dance around someone else’s bad behavior. For example, if they have used obscene or insulting language around you, don’t tell them that their words “aren’t nice.” Spell it out.

It would be better to say, “Your language is offensive to me and makes me feel uncomfortable. I do not want to listen to it. If you continue to talk like that, I will leave the room.”

If possible, open with a positive statement: If you think the other person is coming from a place of positive intentions and has made an honest mistake in overstepping a boundary, opening with a compliment or piece of praise can set the right tone.

For example, if you are about to explain that you don’t like to hug people, you could start by acknowledging that you appreciate their desire to show you how much they care.

Use the five-point structure: Professional coach and author Kimberly Fulcher recommends a five-step approach¹³⁵ to stating a boundary:

1. Begin by outlining what the problem is.

2. Tell the other person what, precisely, is unacceptable about their behavior.
3. Tell them how their behavior makes you feel.
4. Ask them to implement a solution that will stop future boundary violations.
5. Tell them what the consequences will be if they do not respect your request.

For instance, if your colleague keeps borrowing your office equipment without permission, you need to lay down a clear boundary such as the following:

“I’ve noticed that you keep borrowing my equipment without asking permission. This isn’t acceptable because it means I can’t get my work done. This makes me feel frustrated and anxious about my deadlines. Please ask in future before borrowing any equipment. If you do not, I will have to lock it away in my draw, or make a formal complaint against you.”

Sharpen your conflict management skills: When you know that you can deal with rejection, disagreements, and even the threat of abandonment, you will find it easier to defend your boundaries. You’ll feel more comfortable interacting with other people when you can trust yourself to react appropriately to whatever they say or do.¹³⁶

Do not apologize: Remember – everyone is entitled to their own boundaries, and this includes you! Never say sorry for valuing yourself. Other people have no right to treat you like a second-class citizen, and enforcing your boundaries is a sign of great mental health. If someone else can’t handle that, it’s their issue.

Match your actions and body language to your words: No one deserves to be treated poorly, but if you show via your actions that your boundaries do not matter, people won't take you seriously.

For example, if you tell your partner that you need them to take responsibility for half of the housework, yet you still tidy up after them, you are communicating via your actions that you don't really mean what you say. After all, your behavior hasn't changed!

Identify and prepare for difficult situations: Think about common situations that make you feel uncomfortable, and practice saying the right words that will lay down your boundaries. For example, it's a good idea to decide on a statement to use when you need to buy yourself time to think.¹³⁷

Some people have the unpleasant habit of putting others on the spot and demanding an instant answer to an awkward question. Be prepared by coming up with an effective way of implementing a boundary. "I cannot answer that right now. I will take time to think and get back to you in an hour" is a sensible response.

Consistency is essential

Emotionally intelligent people will respect your boundaries. Of course, I realize that there are a lot of people out there who still have some work to do in that department. From time to time, you will come up against people who will try to ignore your boundaries. There are only two ways to remedy this.

The first is to remain strong and consistent. Repeat your boundary statement more than once if necessary, using a clear

tone of voice. If they still don't respect your wishes, it's time to impose consequences.

Remember, you should have set them out in your original boundary statement. It is absolutely essential that you follow through, because if you back down, people will think that you are weak.

I work with a lot of clients who struggle to set boundaries. When I walk them through the five-step process, they react with horror. They tell me that they "couldn't possibly do that," or that they "aren't assertive enough." Nonsense. Anyone can set boundaries.

Yes, it takes practice. Yes, it will feel uncomfortable at first. But is it a learnable skill? Definitely! Make a commitment to implementing the advice in this chapter, and you'll soon start to enjoy your relationships a whole lot more.

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Chapter 4:

Defining A Relationship

Once you've been dating someone for a while, the next step is to move from the "getting to know you" stage to the "relationship stage." It's often easier said than done! Some people will tell you that if a relationship is destined to work out, you won't need to have "the talk."

It's true that some couples make the transition seamlessly, but sometimes both parties get confused about what the other person wants and needs. The good news is that, if you prepare yourself for any possible outcome, you can handle "the talk" with dignity and grace.

How the typical dating situation unfolds

Does this story sound familiar? You meet someone you really like, and you go on a few dates. Perhaps you start sleeping with them. Within a few weeks, you realize that you would like to get into a relationship with this person, and your feelings are reciprocated – or are they?

It's amazing how rapidly we can find ourselves wondering whether that special person is seeing someone else, whether they see a future with us, and whether they like us as much as we like them.¹³⁸ As the weeks go by, that urge to know where the relationship is heading starts to grow stronger and stronger.

At this point, you have to make a choice. When it comes down to it, you only have two options:

Continue with the relationship, hoping that they will raise the issue: This can prolong the agony. Choosing to ride it out seems like the easy option at first, but you'll start to drive yourself mad pretty quick.

With every day that passes, you'll become increasingly obsessed with what they are thinking, when they are going to make it official, and so on. Your behavior and attitude will probably change, and the other person will wonder what's on your mind. Needless to say, I really don't recommend this option.

Ask them what they want from the relationship: This is a much better strategy, because it is transparent and authentic. As long as you plan the conversation carefully, you stand a good chance of getting the answers you need.

Ideally, you will have a strong rapport with the other person, and you will feel able to ask them direct questions. However, I realize that in some situations, it might be best to take a gentler approach or frame your question in a more casual way.

Why it's such a hard discussion to have

We don't want to appear desperate: There is a lot of pressure on both sexes to avoid appearing too needy or desperate.¹³⁹ There's some logic to this – not many people want to spend time with a clingy partner, and confidence is always attractive. The downside is that when both people are determined to play it cool, a stalemate situation develops. Both parties are left wondering what the heck is going on.

We think we already know the answer, and we don't like it: Sometimes your gut will be telling you that someone isn't really interested in a relationship, but you would rather remain

in a state of denial than face the truth. It's natural to try and avoid the pain of rejection, but here's the thing – you will have to come back down to earth at some point anyway.¹⁴⁰

Even if you manage to avoid “the talk” for several months, the very fact that neither of you are willing to communicate about your relationship will tell you everything you need to know. The truth will smack you in the face one way or the other, so why not do it on your own terms?

I've been guilty of ignoring my gut before. A few years ago, I met a woman – I'll call her Zoe - through a mutual friend. She and I had been on only six dates before I started daydreaming the fantastic relationship ahead of us.

Zoe didn't often reply to my texts, she didn't call me, and I always had to arrange our dates. Looking back, I can see that I was in serious denial, but at the time she seemed so chatty and happy on our dates that I told myself it didn't matter. I decided that if everything went well for two months, I would ask whether she wanted to make the relationship official.

A couple of weeks later, I was talking to my friend Michelle about the situation. She listened to me ramble on for a few minutes, and then frowned. Michelle is normally an upbeat, optimistic person, so I was surprised by her reaction.

“I don't think you're going to like what I have to say,” Michelle said. “But you're telling me that unless the two of you are actually on a date, this lady doesn't bother with you. If I had to place a bet, I don't think she'll take you up on the offer of a relationship.” I bristled, and changed the subject.

Unfortunately, I ignored Michelle's warning and charged ahead with the relationship. At the two-month mark, I told Zoe

that I always had a great time with her, and that it seemed like we were heading into girlfriend and boyfriend territory.

As soon as the words, “Shall we make it official?” were out of my mouth, I knew that Michelle had been right. Zoe said that she was sorry, but that she wasn’t looking for a relationship.

It was a painful experience, but it taught me the importance of listening to my gut. But here’s the key lesson – it could have been so much worse. If I had chickened out and not asked her at all, I might have spent months trying to win her over, only to watch her start dating another guy.

Tips that will make the talk easier

Whether you plan to ask someone directly or take a subtler route, here’s what you should know before initiating the conversation:

It’s essential that you do it face to face: Under no circumstances should you attempt to have such an important conversation over email, text, or even the phone. You need to be able to see their body language and facial expressions. I know it’s scary, but you really can’t afford to break this rule.

It’s often easiest to say what you feel, then finish with a question: Don’t open with a formal question. Sitting down and blurting “So, can we be official?” is a bit clumsy.

Instead, broach the topic by telling them what you have noticed or experienced in your time together so far. Then you can tag the sentence with a question that invites them to agree or disagree. For example:

“So over the past few weeks, we’ve been spending a lot of time together. It feels like we’re in a relationship sometimes. Do you think it’s heading that way?”

“I’m having such a good time getting to know you. I’d love us to try dating exclusively if you’d be open to that?”

If they feel the same way, they’ll help you out: Practice what you’re going to say, but don’t worry too much about messing it up. If they return your feelings, they will jump at the chance to tell you.

The other person might be intimidated by the prospect of talking about the issue, even if they want a relationship: You’ll notice that the openers above are brief. Always get to the point as soon as possible. The moment they sense that you are building up to an important question, they will start to wonder whether you are about to drop some bad news. Don’t leave them in suspense!

It’s best to have the conversation with no advance warning: Don’t tell them beforehand that you have “something to talk about.” This might put them on the defensive, and it creates a power imbalance. By leaving a gap between the warning and the actual event, you are leaving them hanging. This isn’t fair, and it doesn’t build trust.

You need to shut up and listen if they try to interrupt: There is a chance that the other person will have thought about this conversation too, and they might have planned their response in advance.

If they start talking, let them finish! They may be trying to open up about their feelings, and it’s in your best interest to be quiet and listen.¹⁴¹

It's not a good idea to have the talk too soon: Clarifying your relationship status too soon will sound alarm bells for most people. Talking about your status after just a few weeks isn't normally a good idea.

You can't make an informed decision until you've had a chance to get to know them, so don't dive in too quickly. If in doubt, the three-month rule works in most cases.

You must know your wants and needs: There is nothing wrong with wanting a committed, monogamous relationship. There is nothing wrong with wanting an open relationship, either.

You get my point – people have all kinds of preferences, and no one has the right to make you feel bad for knowing what you want. Problems arise when we get so desperate for someone to like us that we accept their terms and conditions even if they don't meet our needs.

No matter how much you like someone, don't settle. Don't force yourself to accept what they're offering if it doesn't match your personal relationship goals.¹⁴² Respect yourself enough to move on and find someone who is a better fit.

Prepare for a negative response: Always know how you intend to respond if they don't tell you what you want to hear. It's not always easy to predict in advance how you will feel in response to a rejection, so think of a phrase that buys you a few minutes' breathing space if you find yourself crying or unable to think straight:

"It's OK, I just need a moment, don't worry."

"I'll be fine, I guess I'm just disappointed."

“Can I just step outside for a moment? I’ll be right back.”

Once you have regained your composure, thank them for being honest. Your thanks should be sincere – although rejection hurts, you will at least know where you stand. Thank them for the time you’ve spent together, and tell them that you have enjoyed getting to know them.

Unless the person rejecting you is a total jerk, they won’t think you are weak or pathetic for showing your disappointment. (If they are a jerk about it, then you just dodged a bullet!) It takes courage to risk romantic rejection, so they will always remember you as a guy or girl who was willing to put themselves on the line. That’s hardly a bad impression to leave.

Always make sure that they can leave without difficulty if the conversation goes wrong: For example, it’s not a good idea to have the discussion at midnight on the couch after a romantic evening in. Choose a more neutral location. Having the conversation in a park or quiet corner of a coffee shop allows you to part ways quickly if it doesn’t go well.

If they aren’t sure, give them more time: Don’t panic if your partner can’t tell you precisely what they want or need at that moment in time. They may need some time to think before committing to a relationship. That’s OK, but don’t let them leave you hanging. Ask them to give you more details within a few days.

After a rejection, it’s best to cut contact for a while: Don’t kid yourself that you can immediately move from romantic rejection to friendship. It’s emotional suicide.¹⁴³

Sure, you might form a friendship in the future, but it's only going to work if you can think of them with someone else without wanting to cry.

You don't have to play games here. Tell them how you feel, and let them know that you can't be buddies in the foreseeable future.

Be warned – some people will feel guilty at having caused you pain, and insist that the two of you stay in contact as “friends.” For the reasons I've just outlined, this won't work. Look after your emotional health and maintain your boundaries.

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Chapter 5:

Your Partner's Most Important Need, & How To Meet It

Relationships end for many reasons, but there is one major risk factor that people don't often talk about. We all know that a lack of trust, incompatible worldviews and the stress of significant life events can be enough to tear even the most loving couples apart, but what's the most lethal risk of all? Threats of abandonment.

Specifically, whenever you or a partner threaten to leave the relationship, it places a strain on the bond between you. In this chapter, I'll reveal exactly why this happens.

You'll learn why the threat of being abandoned is such a trigger point for so many people, and how you can build trust. In short, your partner's number one need in a relationship is a sense of trust and security. Ignore it at your peril.

Why fighting is inevitable

Some people mistakenly believe that if a couple fights, it must mean that they are incompatible. However, it's not arguments *per se* that drive a couple apart, but how secure they feel in the relationship. Another belief we need to rethink is the idea that arguments develop simply when beliefs and ideas clash.

That's true – but only to a point. Stan Tatkin, a researcher and therapist who specializes in communication, believes that neurobiology can help us understand why some relationships fall apart.

We need to look beyond what we talk about or do with our partners, and think about what happens in our primal (or “animal”) brains when we interact with others.¹⁴⁴

You don't need to be a neuroscientist to understand the basic functions of the brain. To put it simply, the “higher” parts of the brain - those areas visible on the surface and positioned towards the front - are responsible for conscious thought. They allow us to rationalize, plan, and make deliberate judgments.¹⁴⁵

The rest of the brain, sometimes referred to as the “lower” or “primitive” brain, runs on autopilot. It also alerts us to threats. You can think of it as your threat detection system. It allows you to react appropriately to danger.

Note that we aren't just talking about physical danger here. Our lower brain also allows us to react quickly to an emotional or psychological threat. For example, when someone says something that makes us mad, we move from “neutral” to “angry” in an instant.

The lower brain is responsible for automating your habits and routines. If you learn how to play the piano, drive a car, or perform any other skill that requires that you repeat a set of physical movements over and over again, your lower brain lays down “procedural memories.”

Whenever you use that skill, your higher brain won’t have to put in any effort. You can respond appropriately without having to sit down and think about what you are doing.¹⁴⁶

Love becomes an automatic process

When you first meet someone and start dating, your conscious mind spends hours analyzing what they say, how they are acting, and whether or not the two of you are compatible. Your higher brain fixates on the other person. It wants to get to know them inside and out. The hormonal changes that take place in the brain and the rest of the body actively support this state of obsession.

For example, the serotonin levels in your brain drop, which encourages you to seek out the other individual as a source of happiness. Testosterone levels also change – the average man’s testosterone levels decrease when he falls in love, whereas a woman’s testosterone levels go up! Scientists aren’t yet sure why this is, but we know for certain that love changes our body chemistry.¹⁴⁷

However, even the strongest crushes eventually fade. As time goes on and we start to become comfortable with a partner, we tend to fall into a routine. They are no longer quite so exciting, because we know them well.

Or rather, we think we know them. This is totally natural. We can’t afford to spend all our lives in a state of romantic

obsession, because we'd never get anything else done!

Feeling comfortable isn't the issue here. The problems start when two people take one another for granted, and assume that they can tell what their partner is thinking. The relationship starts to run on autopilot, and one or both partners start to pay less attention to what the other person is actually saying and doing.

The result? Misunderstandings and arguments, of course! If you've ever been in a fight that seemed to come from nowhere and escalated fast, this will sound familiar.

Couples who have been together for a while will start to use phrases like "You always...", "You never...", and "We always..." These generalizations are annoying and make the situation worse. They set the stage for arguments!

Why couples threaten each other with abandonment

When you fight with someone, your mind and body become attuned to potential threats. Your lower brain kicks in, flooding your body with adrenalin and cortisol, which give you that "fight or flight" response. In the heat of the moment, it becomes hard to think rationally.

It doesn't take long before you become focused on how angry or upset you feel rather than the issue that started the fight in the first place! Emotions rise, tempers flare, and it becomes all too easy to make threats like:

"I've had enough! I can't be bothered with this relationship anymore!"

"Well, if you're so upset, maybe I'll just leave you alone!"

"I'm sick of fighting all the time, I'm done!"

Both parties can end up screaming and shouting as their nervous systems go into overdrive.¹⁴⁸ It feels good to make a threat at the time, but the long-term effects can ruin a relationship. Not only do threats undermine trust – it’s hard to put your faith in someone who has a history of threatening to leave you – but it also lays a foundation for future fights.

For example, if you repeatedly threaten to leave your partner, they might start to bring this up in the future as a reason why they cannot talk to you about their problems.

Why are abandonment threats such a big deal?

At this point, you might be wondering why we are so sensitive to the possibility that a partner is thinking of leaving us. Here’s a quick explanation. Our attitudes towards attachment and abandonment begin in early childhood.

When we are babies, we are totally dependent on other people to look after us. If a baby’s caregiver (usually their mother) doesn’t show him or her consistent love and affection, the baby becomes very anxious.

On some level, they know that if they are to survive, their caregiver must be motivated to provide food, warmth, and shelter. Abandonment literally equals death if you are a baby. Although we can take care of ourselves as adults, we never fully shed our need for secure, safe relationships.

In a healthy parent-child relationship, the baby develops a secure attachment style. This means that the child will feel a strong bond with their parent. They will miss them when they are away, but they don’t suffer too much because they feel sure that the parent loves them, and that they will return.

On the other hand, if a parent doesn't give their baby consistent love and attention, their child will grow up with a lot of relationship anxiety. A psychologist would say that they have an "insecure attachment style."¹⁴⁹

Although all of us find abandonment scary to some degree, people with an insecure attachment style find it hard to trust others. They will often assume that everyone will leave at some point. For these people, threats of abandonment are particularly hard to take.

Studies with young adults show that the quality of the relationships they had with their parents shapes their attitudes towards romantic relationships later in life.

Basically, those who always felt safe and loved as children feel more confident in their adult relationships, whereas those who had challenging relationships with their parents tend to fear abandonment and look towards their partner for a sense of validation. They are also more likely to experience higher levels of negative emotions, and they feel less committed to their partners.¹⁵⁰

What does this research show us? Basically, you will never kick the "need" for safety and security, because the human brain will always run according to primitive instinct and habit.

Even as adults, we want to know that the people we love aren't going to suddenly walk out on us – and this is an even bigger worry if we didn't have a good early relationship with our primary caregiver. Create trust and stability in your relationship, and you will have a much better chance of staying together.

How to promote trust and stability in your relationship

Never use the threat of leaving as leverage: If you know that your partner is afraid of being abandoned – and that applies to most of us – it’s tempting to use threats as a way of gaining control in a situation.

For example, if your partner wants to talk about an issue you would rather leave unexamined, saying something like “It’s arguments like this that make me question our relationship” will encourage them to keep quiet.

This strategy is effective in the short term, but eventually your partner will become sick of you resorting to threats as a way of shutting down a difficult conversation. **Never resort to this tactic.** If you spot it in your partner, it’s time to draw a boundary and let them know that it isn’t acceptable.

Always fight face to face: Eye contact is essential for good communication. We convey so much of our meaning via our facial expressions. This is why you should not argue over the phone, via text message, or when sitting side by side in the car.

Wait until you can sit or stand face to face before tackling sensitive issues. We usually trust someone more if they make eye contact with us, and so face to face contact is likely to inspire more confidence in your relationship.

Don’t respond immediately if your partner threatens to leave: Do you tend to react strongly the moment your partner says anything that upsets or shocks you? The next time you argue, break the cycle. Rather than escalating the situation by making a threat of your own or raising your voice, take a different approach.

Change your position, take a deep breath and ask for a moment to collect your thoughts. Ask a question that will help

you better understand your partner's position. Remember that threats are often made when the lower brain is in control. If a fight has reached this point, it's time to take a break and continue the discussion later.

Remember that your partner's attachment style is important: As you know, some people experience situations in childhood that result in a secure attachment style, whereas others develop a tendency to form insecure attachments with others. In short, you and your partner might have different requirements when it comes to reassurance.

For some people, a single brief reminder that you love them and want to work through a problem is enough. Others need to be told repeatedly – especially when tensions are running high – that they are not being abandoned.

Of course, if you have a partner who is unusually clingy or worried about being left alone, it's their responsibility to sort out their own issues.

Deep down, even the most confident person wants to know where they stand in the eyes of others. We all know on an intuitive level that the best relationships are built on a shared sense of trust and equality.

In the next chapter, I'll show you another set of strategies that will help you and your partner recognize one another as equals.

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Chapter 6:

How To Make Assertive Communication Work In Your Relationships

Given that you are reading this book, it's a safe bet that you have an interest in communication and relationship skills. You've probably heard about the most common communication styles we use in our relationships¹⁵¹:

Passive communication: Passive communicators do not voice their thoughts or feelings. They put the needs of other people ahead of their own. Other people often think of them as doormats.

Aggressive communication: Those with an aggressive style of communication value their own needs above everyone else's, and they aren't afraid to show it! They are more successful in getting what they want compared to a passive communicator, but they may be known as a bully or loudmouth.

Passive-aggressive communication: When someone suppresses their true thoughts and feelings but communicates them in "subtle" ways, they are using passive-aggressive communication. For example, if someone agrees to do a job they don't really want to do, they might indirectly show their resentment by "accidentally" doing it wrong.

Assertive communication: Assertive communication is about balancing your own needs with those of everyone else. Assertive people know how and when to compromise, and they can keep their emotions in check when it comes to handling difficult situations.

Obviously, assertive communication is the most constructive of all the styles. Assertive people respect both themselves and others. They are direct, confident, and they don't play mind games.

The Five-Step Model

Here's an excellent five-step model that will help you communicate assertively with your partner. (It also works well with friends, relatives, and colleagues.) It's a simple process that allows you to share your feelings, minimize the risk of conflict, and lay the groundwork for healthy collaboration.

The process:¹⁵²

Step 1 – Using factual, concise statements, express your thoughts on the issue without becoming overly emotional. There's nothing wrong with strong emotions, but getting too angry or upset will trigger the other person's threat sensor.

They will then become defensive, and won't be receptive to what you need to say. Stick to one issue at a time. Check that your partner has understood what you have said by asking "Do you understand what I mean?," or "Do you need me to word this differently?"

Step 2 – Accord the other person the respect you would like to receive. Do not interrupt. Summarize what you think they just told you. "You think X because Y, is that right?" is a

simple, effective way of letting them know that you have understood their view (or not).

At this stage in the process, you may find that the person you are dealing with is reluctant to open up to you. This might be because they are intimidated by your confidence, or it may be because they lack faith in their own convictions.

The best way of encouraging them to open up is via the use of questions. Start off by using questions that require very little effort to answer. Closed questions that only require a “Yes” or “No” answer, or questions that can be answered in just a couple of words, are effective here.

For instance, you could ask, “Do you agree that we should do X?” or “Do you want to go to Event A or Event B?” These are low-effort questions. Once they have started talking and appear a little more relaxed, you can start asking longer questions that invite more complicated responses.

Be patient with insecure and passive communicators. They usually appreciate some extra time in which to gather their thoughts. If you rush in and demand that they answer you immediately, they will shut down even further.

On the other hand, if you give them the space they need, they will slowly begin to trust you. In time, the conversations you have with them should become easier.

On other occasions, you might have to deal with someone who prefers to use an aggressive style of communication. Boundaries are an essential tool here. An aggressive person will see any sign of weakness or passivity as an invitation to carry on imposing their will.

Use your boundaries to spell out the consequences of their aggressive behavior, and follow through as necessary. For example, here are some boundaries you can use when dealing with an aggressive communicator:

“It is unacceptable for you to shout at me. It makes me feel uneasy. If you cannot speak at a reasonable volume, I will end this conversation.”

“I do not tolerate people insulting me. It makes me feel belittled. Unless you stop insulting me right now, I will lodge a formal complaint.”

“I will not accept you reeling off my supposed faults, given that they have no relevance to this conversation. If you cannot stick to the topic at hand, I am going to leave the room.”

Another important tip when dealing with an aggressive communicator is to concentrate on generating proactive responses rather than taking on a reactive role. For instance, if someone is berating you for your lack of participation in a team project, returning with a criticism of your own will only exacerbate the situation.

Instead, you should take a proactive approach and outline a couple of potential solutions. Aggressive people are more likely to accord you some respect once they realize that you intend to stand your ground and defend your boundaries.¹⁵³

Do not attempt to placate them by suggesting that you can empathize with them, or that you understand their anger. They are likely to respond by telling you that you cannot possibly understand their position! Don't waste your breath by telling them that you relate to their emotions, or that you once found yourself in a similar situation.

Along with those who are openly hostile, you will sometimes have to deal with people who express their anger in a subtler manner. Passive-aggressive people are harder to spot than someone who uses direct aggression.

Signs of passive-aggressive behavior include a mismatch between someone's words and body language (which hints at deceit and manipulation), subtle sarcasm, a tendency to dodge questions and change the course of the conversation to something irrelevant, a habit of punishing people by using the silent treatment, and spreading negative gossip. Passive-aggressive people are sullen and slow to cooperate.

Passive-aggressive people want to trigger a strong reaction in another person and get away with it. They aren't concerned with actually solving a problem – they just want to assert their power without resorting to overt aggression.

The trick is to stay very calm, and ignore their immature behaviors. Think of them as a teenager who hasn't developed the skills they need to function in the adult world.

There is no point in getting mad with a teenager, or trying to use passive aggression in return. You should apply the same principles when dealing with passive-aggressive adults.

Stick to the facts. Don't fall into the trap of asking, "What's wrong?" when they shrug their shoulders or start pouting. (Yes, I have known passive-aggressive adults who pout.) When you give them the attention they crave, this acts as positive reinforcement and just encourages future passive-aggressive behavior.¹⁵⁴

Step 3 – Now that you have both made your views known, you can start to work on conflict resolution and compromise.

The best way to begin is to ask, “What can we agree on here?” Both of you will have needs that you are trying to meet. You will also both have fears.

This is true even in situations that seem pretty benign. For example, let’s say you and your partner are arguing about how much money you will spend on your annual vacation. You want to go on a cheap vacation, whereas they seem intent on blowing your joint savings on an expensive cruise.

If you focused on what you could both agree on, you may discover that you both want to spend quality time together, to make great memories, and to have a relaxing week away from work.

Finding points of agreement builds a sense of trust and security, which in turn makes it more likely that your partner will listen. You could then talk about your fears. In your case, you might fear running out of money and not having a “buffer” to see you through an unexpected redundancy or emergency.

On the other hand, your partner may be worried that if you don’t have exciting experiences together, you will both get bored with one another and the relationship will go stale.

Your partner may also tell you that they feel the need to have a once-in-a-lifetime trip, rather than go to the same old places year after year. “What do you need here?” and “What worries you about this?” are two good questions to ask when unearthing fears and needs.

As long as you are both willing to take one another’s feelings into account, you will be on the right track to a

solution that works for you both. Understanding one another's fears and needs is a great basis for compromise.

For example, having agreed that you both want to make good memories and relax, and having identified that your partner feels the need to take a really special trip, you could schedule an evening devoted to finding cost-effective yet "quirky" vacation ideas. You could even make a game of it, challenging one another to come up with the most interesting idea possible within an agreed budget.

Step 4 – Know what to do if you can't agree. From time to time, you'll come up against a no-win situation. This tends to happen when two people hold strong beliefs that mean a lot to them, or when their personal preferences are nonnegotiable.

For example, if you want to adopt a child but your partner only wants to have a child that is biologically their own, there is no room for compromise if you are both unwilling to budge.

In a no-win situation, your job is to resist the urge to become aggressive (and impose your will on the other person) or passive (and just agree to what the other person wants). It might sound obvious, but there doesn't have to be a "winner" and a "loser."

Acknowledging that another person has a different perspective to your own does not mean that you are agreeing with them. It means that you have the [emotional intelligence](#) to understand that you are both separate individuals who have the right to your own opinions.

Be willing to entertain the possibility that you will have to agree to disagree, and that both of you might have to endure some discomfort or even some emotional pain as a result.

Remember that just because someone disagrees with you, it doesn't mean that your opinions are "bad." Good people can and do hold different opinions! Emotionally mature adults know that agreement is great and compromise is good, but some situations are just dead ends.

Step 5 – Look inside yourself, and monitor your internal dialogue. When you can't reach an agreement with another person, you need to focus on what you can change – your own reactions. You cannot control what other people do or think, but you have the power to decide whether you will let their opinions change you.

Sometimes, things just won't work out, and some people won't agree with you – and that's OK. Check that you aren't holding on to any resentment. If you find yourself thinking negative thoughts like "Nothing ever goes my way," or "Life is out to get me," you need to change your mindset before you can move forward.

Don't skip this step. Our inner dialogue has the power to shape our mood, and if you do not address your negative thoughts, they will slowly color your entire outlook on life.

Research has shown that people who tend to think negative thoughts are vulnerable to depression. Furthermore, negativity keeps people stuck in a low mood. It's a vicious cycle! Accept your negative thoughts, but challenge them. Don't let them weigh you down.¹⁵⁵

The quickest way to overcome these thoughts is to find at least three pieces of evidence that contradicts them. If possible, note them down on a piece of paper.

For instance, if you find yourself thinking that nothing ever goes your way, list three pieces of good luck you have experienced over the past year. A bit of gratitude can make a big difference!

Finally, you need to make a plan that accommodates your own needs as far as is reasonably possible. For example, to continue with the scenario above, you may find that there is no way to bridge the gap between your partner's preferred option (to have a child that is biologically related to you) and your preferred option (to adopt a child).

This would undoubtedly be a hard situation, but even in the most difficult of circumstances, you do have options. In this case, you could decide that you will choose to remain childfree, to leave the relationship and find another partner whose needs are more compatible with your own, or to fulfil your need to nurture a young person by working in a child-centered career. Your options may not be ideal, but you can still use your free will and good judgment to make the best of a tough situation.

For the sake of your relationship, it's vital that you make peace with reality – accepting what is, and not dwelling on what might have been. If that means talking to a third party, such as a counselor, then so be it. Carrying around resentment and dissatisfaction will not only make you feel bad, but it will also damage your relationship.

Of course, there are some situations in which two people cannot hope to have a meaningful discussion. In the next chapter, I'm going to talk about how you can deal with toxic

situations that, if left unchecked, will wreak havoc on your mental health.

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Chapter 7:

How to Identify & Handle Verbal Abuse

When the topic of abuse comes up, most people automatically think of physical assault. But what about abuse that doesn't involve any bodily contact? Sadly, too many of us are taught that as long as someone isn't actually causing you physical harm, they aren't an abuser. This belief can keep someone locked into an abusive relationship, because they don't realize that verbal abuse isn't normal.

Physical abuse is usually obvious – either someone is using force against you, or they are not. But when it comes to verbal abuse, the picture can be more confusing.¹⁵⁶ In this chapter, I'll give you a quick primer on verbal abuse, how to spot it, why it is so damaging to your relationship, and how to handle the situation.

Anyone can be on the receiving end of verbal abuse. Male, female, heterosexual, homosexual, young or old – anyone can experience it.

I'm going to focus on verbal abuse between romantic partners, but most of this chapter also applies to abusive friendships or family relationships. You don't necessarily have to end your relationship with someone who verbally abuses you.

However, for the sake of your mental health, you should at least arm yourself with the knowledge you need before making a decision.

Verbal abuse should always be taken seriously. It can cause depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal.¹⁵⁷ You should also know that it's not unusual for verbal abuse to escalate to physical violence.¹⁵⁸

So what is verbal abuse?

When someone deliberately speaks to you in a way that causes you emotional harm, they are verbally abusing you. There are two main facets of verbal abuse. The first is what someone is saying. The second is how they are saying it.

The most obvious form of verbal abuse is name calling. In a relationship between two adults, there is no justification for this behavior. It is never constructive, and is a tactic used to intimidate or silence the other person into submission.

If someone is using derogatory language towards you, deliberately provoking you, or otherwise making you feel bad using their words or tone of voice, you are being verbally abused.

Other forms of verbally abusive behavior include the following¹⁵⁹:

Belittling someone else's opinions: It's fine to disagree with someone, but putting their views down for no good reason and using unnecessarily harsh words (e.g. "That's a really stupid opinion, why on earth would anyone think that?") is abusive.

Gaslighting: This is form of abuse that attempts to change a victim's perception of reality. The aim is to confuse the victim

and undermine their confidence. For example, an abuser might try to convince the victim that they forgot the abuser's birthday the previous year, even though the latter knows full well that they did not. When it works, gaslighting makes the victim feel as though they are going mad. This leaves them vulnerable to manipulation.

Blaming: Verbal abusers often shift the blame for their own behavior onto their victims. For example, if they become angry, they might tell the victim that it's their fault for making them feel bad. This tactic encourages the victim to comply with the abuser's demands in the hope that they will avoid triggering another outburst.

Excessive judgment or criticism: Abusive judgments and criticisms are not delivered with the other person's best interests at heart. Verbal abusers use harsh judgments as a way of intimidating others. By confidently asserting their opinions as though they are absolute truths, they try to create a power dynamic that always lets them come out on top.

Deliberate withholding: We all need to keep our thoughts and feelings private from time to time. No one is obliged to share absolutely everything with their partner. However, verbal abusers intentionally use withholding tactics as a way of keeping their partner "on edge."

A verbal abuser may look sad or angry, but insist that nothing is wrong when confronted. They may later accuse their victim of "not caring." Withholding is therefore both abusive and passive-aggressive.

Trivializing: This involves cutting down a partner and minimizing their achievements, their social skills, or even the

amount of time and effort they put into the relationship. For example, an abuser might claim that their partner gives them “no attention” or “doesn’t care,” even if it’s obvious that this isn’t the case. Trivializing can slowly chip away at someone’s self-esteem.

Unfortunately, I have witnessed this form of verbal abuse in my own family. My mother’s sister is now divorced, but when I was a child she was married to a man who would take every opportunity to sneer at her achievements.

For example, my aunt once managed to get a great job working at a legal firm. She had been trying to get a paralegal position for years, so it was a really big achievement.

When she told her husband the news, he stared at her for a few moments, shrugged his shoulders, and sighed.

“That office will be full of young people just starting out in their careers,” he said. “Won’t that make you feel a bit old?” He didn’t offer her any congratulations whatsoever.

My aunt still took the job, but my mother reported that she felt self-conscious about her age for weeks after his nasty remarks. Never underestimate the power of words.

Denial: Abusers have a habit of forgetting what they have said and done. Some will deny that they have ever abused their partner. This is a form of gaslighting. Denial leaves the victim feeling disoriented and questioning their own reality, which makes it harder to take an objective look at the situation.

On the other hand, some abusers will be full of remorse and fake apologies. They will tell their victim how sorry they are,

and promise that it will never happen again. But guess what? The cycle usually starts over.

Whether it spans a few days or several months, it will repeat itself time and time again until someone deliberately breaks the pattern. This behavior is so common that it is known as the “cycle of abuse.”

What do all these forms of abuse have in common? In short, every single one allows the perpetrator to dominate the victim by wearing them down. Whether they openly admit it or not, an abuser’s goal is to control their victim by undermining their confidence.

There are several theories that try to account for why someone might become verbally abusive. Some abusers find it hard to regulate their own emotions, and they can’t handle negative feelings. As a result, they lash out at others.

Experiences of childhood abuse also seem to lay the groundwork for inappropriate behavior later in life. Specifically, if an individual is left traumatized by abuse they witnessed or experienced in childhood, they are more likely to use abusive tactics in their adult relationships.¹⁶⁰

I’ll let the experts work out the ultimate answer! For the purposes of this chapter, I’m more concerned with providing practical strategies that will help you handle verbal abuse.

Strategies for handling verbal abuse

Record conversations: Keep a recording device discreetly tucked away in the living room (or wherever the verbal abuse tends to occur), or use your phone to record conversations with your partner. This will keep you sane, because listening to

prior conversations will help you spot patterns of abuse. **It is a reality check.**

Furthermore, if your partner tends to deny their abuse or accuses you of saying things that never passed your lips, these records will help you keep track of who really said what to whom. Recordings are also useful evidence that can be used in therapy, or even in court cases.

Keep a diary of key events: Along with recordings, keep a log of the abuse. Note down dates, times, and circumstances. Recordings are useful, but they don't always capture the events that precede abuse. Keep your diary hidden, or use a password protected file on your phone or computer.

Practice changing your inner dialogue: Verbal abuse is particularly distressing if the victim believes what the perpetrator is saying about them. As I've mentioned earlier in this book, you can't control other people, but you can control your own reactions. If you can learn how to tell yourself that an abuser is telling you lies so that they can try to control you, their words will carry less weight.

Rather than reacting to what they are saying as though it were true, use your inner dialogue as a defense mechanism.

For example, if someone tells you that you are ugly, make a conscious effort to tell yourself that they spouting garbage because they don't want to treat you as an equal. This won't stop the abuse, but it is a short-term measure that can help protect your self-esteem.

If it's safe to do so, defend your boundaries: Sometimes, asserting your boundaries will only aggravate a verbal abuser,

or even trigger physical violence. However, if possible, tell them that you won't tolerate their behavior.

Refer back to the chapter on setting and upholding boundaries for more advice on how to do this. Do not try to reason with a verbal abuser. They are not interested in having a constructive conversation – they want to assert their power.

Get a reality check from someone you trust: Confide in a trusted friend or relative, and ask them to serve as a reality check. Someone who is on the outside looking in at your relationship is in a better place to tell you whether your experiences are normal.

Be warned – not everyone understands what verbal abuse is, and some will trivialize your experience. If they say things like “But it's not that bad,” “Everyone has fights,” and “But he or she is a good person underneath,” find someone else to support you.

Create an identity that doesn't depend on anyone else's validation: The more secure you are in yourself, the less likely you are to be hurt by your partner's cruel words. Channel your energy into building friendships, strengthening family bonds, and expanding your social and professional networks.

Seek therapy: In an ideal world, a verbal abuser would take themselves to therapy and admit that they need help. Unfortunately, this rarely happens, because they believe that their behavior is totally reasonable.¹⁶¹

However, this doesn't mean that the victim can't benefit from therapy. If your relationship is making you unhappy, a therapist with experience in abuse can help you make sense of

the situation. If you can convince your partner to enter couples therapy, then your relationship might stand a chance.

Never respond with abuse of your own: Under threat, you might want to defend yourself by returning someone's insults and aggression. This is a terrible strategy, and one to be avoided at all costs. Abusing someone else, even if you are acting in self-defense, means acting against your morals and values.

It also gives your abuser ammunition to use against you in the future. Whenever you try to set a boundary or let them know that you are unhappy with their behavior, they'll point out that you aren't so perfect yourself.

Why a victim can find it hard to leave an abuser

Those who have never experienced an abusive relationship tend to wonder why the victim doesn't just leave. Unfortunately, it isn't quite so simple. Some victims are dependent on their abusers for money, housing, or other forms of support.

Others enter a state of denial, clinging onto hope that the other person will eventually see the light and change their ways, even though this is unlikely to happen unless they enter therapy and admit that they need to do some serious work on themselves.¹⁶²

Lots of abusers treat their victims well in the early stages of the relationship – just long enough for the victim to fall in love. By the time the abuse begins, the victim will find it hard to end the relationship. Over time, they start to see the abuse as normal, and forget what it was like to live a life free from emotional turmoil.

If they had low self-esteem before entering the relationship, they may come to believe that they somehow deserve the abuse. Finally, because abuse often comes in cycles, a victim might hope that the “nice” phase will last forever. It can take years before they face reality and acknowledge that nothing will change without drastic intervention.

If you need to talk to someone about your relationship, or get help to break free from an abuser, there are several services that can help you decide how to move forward. The National Domestic Violence Hotline (thehotline.org) offers a telephone and online service that provides support 365 days a year. If you are a woman, the government’s Women’s Health website (womenshealth.gov) is a good starting point.

Obviously, an abusive person is a negative influence. However, not all negative people are abusive. In the next chapter, I’ll show you how to handle everyday negativity.

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¹⁵⁷ Morningside Recovery. (2017). Understanding Verbal Abuse. morningsiderecovery.com

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¹⁶² Ibid.

Chapter 8:

Dealing with Negative People

In the previous chapter, we looked at verbal abuse. But what about those people who aren't abusive, but still manage to drag your mood down? In this section, I'll tell you how to spot a negative person – they aren't quite as obvious as you might think – and how to stay positive even if you have to deal with them on a regular basis.

Not all negative people are the same!

So, what do I mean by “negative people”? Here's a quick rundown of the most common types:

Straight-up negative individuals

These are easy to spot. They are the people who never have anything good to say about anyone or anything. They seem to suck the life out of a room. Other people tend to avoid them whenever possible.

Martyrs

You might not recognize a Martyr at first. They present themselves as someone who always puts the needs of others before their own. Sounds good, right?

Unfortunately, they then complain that they have no time for themselves, that no one appreciates them, and so on. After a while, this gets very wearing. Don't be fooled – a Martyr

actually enjoys wearing themselves out, because it gives them a reason to complain.

People who relentlessly judge everyone

I admit it – we all judge others. Everyone has an opinion, and that’s OK. However, judgmental people never hold back. If someone isn’t perfect, they’ll let you know. Actually, they’ll let you know over and over again.

Over time, you’ll get the feeling that they will start judging you behind your back. (Too late – I can almost guarantee they’ve already started.)

People who distract you from your goals

Distractors don’t necessarily *sound* negative, which can make them hard to spot. It’s what they do, rather than what they say, that should sound your alarm bells. Basically, a Distractor takes up a lot of your time and energy to the extent that your goals start to suffer.¹⁶³

Distractors can make you feel suffocated and even a little helpless, because you aren’t sure how to get rid of them! A Distractor will typically talk to you for hours about nothing of real importance, use you as a sounding board, or subtly recruit you to carry out tasks for them.

The two-step plan for dealing with negative people

I’ll give it to you straight: The best way to deal with a negative person is to stop interacting with them. I don’t care whether you feel sorry for them or want to help in some way – they are still bad news.

Why? Because, even if you are fascinated by psychology and the science of human behavior, you aren’t here to play the

role of therapist to negative people. You could spend hours trying to analyze their behavior, and it won't get you anywhere.

In fact, you probably know some people who waste their precious time trying to “figure out” their troublesome relatives, friends, or colleagues – to no avail. Do not fall into this trap!

OK, I know what you're thinking. You can cut out negative acquaintances, avoid colleagues from other departments at work, and reduce the time you spend with distant family members, but what about those people you really can't avoid? I personally use a two-pronged strategy with these individuals.

First, I make sure my mindset is in the right place. Second, I have an arsenal of communication strategies that shut down their negativity so that I can carry on living my life in peace.

Step One: Change your attitude

If you can't change someone else, don't despair. You can always change how you react to a situation.

Think back to your last interaction with a negative person. I'm going to use an example that happened to me a few months ago with my neighbor. I was heading out the door to work one morning, and she was putting out birdseed in her yard. I'll call her “Sally:”

ME: “Hi Sally! Isn't the weather great?”

SALLY: “It's not usually this hot in March. No rain for weeks!”

ME: “It is pretty warm for the time of year, true.”

SALLY: “That’s probably why the grass looks awful. Anyway, you’re out the door early this morning.”

ME: “Yes, I’ve got a meeting with a new client, I’m excited to work with them!”

SALLY: “You work a lot, don’t you? I don’t get why people are so driven to work all the time these days. I bet you’re exhausted by the end of the week.”

At this point, I wrapped the conversation up with a cheery farewell and hopped into my car. It definitely wasn’t my ideal start to the morning! Does this story resonate with you? Most of us have met people like this!

I can’t cut Sally out of my life completely. I typically see her a couple of times per day, and I want to maintain a cordial relationship with all my neighbors. Luckily, I don’t have to let her bad moods drag me down. Here are the tools I use in this kind of situation.

Shifting your mindset

Look at the following phrases. Can you spot the subtle difference?

“Sally is a negative person.”

“Sally has a lot of negativity.”

In the first sentence, we’re assuming that Sally is, at heart, a negative person. If you’ve spent time around someone and they have always behaved in a negative manner, this is a fair assessment. After all, we can only draw conclusions based on what we have experienced.

However, I find the second sentence more interesting. Although it isn't the most elegant phrase I have ever written, it is very useful when it comes to staying positive in the face of someone else's complaints, griping, and whining.

The key word here is "has." Sally owns her negativity. It is hers alone. It isn't mine, it isn't her husband's, it doesn't belong to anyone else. I don't have to accept it.

When I realized that I can let someone own their attitude, and I can make my own decision as to whether I want to engage with it or ignore it, negative people started to bother me less and less.

Remember:

1. Just as other people have no right to control your mood, you don't have the right to control theirs.
2. When you encounter negativity, you don't have to take it on board.
3. You are not obliged to lower yourself to anyone else's level. You are not responsible for easing anyone's suffering, or cheering them up.¹⁶⁴
4. It isn't healthy to allow your feelings to be dictated by someone else's moods. In fact, it's a sign of codependency. As you know, codependency doesn't make for healthy relationships.
5. Anyone who assumes that your role in a relationship is to listen to their complaints for hours, or to cheer them up, is bad news. They will drain your energy – fast.

Using Hanlon's Razor to deal with judgmental people

How many times have you heard someone voice a really stupid, toxic opinion that's left you in a bad mood for the rest of the day? I have! Fortunately, I came across a great quote that transformed the way I dealt with judgmental people.

You've probably heard of Occam's Razor: The notion that the simplest solution is usually most likely to be correct. But what about Hanlon's Razor? Attributed to the author Robert J. Hanlon, it goes like this:

"Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity.¹⁶⁵"

Hanlon's Razor is a useful reminder that most of the negative, judgmental people I come across aren't waging a personal campaign against me. **Instead, they are probably making stupid, ill-informed remarks because they are actually - wait for it - ill-formed, stupid, or both.** I can't really hold that against them. In most cases, they probably know no better.

And if they do? Well, I don't have the time to prove it, and choosing to believe that they are just stupid rather than malicious helps me stay calm. If someone wants to debate a particular point with me, I'll happily have a constructive discussion, but for the most part I make a point of brushing off ignorant comments.

You can even turn it into a game! Every time I encounter a negative, judgmental person speak, I think "Hanlon! Hanlon!" It makes me smile, and helps me see past their silly remarks.

When it comes to dealing with Sally, I remind myself that because she has never held down a regular job (she is a homemaker, and her husband is the breadwinner), it's unlikely that she has a clue what she's talking about when it comes to careers and time management in the workplace.

Step Two: Use these three phrases that will shut down negativity

There are no magic words that will work on every negative person. The right approach will depend on your relationship, the amount of time you have available, and the cause of their problem.

Of course, if you are in a romantic relationship with the other person, you will be more inclined to take a more understanding approach – **but this doesn't mean that you have to listen to their negativity for hours on end.**

Here are three useful phrases to use with someone who is whining just for the hell of it:

“That’s unfortunate. Did anything positive come out of it?:” Negative people are taken aback by this tactic. It forces them either to acknowledge that the situation isn't 100% bad, or it forces them to say “No, nothing!” which provides you with a great opportunity to say “That sucks!” and change the subject.¹⁶⁶

“I hear what you’re saying, but talking like this isn’t going to change the situation. I’m going to suggest that we talk about something else:” This allows the other person to feel heard, but firmly steers the conversation in a more positive direction.

“What do you need me to do?:” This is a less aggressive alternative to “Well, what can I do about it?,” but it accomplishes the same objective. It forces the other person to stop venting and engage with the real issue – can a problem be fixed and, if so, how?

The complainer will have to admit that there is nothing you can do (which will highlight how pointless it is for them to keep venting) or, if you can help in some way, the conversation can then focus on constructive problem-solving.

Dealing with negative prophets

Resist the urge to argue with those who make negative predictions for the sake of it. They aren’t looking for a proper debate on the matter at hand.

If they were, they would have outlined the reasons for their position and asked for your feedback. When someone prophesizes doom just because they feel the need to be a downer, be smart and shut it down.

Depending on the relationship you have with this person, and how sensitive they are to rejection, you could try some of these lines.

Notice that they are diversionary tactics. This is because ignoring the other person will make you appear rude, but engaging with them will just suck you down into their black hole.

“We’ll wait and see. Anyway...”

“Thank you for your input. So anyway...”

“I’ll bear that in mind. In the meantime...”

“It’s always good to have another perspective. Now, let’s move on to...”

“It’s funny how two people can see the same situation so differently! So, as I was saying...”

“True, I guess that might happen! So I’m sure we’d all rather talk about something more positive....”

Stick to your boundaries

By now, you’ll know that I’m keen on boundaries as a tool in relationships. They come in handy when you have to deal with negative people.

Think of their negativity as a behavior that you don’t have to tolerate. If someone was insulting you, or invading your personal space, you would assert your boundaries until they started to behave like a reasonable human being. When confronted by someone’s negativity, you can use the same principles.

Let’s look at how this might work in practice. I didn’t have to use my imagination to come up with this example – it actually happened to me at a family gathering a few weeks ago. I was sat next to my cousin at the dinner table.

COUSIN: My daughter hasn’t decided on her college major yet.

ME: It can be hard to know what you want to do at her age.

COUSIN: She’s trying to decide between Communications and Psychology. What a waste of time.

ME: What do you mean by “a waste of time?”

COUSIN: They're both useless. What kind of career is she going to get?

ME: In my experience, anyone can make a great career for themselves if they make a good plan and stick to it. Lots of people end up in careers that aren't related to their college major.

[At this point, I sensed that my cousin wasn't really trying to have a conversation. All he wanted to do was complain about his daughter's choices. Because he knows that I have an interest in psychology, I suspected he was also trying to goad me. I decided to gently call him out on his negativity, and defend my boundaries.]

COUSIN: Yeah, well you would say that. You know what? I think she should think about nursing. Something that will help people.

ME: You seem really down on psychology. That's your opinion, which is fine, but doesn't make me feel good to hear you talk like that when you know it's what I do for a living. Please can we change the subject? Otherwise I'm going to have to ignore you and talk to my dessert instead!

[A touch of humor can work well to diffuse a situation.]

COUSIN: Well....OK. I guess. Have you picked out that new car yet?

Was the conversation slightly awkward? Yes. Did I have to think carefully before asserting my boundary? Yes. But did it work out in the end? Definitely! What's more, I'm willing to bet that my cousin will think twice in the future before subjecting me to his pointless negativity.

Model positive behavior

A long-term approach to conquering negativity is positive role modeling. Earlier in this chapter, I emphasized that you are not responsible for someone else's behavior, only your responses.

On the other hand, if you can make yourself happier and encourage someone else to be more positive, that's got to be a win-win situation!

Modeling positive behavior lets you do precisely that. You don't need to be excessively cheerful, but if you can do the following on a consistent basis, the negative people around you might follow suit:

1. Take a realistic view of every situation, but emphasize the positive.
2. Be clear what you will and won't accept from other people.
3. Defend your boundaries.
4. [Take responsibility for your own emotions.](#)
5. Apologize when you have offended someone, and offer to make amends where appropriate.
6. Choose positive people as partners, friends, and acquaintances.

What about those who are so stuck in their ways that they cling onto their negativity like a life raft?

There's another advantage to using the modeling technique. Cynical, passive-aggressive people might roll their eyes at

your positivity, but the great news is that they will start to leave you alone!

Happiness and optimism make these people uncomfortable, so they are effective repellants.

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Chapter 9:

Identifying & Handling Love Addiction

It's normal to want a romantic relationship, but some people become completely obsessed with love and romance. Love addiction can destroy lives, and it can prevent the addict forming healthy relationships.

The term “love addict” is casually thrown around in the media and in self-help circles, but what does it really mean? Here are the main symptoms¹⁶⁷:

A general obsession with “romance:” Did you often daydream about your future husband or wife as a kid? Have you always gone for romantic music, books, and movies? Do you always want to know what's going on in your friends' love lives?

The belief that falling in love is the solution to all your problems: When you are having a bad day, do you slip into a fantasy that ends with someone rescuing you from all life's issues, both trivial and serious? Is your idea of heaven a never-ending vacation with someone who absolutely adores you?

A habit of treating every social occasion as a chance to find a love interest: Love addicts are constantly watching out for someone who makes them feel special and adored. If you start scanning the room for potential mates at every party (or even

at every business meeting!) then you may well have a problem.

A tendency to jump from one intense relationship to another: Do you tend to have short-lived, intense relationships that fizzle out quickly? Do you try to forge a “deep” connection with someone within days (or even hours) of meeting them, and feel positively euphoric if they seem to return your feelings?

A tendency to go for potential rather than reality: When you meet someone, do you start thinking how you could improve them? When you can’t accept your partner for who they are, you’re probably looking for someone you can shape to fit your image of a “good partner,” rather than someone real to love.¹⁶⁸

A fear of being single: This one is self-explanatory. If you feel lonely at the mere thought of being single, this is a big warning sign. A series of short, overlapping relationships is common in love addiction.

An inability to boost your own self-esteem: Love addicts look to their partners to affirm their self-worth. If you feel empty without someone in your life, and find it hard to imagine who you are when you are not part of a couple, this implies that you are hooked on the idea of having someone to validate you.

A reputation as a love addict or serial dater in your social circle: Do the people who know you best ever make jokes about your chaotic love life? Maybe they have even used the words “love addict” to describe you. As the saying goes, “Many a true word is spoken in jest.”

There's nothing wrong with falling head over heels in the early stages of a relationship. The trouble starts when we see love as not merely a fantastic experience in our lives, but as the only important experience worth having.

When your happiness hinges on someone else reciprocating your love, you are taking a huge risk. If they don't return your feelings, you will be left heartbroken. To distract yourself from the pain, you might jump into another intense relationship...and the cycle will continue.¹⁶⁹

The horrible irony is that these behaviors actually repel anyone who is worth having as a partner. No sane individual is going to want to date a love addict. They might not be familiar with the term, but they will run when they realize what they are dealing with.

After all, who wants to invite so much drama into their life? Only other drama queens (or kings), and they are more trouble than they're worth. If you truly want a real relationship, you need to take love addiction seriously.

Note that not all love addicts have crushes on people they know. Some people become obsessed with famous people they will never meet. In extreme cases, love addicts may become fixated on a fictional character!

I also want to make it clear that both men and women can develop love addiction. It's more socially acceptable for women to talk about their feelings, but I promise you that there are men facing similar problems.

Much has been written on why some people get hooked on love. This isn't a therapy manual, so I'm not going to write an essay on all the possible causes.

However, I think it's important to make one point. The typical love addict feels the need to "prove themselves" to someone who isn't interested in returning their feelings.

A love addict has typically felt insecure and unloved from a young age. Psychologists have observed that love addicts regularly go for narcissists and emotionally unavailable people, because it gives them the chance to prove themselves by winning the affection of someone who doesn't seem willing to give it.

After all, love addiction isn't really about love – it's about using drama and excitement to fill a void, and to get the approval the addict was not shown in childhood.¹⁷⁰

How to overcome love addiction

Recovery from love addiction requires two things. First, you have to build for yourself an identity that does not revolve around catching and keeping a partner.

This involves examining your relationship history, growing your own interests, nurturing a supportive social circle, and pursuing goals and dreams that have nothing to do with love and romance.

You might need to see a therapist, attend support groups, or read books by love addiction experts. I recommend *Addiction to Love* by Susan Peabody, which sets out exactly where love addiction comes from, and the main steps you must take if you want to change.

Second, you need to change how you relate to other people. You can't have an authentic relationship if you cast someone in the role of your next great love. The only way to establish a

real connection is to take off your rose-tinted glasses and take your time in building a relationship.

Communication skills for love addicts

Learn how to talk about everyday issues: We tend to talk about what we value most. If you are a love addict, your primary focus of conversation will be your relationships, your crushes, your partners, or your ex-partners.

I hate to break it to you, but your family and friends probably got sick of it years ago. **Love addiction tends to damage relationships in two ways.**

First, the object of your obsession (your love interest) takes your attention away from family and friends. Second, talking about the same topic over and over again (such as your love interest or your latest relationship drama) will not endear you to anyone.

It's time to change the script. If you don't have any hobbies or interests to talk about, get some. Alternatively, just keep the conversation focused on the other person.

Hold back on the most intimate details of your life!: Healthy relationships are based on a gradual disclosure of information. Love addicts spill their guts within days, or even hours, of meeting someone new. They do this in the hope that it will create an immediate sense of intimacy. They tell potential love interests every little detail, thinking that they will earn their pity, compassion, and care.

This doesn't work. Normal, healthy people are turned off when someone tells them everything about their problems, their personal life, and their romantic fantasies.¹⁷¹

Learn how to make small talk, how to ask someone suitable questions that will let you develop healthy rapport, and how to move a relationship along at a reasonable pace.

Talk to people that will never interest you romantically: Recovery from love addiction involves building positive relationships with people who will only be friends, never romantic partners.

Where can you meet new friends? Everywhere! Seek them out at work, via your existing friends, at adult education classes, and special interest groups.

Set yourself the challenge of making two new friends that you will never find physically or romantically attractive. Ideally, these friends should be in stable, happy relationships that you can use as models in the future.

Don't be surprised if you find it hard to feel interested in platonic relationships. It will take time to shake your assumption that if someone can't provide you with romantic validation then they aren't worth talking to.

Drop the excessive texts and emails and communicate face to face: There's nothing like a text, instant message, or social media post to fire up your imagination.

Everyone falls into the trap of reading too much into written messages from time to time. For example, who hasn't pondered whether "Xxx" at the end of a text means something significant?

Keep it real. Spend time face to face rather than swapping endless online messages. This is good advice for anyone, but it is particularly important for love addicts, who have a tendency

to over-analyze every little message from a potential love interest.

Know when it's time to sever all ties: If you are a love addict, you need to learn how to cut contact with someone who is triggering your obsessive thoughts and behaviors.

Hundreds of articles have been written on this concept, known as the “No Contact Rule,” but it comes down to this – as soon as you realize that someone is only a fantasy figure or distraction, stop engaging with them.

Tell them that the interactions aren't working for you, and that you no longer wish to continue the “relationship.”¹⁷² No calls, no emails, no texting, no dates, no hookups.

If you have to work or parent with this person, keep your interactions short and civil. Stop fueling the on-off, on-off cycle that so many love addicts fall into! I know that this is far from easy. In fact, it can be a brutal process.

Have a support system in place. Confide in close platonic friends. Start going to a therapist. Join a well-moderated online forum. Just make sure you have an outlet for the tough emotions you will face.

Get real with yourself about someone else's intentions: If you tend to kid yourself that someone is interested in you just because it fits the fantasy inside your head, it's time to pay attention to what they are actually doing, not what they are saying.

Anyone can sit down and fire off a few flirtatious text messages, but it takes effort to show up for proper dates, to set aside half an hour for a meaningful phone call, and so on.

If you are a love addict, you need to realize that the majority of romantic relationships fail, and it's pointless to try and make one work at the cost of your sanity.

Think about it. How many people marry their first love? Very few. It is normal to date at least a few people before settling down.

Accepting the reality of dating will make you more secure in your love life, as you will know that a failed relationship does not mean that you are “unlovable” or inadequate in any way.

What if you find yourself dating a love addict?

To be brutally honest, I wouldn't recommend that you carry on seeing someone if you learn that they are a love addict. If they come out and tell you that they “suffer from love addiction,” it's a huge red flag.

Unless they are in the process of getting help, whether that entails going to a therapist or a peer support group such as Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, their issues will probably kill your relationship.

Your partner will have trouble seeing you and the relationship in a realistic light, and they will need endless reassurance. They will always be seeking that romantic “high,” and getting upset when their romantic partner (i.e. you) doesn't meet their expectations.

Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned that no sane, healthy person would want to date a love addict. If you realize that the person you are dating is showing signs of love addiction, you need to take a look at your own role in the dynamic.

Love addicts are attracted to people who aren't emotionally available – those who tend to toss out crumbs of affection, who aren't really able to make a commitment, and have an erratic communication style.

This is why it's so important to make sure that you are in the right mindset before you start dating. If you aren't sure what you want, or even whether you want to be in a relationship at all, you are more likely to attract the attention of people who are desperate to earn the approval of someone who isn't sure whether they want to give it.

Take a few steps back. Are you sure that you want to make yourself emotionally vulnerable? Do you really want to open up to another person? If not, you aren't in a position to date right now.

I want to end on a positive note. Yes, love addiction is painful, and it is hard to overcome. On the other hand, if you have to deal with a love addiction, you have a golden opportunity to examine your beliefs about relationships and rebuild great communication skills from the ground up.

Your problems can become a springboard for self-development that will set you up for healthy bonds in every area of your life.

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Part II

Developing the Communication Skills You Need For Great Relationships

Chapter 10:

Understanding Different Communication Styles

Have you ever tried to have a conversation with someone, only to feel as though the two of you are speaking different languages?

Perhaps you've met someone who, on paper, seems to be just the kind of person you'd want as a partner or friend, but never quite seems to "get" you? Don't give up yet! This situation is pretty common and there is a simple explanation.

In this chapter, I'll explain why we all communicate in slightly different ways, and how to forge a connection with anyone, regardless of their communication style.

Lots of us want to understand how and why we sometimes find it hard to get along with others. I'm going to introduce a theory that has been used by leading global businesses, including Coca-Cola and Apple, and by the NASA recruitment team! If it's good enough for NASA, it's good enough for me.

The link between personality and communication style

Back in the 1970s, psychologist Taibi Kahler started researching the link between an individual's personality type and their communication style. He started his career as a psychologist interested in psychotherapy.

Specifically, he wondered what kinds of negative thought patterns caused mental health problems such as depression. He was also interested in the question of whether it was possible to predict how someone would respond to therapy based on their personality and way of speaking.¹⁷³

He reasoned that if he could understand how someone was likely to behave whilst under stress, and the style of communication they preferred to use when talking to other people, it would be easier to connect with them in psychotherapy.

The beauty of this theory is that it isn't just useful for therapists. Anyone who wants to understand why people misunderstand one another can benefit.

If you and your partner, friend or colleague just can't seem to appreciate what the other is saying, it might be down to a clash in communication styles.

Of course, it's perfectly possible to communicate with any personality type using the skills in this book. However, I've found this model to be an excellent tool when it comes to understanding others.

Once you've figured out someone's primary personality type and method of communication, you'll find that your relationships will become smoother.

The six key personality types

Kahler figured out that most people fall into one of the following categories. **No one is locked into these patterns forever.** We all contain elements of these six personalities, and each style has its own motivations and communication styles.¹⁷⁴ However, we all tend to gravitate towards one of these “types:”

Harmonizers

[30% of Americans fit this category, and 75% of Harmonizers are women]

Here’s how you can spot a Harmonizer:

1. They are gentle, compassionate, and like to nurture others
2. They are sensitive and easily hurt
3. They like to build bonds by exchanging personal stories
4. They are great at validating other people
5. They don’t like to be alone, and they love helping others
6. They enjoy the visual arts, good food, and uplifting music – their senses are highly attuned to stimuli
7. When they are upset, they tend to become less assertive, experience a loss of confidence, and they become flustered

How should you talk to a Harmonizer?

1. They love affirmations such as “You’re so generous” and “You’re such a good listener,” so use them wherever possible
2. They like to exchange stories – a Harmonizer will appreciate it when you open up to them
3. Tell them exactly how they can help, and how much their help means to you
4. Keep tension to a minimum, never raise your voice, and stay calm in heated situations
5. Show your gentler side, as this will make them feel safe
6. Watch for signs of uncertainty, and give them plenty of praise to shore up their confidence

Thinkers

[25% of Americans fit this category, and 75% of Thinkers are male]

If you meet a Thinker, you’ll notice that they:

1. Like to know precisely what is going on, and when
2. Prize logical thinking above all else
3. Deal in facts and figures
4. Value equality – if they are fighting with someone, they believe it is only right that everyone is heard
5. Prefer solitude and small groups to larger gatherings
6. Become critical of others when under stress, and can become pedantic with regards to dates, times, and schedules

How should you communicate with a Thinker?

1. Don't waffle – Thinkers like to get the facts upfront
2. If you want to win their respect, always back up your arguments with objective facts and figures
3. Praise them for their hard work rather than their personality and people skills
4. Speak to them one-on-one if possible
5. If they have upset you, relate the facts and list your feelings (bullet points work well here!)
6. Tap into their strengths by asking them for help with planning or research tasks
7. Anticipate pedantic behavior, and be ready to steer the conversation back to the original problem if necessary

Persisters

[10% of Americans fit this category, and 75% of Persisters are male]

How do you know when you've found a Persister?

1. You'll notice that they are a keen observer of people
2. They tend to hone in on the important facts of a situation quickly
3. They voice their opinions, and they hold fast to their values
4. They are conscientious, and hate leaving a job unfinished

5. They are usually introverted
6. They can be too pushy when it comes to their belief system, especially under stress
7. They expect a lot of themselves – and, sometimes, they expect too much of others

How should you communicate with a Persister?

1. Always make it clear that you respect their cherished beliefs, even if you don't agree with them
2. Praise them for all the tasks they have completed
3. Talk through problems in terms of beliefs and values – Persisters place a lot of emphasis on personal convictions
4. If you are debating or fighting with a Persister, tell them that your primary desire is to understand their beliefs
5. Be prepared to defend your boundaries if a Persister is in a dogmatic mood, because they might try to push their beliefs on you
6. Talk to them alone or in a small group – they do not like big parties!

Imaginers

[10% of Americans fit this category, and 60% of Imaginers are female]

Here's how you know you've found an Imaginer:

1. They are calm and collected, but waste no time in telling you exactly what they think
2. They are creative, and will put forward many potential solutions to a problem
3. They are highly introverted, and prefer to be alone than with others
4. When they experience a problem, they have a tendency to suffer from “paralysis by analysis”
5. They find it hard to reach out for help

Some tips for communicating with an Imaginer:

1. Respect the fact that they need a lot of time alone, and may need time to think through a situation in solitude
2. Be prepared to offer them help a few times before they will accept it
3. Outline a situation in concise terms, and ask them for help in explicit terms if you need a solution
4. Praise them for their ability to think through a problem and come up with a new perspective

Rebels

[20% of Americans fit this category, and 60% of Rebels are female]

A typical Rebel:

1. Has a high level of energy, and is fun to be around
2. Can be very creative

3. Enjoys spending time with groups of people
4. Is competitive and likes to be “the best”
5. Is quick to judge others when things go wrong, and does not like to admit personal faults
6. Is usually upbeat, but can spiral into negativity when something does not go their way

When communicating with a Rebel:

1. Match your energy to theirs – a Rebel will find you more likeable if you are enthusiastic
2. Show that you appreciate their sense of humor, and turn problem solving into a game if possible
3. Praise their imagination and efforts
4. Give them a choice between two or more options if possible – they like to express a preference
5. Be prepared for them to blame you if you have to break some bad news
6. Defend your boundaries against their negativity

Promoters

[5% of Americans fit this category, and 60% of Promoters are male]

Here's how to spot a Promoter:

1. They always want to know what is going to happen next, and when
2. They value action over thought, and they like to win
3. They are great at persuading others

4. They like spending time in groups
5. They can use their charm to manipulate other people
6. They can become bored easily, and tend to abandon half-finished projects

When communicating with a Promoter:

1. Keep the conversation focused on realities, not dreams
2. Allow them to show off their knowledge and skills
3. Let them charm and flatter you – within reasonable limits!
4. Guard yourself against manipulation by keeping your boundaries intact
5. If you sense that they are becoming bored, get what you need from them (whether that's information or a commitment to finishing a project) as soon as possible

So how can this model help you?

As you can see, each personality style comes with its own way of viewing the world. As you read through the descriptions, you probably slotted people you know into these categories.

Now think about what might happen when two people with different personalities have to work or live together. It can get messy. But when you know what you're up against, you can start thinking of strategies.

The Persister and the Promotor

I'll give you an example that shows how this theory can help us deal with others. I'm a Persister – I like to stick to my beliefs, I'm observant, and I like to see a project through to completion. A couple of years ago, I went on a few dates with a Promoter. At the time, I was learning about personality theories and so it was a good opportunity to see how this model worked in real life!

My date was lively, charming, and a good planner when it came to setting up activities – all common Promoter traits that fit well with my personality. As you know from the descriptions above, Promoters can also become manipulative when they don't get what they want.

During our second date, she told me a story about a time she had persuaded a colleague to go against their manager's orders. As a result of her manipulation, the colleague lost his job. That put me on high alert. Normally I would have ended the relationship there and then, but I was interested to see how the situation would play out.

One night, she phoned me just to ask about my day. At least, that's what she said she was doing. Then, after a few minutes, the conversation went like this:

HER: I'm glad work went well for you. My day wasn't great.

ME: Oh no, what happened?

HER: Nothing really.

ME: OK.

[At this point, I began to think that our interaction was taking a strange turn.]

HER: Actually, I'll tell you. [Deep breath, loud swallow.] You know my cat, Monty? I had to take him to the vet today. He's really sick. He needs surgery this week. The vet says he'll die without it!

ME: That's terrible. Aw, poor Monty. It's so hard to watch an animal suffer. When's his surgery?

HER: That's the problem. It's going to cost six hundred dollars. I don't have insurance. The vet says I can pay in instalments, but the interest is really high. I don't suppose...no, I won't ask.

ME: Ask what?

HER: Could you lend me half of it?

[I had only known this woman three weeks, and I was not going to lend her any money. I stood my ground and told her that she would have to find the money elsewhere.]

HER: Typical. You don't care about anyone but yourself. I've been so nice to you. Actually, I've been thinking, you're kind of selfish. I don't know whether I want to see you again.

ME: That's a shame. I think this conversation is over.

The good news is that I had seen this behavior coming – she was a Promoter who had already told me that she had a history of manipulating people.

Obviously, I didn't know that it would take the form of a request for \$300, but I wasn't exactly shocked when she tried to emotionally blackmail me. Here's the kicker – she'd never mentioned Monty before. I'm not convinced he ever existed.

I'm not saying that Promoters are "bad," just that an awareness of the different personality types, combined with your own observations, can give you an advantage over toxic people.

Using the model to solve arguments

This works best when you are both familiar with this model, and have talked about it beforehand. Let's say that you are an Imaginer, and your partner is a Rebel. As an Imaginer, you appreciate the opportunity to spend time alone to ponder a situation rather than hammer out a resolution with your partner.

Meanwhile, your Rebel would rather take a direct approach that allows you to come up with creative solutions together.

However, if you both acknowledge the differences in your communication styles, you can work on a compromise. For example, you could both take some time alone to collect your thoughts, before sitting down and making a list of all the solutions the two of you can possibly come up with in under 10 minutes.

This approach would satisfy an Imaginer's need for alone time when under stress, together with the Rebel's desire for collaboration and creativity.

Why not use this chapter as a basis for a discussion with your partner about communication styles? It could be the start of a more productive, cohesive period in your relationship.

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Chapter 11:

How to Validate Another Person (And Yourself!)

Aside from a sense of security and trust, what do people want most in their relationships? I can sum it up in one word: Validation. As social animals, we want to feel that people accept us for who we are.

This is especially important in romantic relationships, because they are usually the most intimate bonds we form. If our partner doesn't seem to appreciate our perspective, or support us when things get tough, we are liable to feel hurt.

Validation is a great way to let your partner know that you are always there for them. Best of all, it's easy to do once you understand the principles behind it!

What is validation?

Have you ever gone away from a conversation about a difficult or complex topic feeling as though the other person truly understood you?

Isn't it wonderful when someone "gets" you, even if you know that they don't personally agree with what you have to say?

When you are validated by another person, you know that they really appreciate who you are and what you are trying to achieve. If you are trying to negotiate an outcome or just talk

through a difficult situation, validation is a great starting point. It builds rapport and respect.

At this point, I want to draw a clear distinction between empathy and validation. [If you have read my other books](#), you'll know how to use empathy in your relationships. **To briefly recap, empathy is the ability to put yourself in the position of someone else in order to understand their perspective.**

It's an essential ingredient for a good relationship, because it enables you to work through differences and appreciate your partner as a human being.

Validation takes this one step further.¹⁷⁵ To validate someone is to signal that you not only understand another person's perspective, but that you are happy to accept them exactly as they are.

Rather than summarizing and reflecting their feelings, you provide the individual with concrete reasons why you understand their position.

You not only state that you "hear" or "feel" them, but that you acknowledge their position as valid. Ideally, you will also throw in a couple of reasons why they might feel that way.¹⁷⁶ The most powerful combination of all is empathy combined with a large helping of validation.

Still confused? Let's look at an example of empathy versus empathy plus validation.

Empathy in action

PARTNER: You didn't call me when you said you would. Do you not care about my feelings? I'm feeling hurt right now.

YOU: I hear you. I know that my behavior has really upset you. I'm sorry.

Empathy plus validation in action

PARTNER: You didn't call me when you said you would. Do you not care about my feelings?

YOU: I hear you, and I know that I've upset you. I'm sorry. I know that last month you told me about how bad you felt in your last relationship when your ex took too long to call you back, and I know that I messed up last week too when I got home much later than expected. I can see why it looks like I don't care, and I get why you feel that way. I certainly do care about your feelings, and I'd like to make it up to you.

The second response appears much more thoughtful. It isn't defensive, and it's phrased in such a way that the other person feels as though they matter.

Proof that validation really does make a difference

Not convinced? Research attests to the sheer power of validation. For example, in a study run by two Korean psychologists, validation trumped empathic responses when it came to boosting participants' self-esteem and lowering their levels of aggression.¹⁷⁷

The researchers recruited 80 participants, who were invited to take part in a computer game. Using sneaky computer programming tactics, some participants were made to believe that the other players were excluding them from the game.

The participants were then split into three groups. One group listened to a recording that featured neutral facts about the game.

The second group heard a set of empathic statements that described the feelings they might have experienced when the other players “excluded” them.

Finally, the third group listened to a recording that not only described the feelings they might have experienced, but validated them. For example, the final group heard this statement:

“Seeing that you felt bad in this situation, you probably wish to get along with people and consider a sense of belonging and closeness with others important.”

Although both the empathic and validation conditions made the participants feel better about being excluded, the validation condition was more effective.

Validation tips

Use guesses if it’s not clear what they are feeling: Someone who is experiencing conflicting emotions might not be able to articulate them. Until you both know what’s going on, you can’t fully validate another person.

Evaluate their words and body language, then use the following phrases to make sensitive, diplomatic guesses:

“It sounds to me as though you feel...”

“From my position, it sounds like your primary emotion right now is...”

“Would you say that you are feeling...?”

It doesn’t matter if you are wrong, because the other person can correct you. In fact, it can be helpful for your partner to

discover what they are *not* feeling, because it narrows down their possible answers!

As long as you remain patient and validate whatever emotions come up for them, this tactic will work in bringing about a shared understanding.

Ask clarifying questions: If you merely parrot someone's words back to them, along with a couple of generic validating phrases, they will suspect that you didn't really listen to them in the first place.

The solution is to ask one or two questions and listen attentively – even if you already know the answers! – because doing so will make your validating statements appear sincerer.

Let's say that your partner has been involved in several different projects at work. Recently, they have also been making occasional remarks about their manager's incompetence.

PARTNER: Oh my God, I had a terrible day at work! Our team leader won't listen to any of the suggestions we make, even though the project is really starting to come off the rails.

YOU: You sound frustrated. Which project are you referring to?

PARTNER: The upcoming marketing campaign. It's so stressful. There's so much work to be done.

YOU: I can see that this is causing you a whole heap of trouble. Obviously, you feel overwhelmed. That makes total sense, given that you've had to deal with a lot of problems at work recently.

In this kind of conversation, it is important to hone in on precisely what is bothering your partner. If you aren't entirely certain what is causing them so much distress, your attempts at validation and empathy might appear patronizing or impersonal.

Refer back to past events if appropriate. Nothing happens in a vacuum,¹⁷⁸ so if you are puzzled by the strength of your partner's reaction, consider what has happened in the past that may have influenced their view in the present.

Normalize – sometimes: It can be reassuring to know that you aren't the only person in the world to react in a particular way to a situation, and most people appreciate some validating words that let them know that their reaction is normal.

For example, if your friend tells you that they are looking forward to starting a family but feel daunted by the prospect of becoming a parent, you could validate them like this - "That's understandable. Becoming a parent is a big responsibility. I think a lot of people feel as you do." In other words, you are "normalizing" their feelings.

However, there are a couple of circumstances in which it is not appropriate to normalize someone else's emotions. The first circumstance concerns especially sensitive or traumatic situations. Be very careful in reassuring someone that their feelings are normal, because they may feel as though you are patronizing them. Avoid phrases like "Everyone would feel as you do," or "It's normal to feel like that."

Normalizing isn't a good idea when the other person has behaved in a manner most people would find bizarre or unacceptable.¹⁷⁹

For instance, if your partner had been written up at work for shouting and swearing at a customer, it wouldn't be appropriate to tell them that anyone would have done the same!

For a start, this simply isn't true. Second, you do not want to risk encouraging or condoning immoral behavior.

Finally, your insincerity may show in your tone of voice or body language. Once someone has realized that you are willing to lie in this kind of conversation, they will be reluctant to trust you in the future.

Match your body language to your words: Even if you pride yourself on your ability to multitask, it's never acceptable to split your attention between your partner and something else whilst offering validation. They will assume that although you are saying all the "right things," you are not really taking the situation seriously.

Refrain from commenting on their choices: Note that validation does not equal agreement. You can hold a totally different view, but still fulfil your partner's need for validation.¹⁸⁰

However, if you are making judgments about someone else's choices, you are not validating them. In fact, you are doing the complete opposite. I know that keeping a clear head can be hard, but validation and judgment can't go together.

Take ten minutes alone if you need some time to switch from a judgmental to validating state. If you feel compelled to offer advice, wait until they have finished giving you their account of the situation.

Tell them that as you listened to them speak, you formed an opinion of your own. **Ask them whether they would like to hear your suggestions.** Never impose your view on anyone.

Think before saying “Me too!” It can be reassuring and validating to know that someone else has handled a problem you are facing in a similar way. “I would have done the same,” or “I did exactly the same thing when that happened to me” can validate someone’s choice.

However, you should make sure that your experience really is similar to their own. Otherwise, you could appear insensitive or ignorant.

Don’t propose a quick fix: When you care about someone, it’s normal to come up with ways to “solve” the problem. However, if you leap in with a solution that you think should make them feel better, the other person might feel invalidated.

Instead of immediately offering to solve the problem, let them work through their feelings first. Most people can figure out for themselves what they need to do.

The purpose of validation is not to act as a superhero, but to adopt the position of a fellow human being who appreciates their situation.

Watch out for “validation fishing:” We all want validation, but some of us are subtler than others when it comes to asking for it. If your partner is the sort of person who will ask you directly for time and attention, that’s great – but not everyone is comfortable voicing their needs.

This means that you’ll have to become used to spotting the signs that they are “fishing” for your validation. They will be

individual to your partner, but signs that they want your attention and validation include:

1. *Sighing and tutting when they aren't in your line of vision* – they probably want you to turn around and ask them what's wrong.
2. *Glances and looks that aren't accompanied by words.* They might just be checking you out or gazing at you in adoration, but it's probably a sign that they want to talk about an important issue and get some feedback.
3. *They come and sit or stand beside you – but don't actually do anything.* They might simply be enjoying a moment of peace or relaxation, but it's likely that they want to have a conversation and air their feelings.

How to ask someone else for validation

What should you do when you need some validation from your partner? Easy – you ask. OK, it might not be that straightforward.

Lots of us have been raised to believe that making a direct request for validation is wrong and self-centered. **I'm here to tell you that it isn't, unless of course you ask your partner for reassurance all the time.** Occasionally asking them to validate your feelings and thoughts is healthy and normal.

If this is an alien concept to you, don't worry. Here are a few phrases you can borrow:

“I feel X about Y. Do you think I'm being unreasonable?”

“When X said Y to me, I was very hurt. Would you have felt the same way?”

“I can’t believe that X did Y! It’s shocking. I don’t want to see X again. It’s normal to feel upset in this kind of situation, right?”

“I feel really positive that I managed to do X. I didn’t think it would be possible. Are you proud of me?”

Remember that asking a question when you don’t want to hear the answer is destructive. Only ask if there is a reasonable chance that your partner will be able to offer you the validation you need. If not, talk to someone else.

Self-validation

Just in case you needed another reason to practice validation, think about this – what if you were able to validate yourself whenever you needed some encouragement?

Over the years, I've come to appreciate the importance of positive inner dialogue. You know that inner voice that comments on your actions and feelings all day?

I'm not exaggerating when I say that it can make all the difference when it comes to your success at work, in relationships, and life in general.

If you can't validate your own feelings, you leave yourself vulnerable to depression. In the short term, denying your feelings can help you cope with emotionally draining situations. However, if you leave feelings unprocessed, they can come back to bite you later.

For example, let's say that you ask someone out on a date, and they say "No." You really like this person, so their answer stings. You tell yourself that it didn't really matter, shrug it off, and start joining online dating sites in a bid to distract yourself. The problem? Deep down, their rejection has hurt you. Badly.

In this kind of situation, the healthiest response is to take some time for yourself and acknowledge how you feel. **Internal dialogue and self-validation are powerful tools in working through your emotions and moving past painful events.**

On the other hand, when you invalidate yourself, you are setting yourself up for long-lasting unhappiness.

Let me show you what self-validation versus self-invalidation look like.¹⁸¹ Here's some validating internal dialogue:

“This feels awful. Rejection sucks. It’s not surprising that I feel this way – I really liked them. At least I know that I’m capable of asking someone out. That took courage. And it’s good to know that there are people out there that I really want to be with.”

“God, I feel like crying right now. I’m starting to feel as though I’ll never find a partner. Given that I had two important relationships end in my twenties, I think this is a reasonable way to feel. Fortunately, I can be happy whilst single. I just need a bit of time.”

On the other hand, here’s some self-invalidating dialogue:

“Stop moaning. Some people have far worse problems.”

“You’re a grown man/woman, stop being pathetic.”

“Did you really think you stood a chance with them anyway? Get real!”

“I don’t know why I’m so upset. There are lots of fish in the sea!”

I think it’s obvious that the self-validating dialogue is much more helpful! It sets the stage for positive future action, and it encourages an optimistic outlook.

If you don’t believe me, just try it for a few days. **Heck, just try monitoring your inner dialogue for 24 hours!** I can guarantee you’ll feel better about yourself and life in general when you master the art of self-validation.

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Chapter 12:

How to Say “No” To Anyone

In a healthy relationship, both partners will want to please one another. (If you aren't interested in making your partner happy, it's time to rethink your decision to be with them!) Unfortunately, it's possible to take this natural desire too far.

If you don't know when to say “No,” you will end up going along with whatever your partner wants, but feeling resentful.

In the long run, if you don't feel as though you can discuss how their requests make you feel, you will resort to passive-aggressive communication in a bid to let them know that you are hurt.

At the start of a relationship, nothing feels too much trouble when it comes to your new partner. When I met my last girlfriend, I offered to come over every morning during a cold spell and shovel snow from her drive!

She thought I was crazy and, in a sense, I was. My brain was completely in thrall to the hormones that were flooding my body.

By the time our second anniversary had rolled around, I probably would have said “No thanks!” if she'd asked me to get up at 6am and clear the driveway. It's not that I'd become a jerk in the meantime, just that our relationship had matured.

As we get to know our partners and become more comfortable, we come back down to earth and take a more realistic view of the relationship. We start weighing up each side of the equation, and take stock of whether the relationship is balanced. We ask ourselves:

1. Do I feel as though my partner does as much for me as I do for them?
2. Is there a “giver” and a “taker” in this relationship?
3. Am I happy with the way things are?
4. If I’m not, is there any way I can change them?
5. Do I feel as though I have a choice regarding what happens in our relationship?

These aren’t questions to be taken lightly.

Think of it like this. If you can’t say “No,” you can never give a meaningful “Yes” either. A relationship in which you cannot make your true wants known is a relationship based on inauthentic communication.

Therefore, you need to understand how to turn down a request. This skill is also invaluable in friendships and business.¹⁸²

I recommend tailoring your strategy to suit the other person’s request. To keep it simple, I like to sort requests into “reasonable” and “unreasonable.”

Dealing with reasonable requests

Reasonable requests are those that most people would deem normal and appropriate. For example, if your partner asks you

to pick them up from the airport at 5pm next Friday and you have flexible working hours, this isn't an outlandish request.

You might still have to say no, but no one would blame them for asking. Most of us are happy to consider reasonable requests from those we love, because they would probably help us out in return.

Let's say that, in this case, you would normally be happy to rearrange your Friday schedule, but it just so happens that you have an unusually busy week. On top of that, one of your most important clients wants to meet with you at 4.30pm Friday afternoon. In short, you need to turn down your partner's request to collect them from the airport. How might you handle the situation so that both of you go away from the conversation feeling respected?

Open with a positive: If you make the other person feel bad for asking you to help, they will go on the defensive. They might also think twice before asking you for help in the future, which isn't good news for your relationship.

Therefore, it's best to start with a response that will build trust and confidence between you. "I'd really like to, and it always makes me happy to help you out..." would be a strong opener in the above case.

Briefly outline a reason behind the "No" if you can: As the saying goes, "No" is a complete sentence in its own right. However, if the request is reasonable and in good faith, giving a reason is a nice gesture.¹⁸³ The best reasons are nonnegotiable.

For example, "I have a meeting which cannot be rescheduled" is a sound reason and a suitably brief

explanation.

Offer a link or piece of advice that will help them out or make them feel good: Your partner might not be happy that you can't help them, but an alternative form of support or a kind gesture will help soften the blow.

This tactic will let them feel as though you care (and you do care, right?), even though you can't give them what they originally wanted from you. To continue with the same example, you could offer to order them a taxi, or have their favorite meal waiting for them in the fridge.

Let's look at another example, this time in the context of a friendship. Suppose that your best friend wants you to help her make invitations for her upcoming wedding at the weekend.

She isn't sure how to put a handmade invite together, and wants your opinion on color schemes. Unfortunately, you have already promised to visit your parents.

You could give a response along the following lines:

"I'd love to help, but I promised to visit my family weeks ago. I know that Shelly [a mutual friend] loves crafting and I think she's free this weekend – perhaps you could ask her?"

"I'd love to help, but I promised to visit my family weeks ago. I know I can't be there in person to help you out, but I'd be happy to look over a few photos if you want to send them to me."

Both of these approaches allow you to get your own needs met, whilst still helping your friend. Note that this is a "soft no" tactic. It works great if you truly like the other person and want to help them.

However, if you would rather give a straight “No,” meeting someone in the middle will leave you feeling resentful. Use the techniques in the next section instead.

End with a note of encouragement: End the conversation or a note with a few warm words that show how much you care.¹⁸⁴

For example, if your partner has asked you to pick up their son’s medicine from the drugstore on your way home from work, but you won’t have time, you could tell them that you really hope their son feels better soon and that you are looking forward to seeing them at the weekend.

Don’t take responsibility for someone else’s reaction: Sometimes, you might experience a little (or a lot) of negative pushback when you tell someone that you can’t or won’t help them.

If you are usually a passive person with a reputation as a people pleaser, others might be surprised. Here’s the most important thing to remember – as long as you’ve been reasonable in your approach, their response really isn’t a reflection on you.

Period.

Defend your boundaries and stand up for your right to be seen as more than a servant!

Saying “No” to unreasonable people and requests

The above tips work well when you have a good relationship with the other person, and the request under discussion is reasonable.

Unfortunately, as you know, there are plenty of people in this world who are happy to try their luck and trample over your needs in a bid to make their own lives easier.

For example, let's say that you have taken a week's vacation from work. It's Tuesday, and you aren't due to return until Thursday, but your phone rings – it's your boss!

They acknowledge that you are on vacation, but ask whether you'd be willing to come in the next morning anyway because they are "short on staff." You are hoping for a promotion at work, so you don't want to get on your boss's bad side.

At the same time, you have scheduled a lot of fun activities for the final day of your vacation, and you don't want to get a reputation as a pushover.

What should you do in this kind of position? Here are a few guidelines:

Assert your boundaries by stating "personal rules:" If you are asked to do something that makes you feel uncomfortable or goes against your beliefs, say that your personal code of conduct or behavior means that you cannot help them.

"I have a rule that I don't do X," or "I never do Y" is a firm way of drawing a clear line. If they probe for more information or criticize you for sticking to your standards, say "These are my personal rules, and I don't make exceptions." You can then say, "I'm glad I can trust you to respect my wishes." This puts subtle pressure on them to behave in a respectful manner. Not many people like to think that they are the sort of person to trample on someone else's boundaries.

Use the broken record technique: This one is a classic for a reason. Repeat the same answer, in the exact same tone of voice, until the other person gets the message.

If you are in a situation that allows for some humor, tell them that you said “no” the first time around, and perhaps they need to get their hearing checked.

Don't fear the silence: When someone calls on you for a favor, it's not your responsibility to take control of the conversation. Once you have provided them with a response, it's their turn to react.

A few moments of silence won't kill you, and there's no need to jump in with unnecessary explanations or apologies to fill it up.

Don't fall into the trap of accepting “gifts:” Some people try to “convince” others to grant them favors by giving or offering an unwanted gift.

I'm not a cynical person by nature, but if someone who doesn't seem to care about you suddenly goes out of their way to offer help or give you a gift, I'd advise you to be on your guard. In all likelihood, they probably want something in return.

The sneakiest people are those who give a gift, wait a week or two, and then pull out their request! Do not take them up on any offers of help, and decline material gifts if possible. On the plus side, you will at least have advance warning of their actions. This gives you a chance to rehearse how you will say “No” to their demands.

Use a noncommittal phrase: This tactic works on people who don't come out and ask for your help directly, but complain about their situation in such a way that it's obvious they expect you to help.

“Oh dear,” “What a shame,” or “That's a pity” allows you to sympathize without committing yourself to actually helping another person. If they are in desperate need of help, this strategy forces them to spell out what they really want and need.

Give them some praise in advance: End the conversation or message with a short, uplifting note, reassuring them that you are confident in their ability to sort their own problem. This draws a line under the topic, and makes you appear polite and supportive.

How to reject a date

No matter how great your communication skills, and how much relationship experience you have, dating often gets awkward. One of the trickiest situations comes when you have to issue a rejection. It's a special kind of “No,” because it feels so personal.

Being on the receiving end of a “No” hurts, but turning someone down isn't much fun either. So, what should you say when someone asks you out, but you just aren't interested?

Express your thanks: It's not easy to ask someone out on a date! In all likelihood, they were nervous about asking you, so bear this in mind when turning them down. There is no excuse for mocking someone. **Ever.**

Respect their dignity, and thank them for the invitation. **Think of your reputation.** You don't want to be known as a mean jerk who mocks anyone who dares ask you on a date.

“No, but thank you” is a complete answer: You don't owe anyone a fuller explanation. Don't feel obliged to give them a rundown of why the two of you wouldn't be compatible, why your circumstances aren't ideal, and so on. A straightforward “No” is best in most situations.¹⁸⁵

If you truly like them as a person, you can use a gentler approach: If you are asked out by a friend or colleague you genuinely like – but only as a friend – it's fine to tell them the truth.

“You are a fantastic friend/girl/guy, but I just don't have romantic feelings towards you” will get the point across whilst still affirming your respect for them.¹⁸⁶

Don't say that you aren't looking for a relationship (unless it's true): Reject that specific date/relationship, not relationships in general.

Otherwise, the person you have rejected might choose to wait and see whether you change your mind rather than move on. They will also become upset if and when you start dating someone else soon after.

Never suggest you may change your mind: How many times have you heard people in movies, TV shows, and even real life tell someone that they'll “think about it”?

I understand why people do this – they don't want to reject someone to their face, or they want to buy themselves a bit of time before delivering the killer blow.¹⁸⁷

Don't do it. It leaves them hanging on, hoping that you will somehow change your mind. Believe me, it's kinder to give a straight "No," then give them the time and space in which to process their disappointment.

The "I'll think about it" strategy doesn't work in your favor, either. When you leave the conversation, you'll start worrying how long you can expect them to wait before accepting that you really aren't interested.

If you have to work or socialize with the other person, things get very awkward very quickly.

"No" is one of the most important words in the English language, and learning how to use it is the first step in the process to getting what you really want.

"No" isn't selfish. It's an essential tool for anyone who wants to be more honest with themselves and others.

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Chapter 13:

How to Stop Having The Same Old Arguments

Earlier in the book, I explained that as a relationship matures, it's normal to feel more comfortable with your partner.

This comes with its advantages – you start feeling more secure, and you develop meaningful intimacy – but at this stage, you might start noticing that you fight about the same things over and over again.

This happens to almost every couple. It's not a sign that your relationship is doomed, or that you are incompatible.

It's your job to learn how these dynamics develop, why the same topics come up on a frequent basis, and to develop an arsenal of communication strategies that will help your relationship run more smoothly.

Why do you need to learn how to handle repetitive fights?

When you have the same fights all the time, the joy and trust is slowly sucked from your relationship.

You start to have second thoughts about the relationship, and find yourself thinking things like “We always fight, and it's exhausting,” and “Surely it shouldn't be this hard?”

Here's a depressing statistic – 69% of issues that arise in long-term relationships never get resolved!¹⁸⁸

Don't despair – there's some good news! If your personal fighting pattern is predictable, you can learn how to spot the signs and sort out your differences once and for all.

The secret is to hone your communication skills, and focus on your partner's needs as much as your own.

Before we dive into the strategies that will improve your relationship, here's another statistic that shows precisely why it's so important to improve your fighting style. It'll come as no surprise that the happiest couples have the most positive feelings about their relationships. Obvious, right?

What you might not know is that there is a specific ratio that governs relationship happiness. As a rule of thumb, when a couple experiences five positive conversations or interactions for every negative interaction, they are likely to stay together and enjoy a mutually fulfilling relationship.¹⁸⁹

Think about that for a moment – you need a whole lot of positive feelings to cancel out just one unhealthy argument. It's in your best interests to sharpen your conflict management skills!

Strategies that prevent and shut down repetitive arguments

Stop resisting: In the introduction, I talked about the unhealthy expectations we have for our relationships. One of these unspoken “rules” is that “Fighting is bad.” This isn't true. Fighting is fine. It's fighting dirty that's the problem.

Don't try to solve your problems by pretending that they don't exist, or by making an "anti-fighting pact." It won't work – the problems will still be there, bubbling away under the surface.

Before long, the two of you will start to show your unhappiness through passive-aggressive behavior. Worse, you'll start to feel as though you can't speak up in your own relationship. This will drive you apart.

Identify your top three issues: Do this exercise alone and together. Give yourself a few minutes to sit down and think about the issues that cause you the most problems as a couple.

The overlap between your lists will give you an insight into the issues that trip you up. Note that this exercise is NOT intended to give you an arena in which to fight.

You are not aiming to resolve any of the issues right now, just to discover the root cause of your problems. Awareness is the first step to solving the problem.

Identify the underlying feelings behind an argument: Ask yourself, "What's really going on here?" For example, let's suppose you and your partner are fighting about one another's spending habits.

You like to save money and lead a simple life, whereas your partner would prefer to go out for a fancy dinner every week and splash out on expensive vacations.

On one level, this disagreement is about money. However, on another level, something else might be going on.

Your need to save money might be tied to a desire for security, whereas your partner might feel as though buying

themselves nice experiences and possessions is the best way of helping themselves relax after yet another week of work.

They might feel that when you ask them to save money, you are treating them like a child. **So, the ultimate issues here are security, plus feeling respected as an adult.**

How do you tap into the underlying issues? Use **“Why” and “How” questions until you drill down to the base of the problem. For example:**

PARTNER 1: I feel patronized right now.

PARTNER 2: Why?

PARTNER 1: I don't like the way you tell me to budget more and spend less.

PARTNER 2: Why?

PARTNER 1: Because it makes me feel like a child or an idiot. It makes me feel as though you don't respect me.

The last line says it all. Although the couple need to reach a compromise on practical financial matters, they also need to address the fact that Partner 1 feels as though there is an underlying power imbalance in the relationship. This kind of conversation paves the way for a discussion about each person's need to feel respected.

Spot the triggers: Every couple has a slightly different fighting style, but there are certain phrases that act as a trigger to large, destructive arguments:

“You always...”

“You never...”

“Why am I always the one to...?”

“I’m just sick of this whole thing, I don’t care anymore...”

“We’ll never work this problem out...”

What do all these have in common? They are either broad generalizations, which help no one and take your focus away from the problem that is actually under discussion, or they hint at some vague, ominous threat that will put the other party on the defensive.

Never use these phrases. Remember that even if someone uses them against you, you do not have to respond in kind. The best approach is to return to the problem at hand.

I know it takes a lot of willpower to avoid getting dragged into the “You always/No I don’t/Yes you do” game, but avoiding it will save you so much trouble in the long run.

Make a physical change: Do you end up using the same words in your arguments, and adopting the same posture? The next time you are having a fight, make a conscious decision to move your body so that you are positioned in a different way.

There is a strong link between our minds and bodies, and physical habits are closely tied in with our thought patterns.¹⁹⁰

For example, if you tend to sit on the same chair next to the sofa when you have an argument with your partner, shift to the other side of the room and take a new seat instead.

This breaks the chain of associations between how you are feeling, the type of words you are using, and the way you are holding yourself. When you change one of these factors, it becomes easier to change another.

Hone in on specific issues: Have you ever had an argument that was prompted by a minor issue, but then spiraled out of control? Here's an example I remember from my college dating days:

ME: You said you were free on Friday, but now you have to go to your best friend's party?

GIRLFRIEND: Yeah, that's right.

ME: Didn't you know about this in advance? I mean, it's Wednesday now! Surely she asked you ages ago? I've made dinner reservations.

GIRLFRIEND: You're always so fussy. Why can't we go out on Saturday instead?

ME: That's not the point. It's not about the day. It's about the fact you always flake on me.

GIRLFRIEND: Well guess what? You're always annoying me with your stupid schedules.

This argument started because we were trying to plan our next date, but it soon descended into a fight about what she and I were “always” doing.

As you might have guessed, we ended up shouting at one another about these broader issues rather than actually resolving the problem at hand.

If I'd kept the conversation on track by focusing on the date itself, the fight could have been avoided altogether.

Now, I did have an issue with my girlfriend flaking on me – this wasn't the first time something like this had happened. However, it wasn't the time or place to raise the issue.

Follow this basic rule to stop fights spiraling out of control:

- If you are fighting about something specific, sort out that issue.
- If you feel as though there's a larger underlying problem that needs to be resolved, agree to talk about it another time.

Don't bring up the past: Don't stockpile past arguments and resentments to fling in your partner's face during a fight. **It achieves precisely nothing.** You'll both feel even angrier and more upset, and your partner will feel insulted that you resorted to such a low tactic.

Agree to disagree: If you want your partner to agree with you on every little thing, you are going to be disappointed. It's a fact of life that those closest to us aren't going to share our frame of reference.

Guess what? Part of being an emotionally mature adult is making allowances for difference. **It's healthier to work with how things actually are, rather than wishing they were different and resenting your partner for just being themselves.**

Once you've had the same old argument several times over, it's time to reach an agreement for the sake of your relationship. You don't have to "win" every fight. Think about your relationship rather than your ego.

Stop thinking of ways to change your partner's mind. You can't magically change their opinions, but you have a choice when it comes to tolerating their behavior and beliefs.

Painful as it may be, you might come to the conclusion that the two of you are simply incompatible. You will be left with the task of deciding whether to leave the relationship, but at least you will be making decisions based in reality.

Boost the positive: Remember the 5:1 ratio? Tackle your relationship problems from two angles. Take proactive measures to resolve conflict, but don't forget to take preventative measures to stop issues arising in the first place.

Be sure to spend enough time together. Scheduled dates and conversations might not sound romantic, but it's a tried and tested way of making sure that you store up some positivity in your relationship memory bank.

Verbal repair

Here's a simple strategy that can go a long way in soothing your partner's feelings. We don't always fight fair, even when we are trying our best to have a constructive discussion with a loved one.

However, you can make the smart choice and do a little "verbal repair." This will be challenging if you have an ego – and who doesn't? – but just a few words during a heated exchange can prevent long term resentment from building up. These short phrases work as verbal repair. Try these:

"Sorry, let me try a new approach."

"Sorry, I'll rephrase that."

"I know I overreacted. Please let me try again."

"I know I've hurt your feelings. Can I try again?"

“I think I know where I went wrong. Can I explain it in a different way?”

Remember that your tone counts just as much – if not more – than your words.¹⁹¹ Never use a sarcasm or patronizing tone of voice with your partner. It’s better to take a break from the situation if you cannot trust yourself to speak with respect.

What if these strategies don’t work?

The advice in this chapter is backed up by solid psychological research, but I appreciate that you might not be able to solve the problem by yourself.

You need to think about getting some professional help if:

1. Your partner doesn’t want to work with you to sort out your problems.
2. Your fights turn violent or abusive.
3. Your everyday communication has suffered, i.e. you can’t seem to talk about anything anymore.

When a relationship has started to disintegrate, you need to act quickly before its foundations are permanently damaged.

When you repeat the same arguments and neither of you feel heard by the other, one or both partners can slide into apathy. One person can try to carry a relationship for a while, but if one partner has quietly given up, there is little point in carrying on.

The moment you suspect counseling is necessary, book a session with a therapist. Tell your partner why you think the

two of you should get help to work on your relationship, and ask them if they would mind coming with you.

Unfortunately, they might tell you that they don't want to get therapy, or even deny that there is anything wrong. This in itself is a problem – but go to the session anyway.

Therapists are trained in talking to people who are having problems in their relationship, and they can advise you on how to move forward, whether alone or as part of the relationship.

I believe in trying to save relationships, but it's unrealistic to expect that every single partnership can work out. There is no shame in leaving a partner who does not meet your needs, who is abusive, or has given up on the relationship.

Your partner should make you happy, not drag you down! At the end of the day, remember that your needs matter.

Respect yourself and don't stay in a relationship that erodes your mental health!

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¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Giang, V. (2015). The Surprising & Powerful Links Between Posture & Mood. fastcompany.com

¹⁹¹ Harrow, S. (2010). Stop Fighting! Relationship Repair Without Speaking. psychologytoday.com

Chapter 14:

Topics Couples Fight About Most Often

By this point, you will appreciate how skills such as validation, assertiveness, shutting down repetitive arguments, and appreciating differences in communication styles can help you tackle virtually any relationship problem.

My aim in this chapter is to give you a few practical tips for resolving some of the most common relationship troubles. Yes, you might have to compromise in some instances, but it's still a far better outcome than fighting and resentment!

So what do couples fight about most often?

One of my favorite psychologists is relationship expert John Gottman. Together with his wife Julie, he runs the Gottman Institute in Seattle. The couple have over 40 years' experience in researching romantic relationships, so they know what they're talking about!

According to Gottman, here are the top five issues couples fight about most often:¹⁹²

1. Physical intimacy
2. Extended family
3. Free time
4. Money

5. Housework

When you look at this list, you'll notice two things:

1. It covers virtually all aspects of everyday life. Although "Career" and "Work" aren't on the list, arguments about money and free time indirectly touch on these topics.
2. Within these categories, there are dozens of potential subtopics that can form the basis for arguments!

Take "Extended Family." Within this category you have potential problems with parents, in-laws, cousins, aunts, uncles, siblings...it's no wonder that people so often have to deal with "family issues."

Physical intimacy

According to popular stereotypes, it's usually men who have higher libidos, but this isn't always the case. Therapists often come across cases in which wives complain that their husbands are no longer interested in them.¹⁹³

In a mismatched relationship, the person with the higher libido starts to worry that their partner doesn't find them attractive, and the person who isn't so interested in sex can start feeling resentful that they are expected to be physically intimate against their will.

So, how can you bridge the gap?

1. *Play the numbers game:* Therapist Seth Meyers recommends that each person in a mismatched couple rank themselves on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1

is “a naturally low libido” and 10 is “a naturally very high libido.”

When both people know their number and that of their partner, they will stop taking differences in libido personally, and can approach the situation from a calmer, more objective angle.¹⁹⁴

For example, if you are a 7 and your partner is a 4, it is unreasonable to expect them to initiate intimacy as often as you would like. However, if they are a 4, it means they do have a sex drive, so this could be a starting point for a mutually beneficial compromise.

2. *Schedule intimacy*: Sometimes, both partners’ libidos drop due to stress, hectic lifestyles, and other outside factors. Scheduling intimacy may sound unromantic, but it can be a good way of making it a priority again.

3. *Learn what your partner really wants and needs*: It’s not easy to talk about sexual desires, but it’s essential to a healthy long-term sex life.¹⁹⁵ If you can’t face having a discussion in person, why not write letters or emails instead?

When both people feel heard and validated when it comes to sex, they are more likely to physically engage with one another. This kind of discussion can be used to put together a list or “menu” of activities that both parties are happy to do.

Extended family

Jokes about in-laws are often exaggerated, but they contain a grain of truth. If you think about it, given that so many of us

have problems with our own families, it's not a surprise that we often find it hard to fit in with someone else's relations!

Here are a few tips to help smooth over familial tensions:

1. *Take a pre-emptive approach:* As you get to know your partner, tell them about any difficult relations you have, and ask them to share their family history with you. As the saying goes, knowledge is power!
2. *Present a united front:* As and when family problems arise, talk the situation through with your partner and agree what the two of you will do in response.

Consistency will earn you more respect, so never contradict one another in the presence of family members. Do not ask your partner to choose between their family and your relationship – there is always a healthier alternative than making ultimatums.¹⁹⁶

3. *Think about a family in terms of its history:* When you meet someone's relatives, you aren't just meeting a group of people – you are meeting a long history and set of stories.

If their dynamics seem unusual or toxic for no good reason, assume that something has happened that set the dynamic in motion.

Don't assume responsibility for your in-laws' problems, and never assume that you will hear every side of a story. When in doubt, stay neutral. Be slow to take sides.

You should also bear in mind that every family has its own communication style and customs. If you feel

offended by their behavior, talk to your partner – difference in background and upbringing may be to blame.

4. *Get to know your partner's relatives before jumping to conclusions:* Sure, you might never get on well with some members of your extended family. But give them a chance before writing them off. Sometimes, our first (or second) impressions are wrong.¹⁹⁷ Avoid relying on what other people tell you, and get to know them as individuals.

5. *If you don't have to maintain a relationship, it's OK to cut contact:* Unless there are solid legal or moral reasons why you need to remain on speaking terms with a relative, it's OK to remove them from your life. Just because someone is your relative doesn't mean that you shouldn't insist on decent treatment. If they can't or won't respect you and your boundaries, it's time to think about walking away.

Free time

A lot of couples find it difficult to balance their working lives, childcare, and free time. It's not uncommon for one partner to feel as though they have no time to themselves.

How can you negotiate the amount of free time you spend alone and together during your days off?

1. *Set aside designated "couple time:"* Agree what is reasonable when it comes to shared time, mark it out on the calendar, and stick to it.

This will give you both something to look forward to, and shut down the “You don’t have time for me!” arguments. Joint activities – or at least, some of them - should be fun.¹⁹⁸

For example, painting the living room might be a sensible use of your time, but it probably won’t build long-lasting intimacy or fond memories.

2. *Don’t question your partner if they want some time alone:* We all need some space in which to collect our thoughts and enjoy our hobbies. Do not interrogate your partner about their activities.
3. *Develop – and talk about - your own interests:* It’s unhealthy to spend all your free time with your partner, and it gets boring for both of you after a while.

Develop at least one separate hobby each. This gives you some breathing room from one another, and also gives you something interesting to talk about!

Money

This is a problematic area for many couples, and with good reason – the way in which you handle your money has a long-term effect on your lifestyle and financial future. The harsh reality is that if you can’t talk to your partner about money, you’re going to be in for a bad time.

1. *Get transparent from the beginning:* Financial compatibility is vital for a happy long-term future. Never gloss over financial realities.

Be clear about the kind of lifestyle you lead from the start of your relationship, and never move in together without first laying all your financial cards on the table and agreeing on who will pay for what.¹⁹⁹

2. *Talk through hypothetical possibilities:* What happens if one of you gets made redundant, or your financial situation changes in some other way? Avoid stress and uncertainty by talking through possibilities in advance.

3. *Make sure you both have a sense of control:* If someone told you how to spend every cent you owned, you'd soon get resentful. Budget and negotiate so that both parties have some money of their own – even if it's a small sum each month – to use however they please, with no justifications required.²⁰⁰

Housework

Not many people enjoy housework, and when one person does more than their fair share (or at least, believes they do more than their fair share!), all hell can break loose. Here's how to ensure a fair divide:

1. *Establish your priorities:*²⁰¹ Do you both like a very clean home, or does one of you have much higher standards than the other? Prepare to meet in the middle regarding what is an “acceptable standard.”

For example, you cannot reasonably expect your partner to clean the bathroom every day if they believe that cleaning it twice a week is enough.

2. *Make a list of all the chores that need doing, and make a schedule:* Once you have established what absolutely must be done every day or week, divide up the chores according to ability and preference. Again, both parties might have to compromise here.
3. *Set up an agreed “housework hour:”* If compiling a schedule feels too much like hard work, you can agree to blitz the house together at a specific time every day.
4. *If your partner doesn’t cooperate, only raise the issue at the end of the week:* Set up a new schedule every week, and only review it once every seven days. If your partner isn’t keeping to their end of the bargain, use your assertive communication skills and boundaries as necessary.

Remember, every single one of these areas can be tackled using your communication skills toolkit. There are a lot of issues to unpick here, so don’t try to resolve all of them overnight!

Choose one or two that bother you most, and set yourself the challenge of addressing them constructively with your partner over the coming week.

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Chapter 15:

How to Use Communication To Rebuild Trust & Prevent Jealousy

As we all know, people break one another's trust all too often. Cheating and lying are toxic to any partnership, because they erode feelings of security between two people.

To complicate matters further, jealousy creeps into many relationships – and it often gets worse when one partner has been caught betraying the other.

In this chapter, I'm going to teach you communication strategies that will help your relationship survive betrayal and episodes of irrational jealousy.

Rebuilding trust after infidelity

We all know someone who has cheated or been cheated on, but did you know that, according to Statistic Brain, 14% of married women have cheated on their husbands, and 22% of men have cheated on their wives?²⁰²

On the plus side, this means that the majority of people don't cheat. On the other hand, it's definitely not an unusual problem.

Some people cheat because they have a sense of entitlement and want some “excitement.” Think of the person who notices

a new attractive colleague at the office, and decides to have an affair on the basis that it will add some spice to their life.

Another example is the man or woman who feels flattered when a younger person shows them some romantic interest, so they get sucked into an inappropriate situation out of excitement and curiosity.

Occasionally, someone might feel that they are falling in love with a third party, but this isn't actually a common factor in an affair. Most of the time, affairs happen because someone doesn't have the motivation or skills to talk about the underlying problems in their relationship.

Specifically, if you feel as though your relationship is lacking either emotionally or sexually, you might feel inclined to go looking elsewhere if you don't have the ability to talk about the real issue with your partner.²⁰³

On the plus side, excellent communication skills in a relationship will make it less likely that one or both of you will be unfaithful. But what should you do if it's already happened?

Communication strategies that heal relationships

1. *Make conscious agreements:* Most affairs are easy to define – if you are in a monogamous relationship and your partner sleeps with someone else, it's clear that they have violated a boundary.

However, things can become murkier when it comes to emotional infidelity or inappropriate flirting. For example, one person might think that flirting online with an attractive single acquaintance is harmless, whereas another may see it as a violation of trust.²⁰⁴

If your situation is in the “ambiguous” camp, create “conscious agreements” to rebuild trust and prevent repeat occurrences in the future. Hammer out the details and put them in writing.

Be completely clear on what is and isn't OK. Conscious agreements bolster trust because they are proof that both people know what will and will not be tolerated.

You should also set up a schedule of regular communication. This encourages openness and transparency, and will help the betrayed partner feel more secure.

Even if everything appears to be going well, setting aside time for a general “catch up” session each week can foster intimacy, connection, and trust.

2. Emphasize stability and reliability in all your interactions: Remember, the best relationships are built on a sense of trust and security. If you have betrayed your partner, you should aim to be as calm, dependable, and stable as possible.

This means exercising patience at all times, staying true to your word – even in relation to trivial matters – and volunteering information about your schedule.

If you have been betrayed, you can reasonably expect these behaviors from your partner. If they are truly sorry and want to make amends, they will be eager to make you feel more comfortable.²⁰⁵

3. Choose your confidantes wisely: It can be hard to know what to do after an affair. To make matters

worse, talking to outsiders can add to your confusion.

People often have strong opinions on infidelity, and their opinions can make you question your own judgment. It is best to keep these problems between yourself, your partner, and people you can trust to listen without passing comment on what you should do next.

4. *Avoid drip feeding, and don't tolerate it in someone else:* To drip feed the truth is to release information in small chunks, in the hope that it will make the other person feel “better” or to make a problem seem less serious than it really is.

Drip feeding is disrespectful, because it causes the betrayed party to feel hurt on multiple occasions as the truth is gradually released.

Don't do it – have the guts to answer your partner's questions the first time. How can they trust you if you have a history of holding back vital information?²⁰⁶ If you are the betrayed party, you need to recognize it as a cowardly communication strategy.

5. *Be prepared to rehash the same conversation:* When someone's trust has been shattered, it can take some time for them to fully absorb the reality of the situation.

A betrayed partner may think of new questions to ask, or want to hear the same explanation again. If you have broken your partner's trust, staying consistent in your explanations will help rebuild it.

Never tell them that they “should have moved on by now,” as this will cause them to retreat from you. If you have been betrayed, please know that it’s normal to want to talk about the affair several times over.

6. *Don’t justify the unjustifiable:* If you have betrayed your partner, never insult them by trying to justify your actions. There’s a fine line between explaining why you acted as you did – which is an important step in telling your partner the truth – and absolving yourself of blame.

If you have been betrayed, you do not have to listen to justifications – it is your right to shut down the conversation and insist that you have no interest in listening to their “reasons.”

7. *Give it time.* Trust cannot be rebuilt overnight, or within a few weeks. It takes commitment and patience on both sides. Whatever side of the equation you are on, stay honest about your feelings.

If you have been betrayed, you do not have to forgive your partner immediately, and claiming that you have “moved on” when you are still hurting will not do your relationship any favors.

If you have hurt your partner, you need to realize that they will need copious reassurance that you are faithful and remorseful for many months to come. A single apology will not be sufficient.²⁰⁷ If you feel as though this is too big a burden to carry, or too great a task, the best thing to do is end the relationship.

Only 31% of marriages last when one or both parties have been caught cheating,²⁰⁸ but good communication can act as a bridge back to a functional relationship.

You may need professional therapy to completely move past an affair, but the strategies in this chapter are a good start.

What about irrational jealousy?

Note that I'm talking about irrational jealousy here. If you suspect that your partner is cheating because you have solid evidence, that's not irrational! I'm talking about pointless obsession that has no basis in reality.

So how can you overcome this problem?

1. *Don't overcompensate or over-explain:* If you are faced with a jealous partner, don't fall into the trap of reassuring them multiple times a day that you are faithful, or explaining in exhaustive detail where you have been and what you have been doing.

This will merely lead you to resent your partner, and it won't satisfy them anyway – someone who is irrationally jealous won't be convinced by logic and reason.

If you are the jealous partner, realize that trust is a choice. You can never prove your partner's fidelity, just as they can't prove yours.

2. *Look for any underlying causes, and discuss them:* Some people find it hard to trust following a bad relationship or an abusive childhood that left them feeling insecure. Talking through these issues can help both parties gain a new understanding of the jealous partner's feelings.

3. *Ask a trusted friend for an outsider's perspective:*²⁰⁹

If you aren't sure whether your partner is being unreasonable – whether you are the jealous one or not – ask someone you can rely upon to give you their verdict. Sometimes we can get so caught up in this kind of problem that we lose perspective.

4. *Don't allow obsessing to become a hobby:* If you are very jealous, you probably have too much time on your hands. Try good old-fashioned distraction.

If you are the partner of a jealous person, support them in finding new outlets for their mental energy. However, be careful not to patronize them with phrases like “You need to just stop thinking about it.” Be diplomatic.

Jealousy can usually be tackled pretty easily if you know how to handle the problem.

However, I'll end this chapter on a cautionary note. If your partner is excessively jealous to the point of causing you significant stress, they may need professional help in order to move past this psychological problem.

Encourage them to seek assistance from a therapist. If they are unwilling to do so, it may be a sign that they place their feelings above yours, which does not bode well for the future of your relationship.

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Chapter 16:

Communication Tools That Will Rekindle the Flame In Romantic Relationships

Love tends to move from passion to a steady bond over time, but that doesn't mean you have to settle for boredom!

In this chapter, I'm going to give you a few quick tips that will fire up the bond between yourself and your partner. **The key takeaway is this – meaningful communication can increase intensity, which can rekindle the “spark.”**

Here's how you can breathe life into a relationship that feels somewhat stale:

Give meaningful compliments: When was the last time you told your partner that they looked hot, or that they were doing fantastically well at work? It takes only a couple of seconds to give a compliment, but they can make someone feel appreciated and respected.

Watch out for negative remarks: Along with increasing the number of positive comments you make, check in with yourself and take an inventory of the criticisms and unhelpful remarks you make on a day to day basis.

If you need to raise an issue with your partner, do it in a civil and loving way. Do not make snide remarks or engage in

passive-aggressive communication.

Make “love vows:”²¹⁰ Relationships need to be balanced. Both parties need to give and take. Restore the balance by making three “love vows” for the next week or month.

Both of you should think of three loving things to do for your partner, and then promise that you’ll do them within a specific time frame. For example, you could promise to give them a massage or cook their favorite meal.

Allocate time to talk about boring or mundane issues such as bills and housework: When you settle into everyday life as a couple, you might feel as though your love is crushed under the weight of everyday life.

Set aside an hour or two a week to talk about strictly practical matters. This will free you up to have more fun at other times!

Write a sincere letter that lists what you most admire about them²¹¹: A heartfelt letter is one of the best gifts to give or receive. Such letters encourage mutual intimacy, and make the receiver feel loved and secure in the relationship. I can attest that this works wonders!

In my first serious relationship, I wrote my girlfriend a letter like this four times each year for three years. We are still on positive terms today, and she still thanks me for “being so romantic.”

Write gratitude lists and swap them every week: I was once in a relationship with a woman who told me one day that I “didn’t appreciate her.” I immediately drew up a list of five things she had done for me over the past week – including

vacuuming my spare bedroom, and buying me a new phone charger – and presented it to her, along with a sincere declaration of love.

She was shocked, albeit in a good way! She and I got into the habit of writing little “gratitude lists” and swapping them every couple of weeks. I’d recommend this exercise to anyone! Don’t forget to include the things we often take for granted.

For example, let your partner know how much you love their hugs, or how much you love the sound of their laugh. In fact, you could make a whole list devoted to the “small stuff” that makes you smile every day.

Communicate across multiple channels: Mix things up! If you usually chat via instant messaging apps, send an email instead. If you don’t often use video chat, make a couple of calls next week. Trying new things shows your partner that you are still interested in connecting with them in different ways.

Shut down outside communication for an hour each day: The internet is a wonderful tool, and smartphones are awesome – but obsessive phone use isn’t good for your relationship. **To build intimacy and make it easy to really listen to one another, try a phone-free hour at least a couple of evenings each week!**

Make a point of being on your best behavior: You probably made sure that you displayed good manners during the early weeks and months of your relationship, because you wanted to impress your new partner.²¹²

Why not relive those early days? They will feel flattered that you are going to such an effort!

We're all guilty of taking people for granted sometimes, but it's pretty easy to make your partner feel good again. If they ask why you are being so nice, tell them the truth!

Apologize for putting in less effort than you did in earlier stages of the relationship, and explain that you want them to feel loved. You don't need an excuse to show your partner how much they mean to you.

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Chapter 17:

Effective Communication for Parents & Caregivers

In this chapter, I want to share some extra advice and tips for parents and anyone who works with children and teenagers. I've spent plenty of time minding my two young nephews, and I can tell you that this advice makes childcare a whole lot easier!

How to communicate with any child

We've all been there. You're trying to convince a child to do something – whether it be finishing their dinner, putting their boots on, or going to bed – and they just aren't cooperating. Or maybe you are trying to get through to a teen who doesn't want to talk to you. Whatever their age, communicating with kids can be tough.

Here are some solid principles to follow:

1. *Yelling is pointless*: Yelling may feel good at the time, but it's destructive. It teaches a child that it's OK to shout and act in an aggressive manner when they feel angry, which isn't good!

Yelling also puts both of you on the defensive, triggering your nervous systems and escalating the situation. This shuts down all lines of communication, which isn't the result you want!²¹³

Worse, a child who is yelled at by their caregivers is at greater risk of developing behavioral and social problems.²¹⁴

2. *Give a child some choice:* Children often get frustrated because adults always tell them what to do and how to act. Part of growing up is learning to establish a separate sense of self, and it's hard to do that if you don't have any autonomy.

Compromise by guiding the child's behavior, but offering them an element of choice at the same time. For example, a child has to get dressed in the morning – but you could offer them the choice of a blue, green, or yellow shirt.

Stay consistent – don't give a child a choice of clothes one morning then not the next, because they will become confused.²¹⁵

3. *Talk during transition times:* Children and teens often feel more relaxed during car trips, when walking to or from a scheduled activity, or when completing mundane chores like helping with the laundry.

This makes them more likely to open up about issues that are bothering them.²¹⁶ Pay extra attention during these moments, and be sure to let them speak.

I was taking my nephew to soccer practice one day, when he casually mentioned that he was upset about his parents' recent separation.

Until that point, everyone had assumed he was handling it well. I told his mother about our conversation, and my nephew received the counseling he needed.

4. *Let children make their own mistakes:* You might want to pass your hard-earned wisdom onto your children, but it's better to let them find their own way in the world.

You don't like it when someone tries to interfere in your life, right? Extend the same courtesy to kids, especially teens.

Obviously, you need to intervene if they are in danger, but most of the time it's best to let them learn from experience. Refrain from giving unsolicited advice. If your child seems receptive to your opinion, assure them that you recognize the differences between their life and your own.²¹⁷

5. *Show them how to open up about emotions:* Show kids how emotionally balanced people talk about everyday events.²¹⁸

For instance, if you are feeling annoyed because you had a hard day at work, don't pretend that everything's fine. This will just confuse a child, make them doubt their own judgment, and encourage them to keep their own emotions bottled up.

Tell the child, in age-appropriate language, why you feel bad. Let them know what happened to you that day, and how you are going to solve the problem.

This kind of modeling teaches them that it's OK to talk about feelings, and that even the "bad stuff" can be worked out in the end.

6. *Don't patronize a child:* You're the adult, so you know best - right? Not necessarily! Kids can be remarkably perceptive, and they – not you – know how they are thinking and feeling.

When your child starts talking about their worries or concerns, switch into full listening mode. Do not interrupt, and let them explain exactly what is on their mind.²¹⁹

7. *Listen in a nonjudgmental manner:* If you seize every chance to berate your child for their mistakes, they won't feel comfortable opening up to you in the future.

Impose consequences for bad behavior, spell out rules, and defend your boundaries – but withhold moral judgments where possible.

Do you know what teens want most from the adults in their lives? **According to research, they want their parents to be available for important conversations, and to hold back on making quick judgments.**²²⁰

You won't agree with all your child's views and choices – and that's perfectly OK! Keep your ego in check and be open to the possibility that there is more than one way of looking at a situation.

8. *If you aren't sure what they need from a conversation, just ask:* If a child starts talking to you

but the conversation doesn't seem to be going in any particular direction, gently ask whether they want someone to listen, whether they want some advice, or whether they need something else entirely. Just like adults, children and teens vary in their ability to voice their needs.

9. *Open with thoughts rather than questions:* Questions definitely have a place when you're communicating with a child, but too many questions can make them defensive. Sometimes, it's best to open with a thought rather than a query.

For example, if a teen seems particularly distant one Saturday evening but doesn't seem in the mood to talk, you could say "I've been thinking, today has felt a bit slow and dull," and see whether it prompts them to open up.

This approach feels less invasive than questions like "What's the matter?" or "Why won't you talk to me?"

Oh, and it's best to avoid asking questions during dinner too.

If you get into the habit of making every dinnertime into an interview, your children (especially teens) will start dreading it, which will result in a tense atmosphere.

10. *Look beyond irrational statements:* When a child says something like "I hate school!" or "I hate my so-called best friend!" don't respond with a minimizing statement like "Don't be silly," or "I'm sure you don't mean that."

Instead, validate their feelings and use simple questions to get to the heart of the issue. Asking “Why, exactly?” or “What has happened?” will give you the bigger picture. Their “silly” statements might not be silly after all!²²¹

11. *Explain the logic behind your decisions:* As a parent or caregiver, you will need to lay down the law from time to time and make decisions.

However, rather than use phrases like “Because I said so, that’s why!,” explain the logic behind your decision.

Even if the child doesn’t agree with you, they will at least realize that you have your reasons, and aren’t just out to make them unhappy. Show that you have taken time to consider a request, as this will help your child feel respected.²²²

For example:

CHILD: Can I go to Stacey’s house for a sleepover Friday night?

PARENT: I’ll have to think about that and get back to you in a few minutes, OK?

[10 minutes later]

PARENT: I know you love going to Stacey’s house and that sleepovers are fun, but we have to visit your aunt on Saturday morning and you’ll be tired from the sleepover if you go, so it’s a “No” this time.

CHILD: But I want to go!

PARENT: I know it’s disappointing. But there’s a good reason why you can’t go, and that’s my final answer.

The main rule is to show your child the same respect you would want to receive in return.

At the same time, your job is to enforce reasonable boundaries and stick to them.

Contrary to what you might think, children appreciate structure and routine. The best parents are those who use a consistent approach when it comes to discipline, and insist on appropriate standards of behavior. At the same time, they always let their children know that they are there for support and guidance when necessary.

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Chapter 18:

Communication Strategies for Friendships

Although our romantic relationships tend to be the most intense bonds we make outside our birth families, friendships come a close second.

In fact, some people would argue that losing a long-term friendship can cause more pain than the loss of a long-term romantic relationship. Research has shown that women tend to take “friend breakups” especially hard.²²³

What’s the solution? Yep, you’ve guessed it – communication! Some friendships just aren’t destined to last the distance, but knowing how to handle common friendship problems will strengthen your bond and keep you close.

I’m going to talk about three issues that often come up in friendships, and how you can prevent them driving you apart.

Problem 1 – One-Sided Friendships

One-sided relationships are painful. When you feel as though you are putting a lot of effort into a friendship only to receive little in return, you might start to lose your sense of self-worth and confidence.

If you haven't been friends with someone for very long, the best strategy is to cut them loose. But I know this isn't so easy to do if you've been friends for years.

I've been in this situation myself. One of my best friends from college, Tom, still hung out with me every couple of weeks for years after we graduated.

The problem was that I always had to initiate contact, which made me feel resentful. He meant a lot to me, so I couldn't bring myself to cut him out of my life – and he was fun to hang out with when we did get together.

So how should you handle this kind of friendship?

1. *Tell them how you feel:* You'd think that two friends would notice when their relationship falls out of balance, but some people are just oblivious.²²⁴ What's more, once you get into a routine where someone always arranges everything, the less proactive friend starts to accept that this is "how things are."

When I worked up the courage to tell Tom how I felt, he was genuinely surprised. He thought that I liked playing the role of organizer! He started to make more of an effort after that conversation, and I began to feel a lot better.

2. *If they have turned distant, get the facts:* If your friend has been unusually distant and out of contact, it's possible that they are facing significant problems in their personal life.

Be careful. Avoid jumping to conclusions. Don't make them defensive by asking why they haven't been in touch.

Instead, tell them that you hope they are OK, and that you miss them. Then suggest that the two of you meet. You'll find out pretty quick whether they have been neglecting your friendship through laziness or through circumstance.²²⁵

3. *Use the power of scheduling:* When hanging out with a friend, ask if you can set up your next hangout before you part ways. Tell them that you've really enjoyed spending time together, and choose a date that works for you both.

You will no longer have to worry about who will next reach out to make the next "friend date." Just check in the day before and make sure they are still available. Of course, if they keep bailing on you, it's probably time to let the friendship go.

Problem 2 – Jealousy

We'd all like to think that our friends would be happy for us if we got a promotion, bought a new house, got married, or landed our dream job. Unfortunately, jealousy is common among friends. Try these tips:

1. *Tell them the full story:* When someone is jealous of you, they often assume that your life is perfect and

that you are totally happy. They get so caught up in what they don't have that their perspective gets warped.

Make sure they know that you still have your share of problems, and let them know that no situation is truly perfect. For instance, if you are getting married and your friend is jealous, you could casually mention that your in-laws are causing you trouble and that wedding planning is stressful.

Don't lie or over-emphasize your problems. Just let them know that you have ups and downs, even though your life has changed for the better.

2. *Include them in your joy:* Have you bought a house? Invite your friend over for a special housewarming dinner. Have you just had a baby? Ask your friend to be a godparent. Just got a new job? Ask them to help you pick out a couple of new outfits for your first day.

Be sure to tell them how much you appreciate their help, and how glad you are that you have friends who can share in your good news²²⁶ This tactic will help them feel more secure.

3. *Take on the more active role in your friendship for a few weeks:* Jealous people often feel that someone else's good news means that they are suddenly less important. Some extra attention can help reassure an envious friend.

Make sure that you ask them what's going on in their life, make a special effort to see them regularly, and throw them a few sincere compliments. Don't talk about your good news to the exclusion of everything else, as even the most tolerant of your friends will get sick of it fast.

Suggest a couple of new activities for the two of you to try. See the problem as an opportunity to enliven your friendship.

Problem 3 – Violations of Trust

Most of us have had to deal with a gossiping friend at some point, or someone who has spilled a deeply personal secret. When someone has abused your trust, it's hard to feel close to them again. What should you do when a friend has betrayed you?

1. *Find out why they acted as they did:* Don't try to ignore the problem. You cannot hope to trust someone again unless you know the full story. Sit down with your friend, explain what you know, and ask them for their side of the story.

Unfortunately, they may deny that anything untoward has happened, which puts you in the position of having to decide whether or not to continue with the friendship.

On the other hand, you may discover that they didn't realize you wanted a certain piece of information to be kept a secret, or that you have misunderstood the situation.

Do not rely on third parties to tell you the truth. Go straight to the source. Just as you would with any

sensitive conversation, focus on actions and consequences, not personalities.

2. *Brace yourself for defensiveness:* Few people like to think of themselves as backstabbers, so there's a chance that your friend will go on the defensive.

They might even bring up the past and remind you of your own faults in an effort to divert your attention away from the present.

Remain calm, and give them no further ammunition. Focus on the facts. You can work out how you are going to handle the relationship later.²²⁷

3. *Clean up the damage:* If your so-called friend has been spreading untruths or secrets around, you might need to hold a few conversations with other people.

For example, if you have reason to believe that your friend has told a third party that you don't like them, you will need to clear the air.

Ideally, the person who betrayed you will make amends, but it rarely works out that way. Be prepared to take an inventory of the damage and go on a cleanup mission.

Remember that it takes long-term action to repair a reputation. You may have to model ethical, consistent behavior to regain the trust of others if your reputation has been damaged.²²⁸

Draw on a couple of people you can trust at this time, because you'll need moral support.

Should you forgive your friend?

It's up to you whether you want to forgive a friend for their bad behavior. No one is perfect. Try answering these questions to help you decide whether to save the friendship:

1. On the whole, has this friendship influenced your life for the better?
2. Do you have plenty of happy memories with this person?
3. Do the two of you support one another on a frequent basis?
4. Would you miss this person a lot if you ended the friendship?
5. Do you feel as though you can talk through your problems with this person?
6. Do you feel as though they are basically a person of good character who has made a mistake?

The more "Yes" answers you can give, the better. On the other hand, there is no law stating that you must stay friends with those who treat you badly.

Only you can weigh up the pros and cons when it comes to cutting ties with people who have hurt you.

Conclusion

You've now learned everything you need to know about finding and keeping a great relationship! I've crammed a lot of tips and tricks into this guide, so don't worry if it feels a little overwhelming right now. You might want to highlight the parts that are most relevant to your relationship, and then read them again at a later date.

Let's recap what you've learned:

1. What a healthy relationship looks like, and how our society sets us up to have unrealistic ideas about love and romance.
2. Why you are bound to fight with your partner from time to time, and how to handle the most common problems people come up against in relationships.
3. How to get into the right mindset for dating, pick the right partner for you, and avoid codependent relationships.
4. How to work out what you do and don't want in a relationship, how to stand up for yourself, and how to say "No" when it matters.
5. How to keep a long-term relationship exciting and fresh.
6. How to communicate effectively with friends, family members, and children.

Impressive, huh?

If you are already in a romantic relationship, you and your partner will start to notice the difference within days if you implement the advice in this book.

If you are single, you can embark on your quest for romance secure in the knowledge that you have at your disposal the ultimate relationship toolkit.

The most important message of all

A relationship takes two people to make it work, and the best relationships are between two individuals with high levels of self-esteem. YOU are a worthwhile person in your own right, and you deserve respect from both yourself and those around you. Live by this rule, and you'll be able to avoid destructive relationships and find real, lasting love.

It's my hope that everyone reading this book will be able to fix their relationship problems using the theories and practical strategies I've offered within these pages.

At the same time, I realize that not all relationship issues can be solved without professional help.

However, even if you do need therapy, this book will still help you strengthen your bond. It will also help prevent problems cropping up again in the future.

I wish you the best of luck – I know you can build the relationship you deserve. May you find your own happy ending!

21 Days of Effective Communication

Everyday Habits and Exercises
to Improve Your
Communication Skills and
Social Intelligence

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Introduction:

Who Is This Book For?

Have you ever searched for something interesting to say, wondered how to make new friends, or suffered from social anxiety? You aren't alone. There are millions of other people in your shoes.²²⁹ Heck, I used to have similar problems. These days I can talk to almost anyone and handle everyday social situations with ease. However, it's been a long journey fraught with challenges before I reached my destination.

There's no doubt about it – communication skills are vital to success. Whether you want to improve your romantic relationships, build closer bonds with your family, make your friendships stronger, or boost your career, you absolutely must polish your communication skills.

Communication should be natural – so why do we find it challenging?

All the progress the human race has enjoyed comes down to communication. Think about it. How would we have invented our first tools, raised families, built societies, and formed governments if we hadn't been able to communicate effectively? We need these vital skills to form relationships, exchange ideas, and enjoy spending time with family and friends.

Unfortunately, our life experiences often get in the way, and we start to lose touch with our natural abilities. For example, if

you are bullied at school, you might come to believe that you are an intrinsically unpopular person who will never make friends. In this kind of situation, it makes sense that your social relationships will suffer.²³⁰

Personally, I was raised in a family of high achievers. As a result, I often felt as though any ideas I proposed were bound to be criticized. My mother says that I was a confident preschooler, but by the age of seven, I'd started to become shy.

My journey

During my early twenties, I really began to appreciate just how vital communication skills really are to anyone who wants a happy, well-balanced life. As a young adult I had several good friends and dated a few women, but I didn't really feel close to anyone. Sure, I could talk to my buddies and keep my girlfriends entertained, but something was missing.

I'd watch other people at parties, in class, and at bars, talking and laughing together without a care in the world. They seemed to find small talk so easy. I felt like I must be doing something wrong since communication didn't come naturally to me.

When I landed my first job out of college, the same old issues bubbled up. It wasn't that people didn't like me, but I always felt a bit distant. I was highly introverted, constantly second-guessing myself in conversation, and unsure of how to approach people I wanted to know better.

For a while, I felt a bit sorry for myself. I assumed that some people are born to be great communicators, and that it's pointless to try and practice social skills if you aren't gifted

with a natural talent for conversation. Looking back now, I had so much to learn. As I discovered, you can definitely improve your skills in this area, regardless of your age or background.

My quest for personal development soon led me down a rewarding path where I learned a huge amount about human psychology and communication. I became hooked on self-help books, academic texts, research studies, and seminars.

There isn't enough space in this introduction to list my favorite authors and communication experts. I'm proud to say that I'm now an author myself, having written several books on communication skills, social intelligence, and other aspects of self-improvement.

So far, I've helped hundreds of people improve their relationships and kick-start their careers – and I've got the reviews to prove it!

Making the jump from reading to action

All the self-development in the world remains useless until you are willing to put into practice everything you've learned. It takes a lot of time to research the right information, process it, and experiment with new techniques. At the start of my own journey, I desperately hunted for a book packed with brief but effective communication exercises based on sound psychological research. Alas, I couldn't find one.

Over a decade later, I have written the kind of book I wanted as a young man – you are holding it in your hands. My aim is to help people develop their skills quickly without having to spend countless hours poring over hundreds of resources.

How to use this book

This guide contains 21 communication topics, together with actionable exercises, that will give your current skills a complete overhaul. It doesn't matter whether you are naturally shy, naturally extroverted, or somewhere in the middle – the principles in this book apply to everyone.

I won't overload you with new information, but present enough material to make a positive impact on your social life in a short space of time.

You have probably already heard of the saying, “It takes 21 days to form a new habit.” It won't come as a surprise to learn that I looked to this piece of popular wisdom when coming up with this book's title.

However, I've got a confession to make – 21 isn't a magic number. Contrary to popular opinion, the length of time it really takes to form a new habit varies from 18 to 254 days.²³¹

That's the bad news, but there's good news, too. This 21-day challenge provides the perfect starting point for anyone who wants to hone their communication skills. You won't be able to implement a completely new set of habits in 21 days, but you'll notice a real difference as will your friends, family, and coworkers.

The book is designed to be used over the course of 21 days, but I realize that life doesn't always go as planned. Your schedule might not allow you to use the exercises in precisely the right order. That's okay – just do the best you can. I've made sure that you can change the sequence if needed.

Caution ahead.

Before we get started, I want to end this introduction with a couple of cautions. First, these challenges are just that – challenges. They are not easy. To be honest, they’ve been specially designed to push you beyond your comfort zone. Prepare to work hard, because the results are well worth the effort. Communication is like any other skill – the more you practice, the better you become.

On a lighter note, I’m also going to caution you that practicing and improving your communication skills can be addictive! When you start paying more attention to how people relate to one another on a day-to-day basis, you’ll start to notice that particular patterns show up again and again.

It’s been over ten years since I started taking an interest in human relationships, and there’s still so much I want to learn. I hope this book sparks a similar reaction in you.

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230 Arseneault, L. (2017). The long-term impact of bullying victimization on mental health. *World Psychiatry*, 16, 1, 27-28.

231 Clear, J. (2017). How Long Does It Actually Take To Form A New Habit? jamesclear.com

Day 1:

Listen

Before you even think about your responses to other people, you need to sharpen your listening skills. Have you ever had a conversation with someone whose body is there, but their mind is not? Frustrating, isn't it?

Poor communicators think that “listening” is merely the act of waiting for their turn to speak all while mentally composing their response. This is a grave mistake. Listening is so much more – it's a way of providing someone else the chance to share their thoughts and ideas, to build emotional intimacy, and to show empathy.

Today, you're going to learn the basics of great listening, and then undertake an exercise that will allow you to put these tips into practice.

Listening isn't simply about giving another person the chance to vocalize what's on their mind, although this is valuable in its own right. Listening is also the first step towards personal change.

Psychotherapist Carl Rogers, one of the most influential psychologists of the 20th century, noted that when someone gives us the chance to talk about what has happened to us and how we feel about it, we start to realize the best way to change our thoughts and behaviors.²³²

Although taking advice from someone else can be useful, we are most likely to change for the better if we work through our problems out ourselves. Being able to talk freely to an understanding listener is one of the most effective ways of achieving this.

If your conversation partner rambles, or their thoughts don't seem to make sense, hold your tongue and give them the space they need. They might want to talk to several other people first before implementing a plan, or they may need to process the issue in their own time. Try not to get frustrated! Extend to others the patience you would like to receive in return.

Top tips that will make you an outstanding listener

1. Use non-intrusive verbal and non-verbal signals to encourage them to keep talking: Nodding, and saying, “Uh huh” and “I see” are short, unobtrusive signals that encourage further disclosure. Silence is also okay – sometimes, someone needs a few moments to get their thoughts organized before continuing the conversation. Give them space.
2. Let them keep going until they run out of steam: When I learned to listen properly, I was amazed to discover that a lot of people desperately want someone to slow down and hear what they have to say. This is especially true if they feel angry, upset, or need to work through a problem.

One of the most useful, fundamental – and difficult – listening skills of all is to keep quiet and let the other person hold the floor. If you are dealing with an angry or

frustrated individual, they won't be able to think clearly until they have offloaded everything that's on their mind.

3. Do not play the role of armchair psychologist: To some extent, everyone is a psychologist. We all like to come up with our own theories about why so-and-so is so angry all the time, why our cousin always falls for men who treat her badly, etc.²³³ Analyze away – on your own time.

When someone shares important information with you, do not speculate about their personal motivations, or why they behave in a particular manner. At best, you'll come across as a bit too nosy. At worst, your conversation partner will feel patronized and angry. At you.

4. Do not interrupt with unsolicited advice: Even if you've been in the same situation or faced the same problems as someone else, do not offer your ideas or solutions unless asked for them. There are few things more annoying than unwanted advice or suggestions.

Resist the urge to tell them that you know exactly what they are going through. To put it bluntly, you don't. Two people can have a similar experience, yet their personality types, upbringing, and previous life events mean that they will not experience the same emotions.

If your conversation partner asks for your input, then go ahead – but gauge their response. If they appear open to your feedback, continue. However, if they start frowning, crossing their arms, or give any indication that your advice isn't helpful or welcome, stop and ask whether they want you to continue.

Remember, no one is obliged to follow your recommendations. Put your ego to one side. Once you have contributed, it's up to the other person to strategize their next move. Furthermore, they may not be divulging the whole story, and they will need to take other facts and considerations into account when drawing up a plan of action.

5. Re-phrase someone else's words, but don't parrot them back: You may have heard that repeating someone's words back to them shows that you have been listening. This is true – to a point. A fine line exists between reflecting understanding and quoting someone verbatim.

I'll use an example to illustrate the concept. Suppose that your friend said the following:

“I've been feeling quite lonely lately. It seems like my family doesn't care what I'm doing or whether I'm even happy.”

Here are two potential replies. Which do you think would help your friend feel truly heard, and which would make them feel really annoyed?

“So, you feel like they aren't giving you much attention right now?”

Or

“You've been feeling lonely lately, and like your family doesn't care what you're doing?”

The second response shows that you heard the actual words, but it also sounds downright weird! Your friend

might wonder if she's been talking to a parrot instead of a normal human being. I prefer the first response since it reflects an absorption of the meaning behind the words in addition to the words themselves.

6. Check your assumptions: We all tend to view the world through the lens of our own preferences and experiences. For example, if you are close to your parents and enjoy talking to your mother on the phone every week, you are likely to be upset on someone else's behalf if they tell you that their own mother is very ill.

But if your conversation partner happens to have a distant relationship with their parents, they probably won't expect an overly sympathetic reaction. In fact, your sympathy might make them feel uncomfortable.

What's the lesson here? Do not project your own feelings onto someone else. Let them tell you what a situation means for them personally. Under no circumstances should you tell them how to feel. Accept everyone's differences, and that no one will react in exactly the same way under the same circumstances.

Put It Into Practice.

Your challenge for today is to phone a friend or relative you haven't seen or spoken to in a while, and then use the conversation as an opportunity to practice your active listening skills.

You don't need to be on the phone for hours, just try a 20-minute catchup. Ask them what they've been doing lately and

strive to listen attentively. You might be shocked to discover how often you slip into bad listening habits. Afterwards, reread this chapter and make an honest assessment of how you did.

This exercise also comes with a nice bonus. By phoning your friend or relative, you can build and improve your relationship. Recall the last time someone called you up unexpectedly and truly wanted to know how you were doing. It felt good, didn't it? You felt valued. The person you call is going to feel the same way. Maybe you could even make it a habit to phone them on a regular basis.

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233 Allen, J.G. (2010). Why everyone's an armchair psychologist. saynotostigma.com

Day 2:

Count The Number Of Times You Interrupt Other People

If you had to identify the most annoying communication habit ever, what would it be? Admittedly there are a lot of contenders, but most of us agree that being interrupted is among the most irritating. Today, you're going to examine how often you interrupt other people, and then work on giving your conversation partners the time and space they deserve.

Interrupting people is easy to do. For example, if you participate in a heated discussion, you might want to jump right in to exert your voice. If you're passionate about an idea, your enthusiasm might bubble to the surface.

But that's where the challenge lies. Even if your ideas are excellent, your conversation partner will be too annoyed to give them the attention they deserve if you interrupt. By your interruption, you're insinuating that your thoughts and ideas are more important than theirs. As you know from personal experience, interruptions derail your train of thought.

Interruptions also make someone feel disrespected.²³⁴ If someone values you and your ideas, they will at least have the courtesy to let you finish speaking, right? You need to apply the same principle when actively listening to others.

Interrupting can completely kill your chances of developing a good relationship with someone else, and that's not an

exaggeration. If they feel as though you are more interested in steamrolling over them with your personal point of view instead of getting to know them, they will start to withdraw from you.

Here's how to kick the interruption habit:

1. Set targets and give yourself rewards: Set a realistic goal and choose a small reward as a suitable incentive. For example, you could promise yourself that if you make it through the day interrupting people fewer than ten times, you will pick up your favorite magazine or candy bar on the way home.²³⁵
2. Stick up signs: The simplest solutions can be the best! I keep a small sticky note on my computer monitor to remind me not to interrupt others. It features a sketch of a closed mouth just beneath an ear. I glance at it when I'm on the phone or webcam. It reminds me that if I strive to grow my relationships – and my business – I need to let other people speak.
3. Write down any points you want to make in advance: While you can't take notes during an unplanned conversation, you can take a list with you to a scheduled meeting. When you know that your key points are strategically bulleted on a piece of paper, it's easier to refrain from interrupting.

In formal meetings, you can also make notes of your thoughts when someone else is speaking. Once they have finished, you can then refer to your notes and ask for clarification.

4. Remember that your silence is just as influential as your voice: No one likes a showoff or a person who appears to love the sound of their own voice. On the other hand, everyone respects someone who lets other people speak and exercises caution when offering their own opinion. If the thought of keeping quiet terrifies you, consider that your interruption habit might spring from a sense of insecurity.

Some chronic interrupters feel the pressure to prove that they have thoughts of their own or even that they have earned a place in the room. Does this sound familiar? If so, your interruption habit might be more than just an annoying quirk. It might be time to examine any underlying feelings of inferiority and address them, either by yourself or with the assistance of a qualified therapist.

5. Practice biting your tongue: The phrase “bite your tongue” can be taken literally here. When you feel the urge to interrupt, sandwich your tongue between your teeth. The sensation will act as a constant reminder not to butt in.

Cultural differences

The advice I’ve given in this chapter assumes that you, and those around you, have been raised in a culture that interprets interruptions as a sign of rudeness. Most Westerners would agree that it’s good manners to let someone else finish speaking before responding.

However, it’s useful to remember that there are cultural differences in how people perceive interruptions. For instance,

some cultures regard interruptions and cross-talk as normal.

To give two specific examples, those of Italian descent tend to see interruptions as an acceptable way of showing interest in a topic. Meanwhile, people raised within Japanese culture often believe that it is acceptable to interrupt someone to ask for clarification.²³⁶

When you meet someone, who seems especially quick to interrupt, consider the possibility that there is a culture gap. It isn't appropriate to ask someone to describe their family's heritage, but just knowing that these differences exist can help you remain calm and patient.

You can bridge the gap by making an explicit request such as, "I've got something really important to say and don't want to forget anything, so if you have any questions, could you please save them for the end?"

Put It Into Practice

Today's exercise is really, really simple – or at least, it's simple in theory. Count how many times you interrupt other people in all your conversations, and then use the tips above to stop yourself. Ideally, you should try to talk with at least three people. If you can do this while in a group, even better.

The first time I tried this exercise, I was dismayed to discover that I struggled to even let people finish their sentences. My intentions weren't to be rude or annoying, but my conversation partners must have been thoroughly irritated.

Unless I make an effort to keep myself in check, I still catch myself interrupting others a bit too often. It's a tough habit to break, but your friends and family will thank you for it. Who

knows, you might learn something new if you master the art of keeping your mouth shut.

234 Scharf, R. (2015). 5 Ways to Stop Yourself from Interrupting People. huffingtonpost.ca

235 Ibid.

236 Gino, F. (2017). How to Handle Interrupting Colleagues. hbr.org

Day 3:

Become An Inclusive Communicator

When it comes to politics and social issues, we all have our own opinions. Yet one thing most of us can agree on is that everyone, regardless of their background or individual characteristics, deserves to be treated with respect. Today, you will learn about the importance of inclusive communication.

What is “inclusive communication” anyway?

In a nutshell, a good inclusive communicator takes care not to alienate or offend an entire group of people based on their personal attributes. They do not make assumptions based on an individual’s characteristics. Inclusive communication acknowledges and values diversity.

Mastering this skill is increasingly important in the 21st century. Thanks to globalization, people from all backgrounds now work and socialize together. Inclusive communication builds harmonious relationships between individuals, and it even boosts business performance. Research reflects a positive correlation between gender diversity, ethnic diversity, and profit in organizations.²³⁷

Tips for inclusive communication

1. Don't emphasize a characteristic if it isn't necessary to do so: For example, let's suppose that you are telling your team that an employee from another department is scheduled to work with them on a new project. This employee, a man called Sam, happens to be gay.

It would not be appropriate to say, "Sam, the gay guy from Department X, will be joining us on Monday." Sam's sexual orientation is not relevant to his work, so drawing attention to this characteristic is not necessary.

2. Don't assume a person's gender or sexual orientation: Choose gender-neutral terms if possible. For example, if your manager is leaving the company and you do not yet know the gender of their replacement, it is more appropriate to use "they" in reference to the possible candidates instead of "he" or "she" until a permanent replacement is selected.

Do not assume that a person is heterosexual. It is better to use terms like "partner" or "significant other" instead of "boyfriend," "wife," and so on.

3. If you need to talk about someone's disability, do so in neutral terms: It's true that many people with disabilities do suffer as a result, but it is presumptuous to make statements such as "Peter suffers from epilepsy" or "Mary is afflicted with schizophrenia."

4. Focus on a person, not any disabilities they might have: Do not define someone by their condition or illness. For example, it is better to say, “Pat has depression” rather than “Pat is a depressive” or “Pat is depressed.”
5. Do not uphold stereotypes: Making assumptions based on someone’s nationality, ethnicity, or other characteristics is offensive because it shows a lack of respect for someone’s individual talents and personality. This philosophy stays true even of positive stereotypes.

For example, if you meet a Chinese accountant, it would be inappropriate to suggest that Chinese people naturally make good accountants because “Asians are so good at math.”

6. Show respect for race and ethnicity through proper capitalization in written communication: For instance, “Native American”, “Black”, and “Torres Strait Islanders”, should always be capitalized. If in doubt, look up the term in a dictionary or use a reputable online resource.
7. Be mindful of context: Bear in mind that in some instances, it is acceptable for members of a group to use words that would be offensive if used by outsiders. For example, some members of the LGBT+ community refer to themselves as “queer.”

However, this word is usually considered offensive if used by a heterosexual person, and not all LGBT+ people accept it in the first place. If in doubt, any “loaded” terms

that have historically been used to insult or belittle others are best avoided.²³⁸

8. Avoid patronizing individuals or groups of people: If you have a disability, you might have heard someone describe you as “brave” or “inspiring” for carrying out normal day-to-day tasks such as cleaning your home, going to work, or exercising at the gym.

I have a cousin who walks with a cane following a car accident several years ago. Several well-meaning people have praised him for being “an inspiration”. Their intentions are good, but my cousin just feels patronized. Do not assume that just because someone has a disability that they want to be recognized for merely existing!

Is inclusive communication really necessary?

I respect the fact that some people think inclusive communication is “too politically correct.” However, wherever your personal views land, you can quickly find yourself in trouble if you do not use inclusive communication. For instance, using sexist language in the workplace could land you in hot water with HR, or earn you a reputation as someone who doesn’t keep up with modern etiquette.

Why making offensive jokes is harmful, even if you really are “only joking”

Over the years, I’ve met a few people who claim that it’s acceptable to make offensive jokes, or stereotype groups of people, as long as you don’t really hold offensive views.

But here’s something to think about – people who do support negative stereotypes and hold racist, sexist or other

offensive views will feel justified whenever they hear such “jokes.”

This means that racism, sexism and other forms of bigotry go unchallenged.²³⁹ Do not make jokes that rely on disparagement humor, and let others know that you don't find them funny.

Put It Into Practice

Exercise I

Do you express assumptions or stereotypes (whether positive or negative) when talking about particular groups? The next time you take part in a conversation that includes a discussion about other people, consider whether your choice of words is respectful. Could you be a more inclusive communicator? If applicable, make a note of where and how you could improve next time around.

Exercise II

Switch on the TV (or go on YouTube) and find a show that features a lot of dialogue. Watch it for 15-20 minutes. Are the people taking part in the conversation upholding any negative views or beliefs about particular groups? Do you hear similar language in your everyday interactions? If so, how could you challenge it?

237 Hunt, V., Layton, D., & Prince, S. (2015). Why diversity matters. mckinsey.com

238 GLAAD. (2017). GLAAD Media Reference Guide. glaad.org

239 Ford, T.E. (2016). Racist and sexist jokes aren't harmless – they can actually perpetuate discrimination. uk.businessinsider.com

Day 4:

How To Expand Your Vocabulary

You will be judged more favorably in social situations if you can demonstrate a broad vocabulary. Most people assume higher levels of education and intelligence when a person knows the meaning of many words and can use them correctly within the scope of normal conversation.

Those who understand and appreciate complex words and phrases are at a real advantage, both personally and professionally. Today, you will learn why a big vocabulary is a valuable asset, and how to add more words to your personal dictionary.

Why your vocabulary really does make a difference

There is a link between vocabulary and occupational success. A study by linguistics and education researcher Johnson O’Conner found that people who achieve high scores on vocabulary tests are significantly more likely to obtain high-level positions in the workplace.

This finding still applies when gender, age, and level of schooling are controlled.²⁴⁰ Even more interesting, vocabulary test performance predicts success – it’s not just a byproduct of working in senior positions or encountering with educated people.

So, what's going on here? In a nutshell, a strong vocabulary is the best foundation for communication, and communication is the starting point for success. When you have more words at your disposal, you are in a better position to deliver exactly the right message.

The richer your vocabulary, the more accomplished you will become in communicating nuanced ideas, and in understanding new lines of thought and reason.²⁴¹

Someone with a wide vocabulary can tailor their oral and written communication to a range of audiences, meaning that they can grow productive relationships with others that allow them to flourish.

A wide vocabulary also allows you to absorb information from complex sources, which provides you with the tools you need to improve your personal and professional skills. For example, if you are comfortable reading and interpreting high-level textbooks, you are more likely to benefit from advanced education and training than people who only recognize common everyday words.

When you are familiar with complex words, your reading speed will also improve, because you won't have to pause to define a word. Obvious, right?

Here are a few strategies that will help you out:

1. Use a new word every day: Get into the habit of looking up a new word each morning, and then using it at some point during the day. If it's a particularly obscure word and you can't fit it into a conversation

naturally, at least tell someone that you learned a cool new word, and then tell them what it means.

2. Use apps and online games to expand your vocabulary: There are hundreds of free apps and games designed to help users learn new words. One of my favorites is Free Rice (freerice.com). It's a simple multiple-choice game that tests your vocabulary. The more questions you get right, the more difficult the questions become!

If you give an incorrect answer, the site will show you where you went wrong. As an added bonus, for every correct answer you give, the site's founders donate a small amount of rice to people in need. PowerVocab (vocabulary.com), 7 Little Words (7littlewords.com), and Words With Friends 2 (zynga.com) are all popular apps that make learning new words simple.

3. Become a word enthusiast: Learning words in isolation will help grow your vocabulary but gaining a deeper appreciation of a word's structure and roots will put you in a good position to understand new words you encounter in the future.

When you first learn a word, break it down to its constituent parts.

For example, the word "orthostatic" means "relating to or caused by an upright posture". If you break the word apart, you'll see that it's a fusion of "ortho" which means "straight", and "static" which means "concerned with bodies at rest". Learning the definitions of prefixes and suffixes will help you decipher new words.

4. Read widely: This is the classic piece of advice for anyone who wants to sound intelligent and educated. Don't stick to the same books and magazines that you normally read. Challenge yourself by exploring new topics, and by reading denser and more challenging text.

Set aside at least 15 minutes of reading time each day. In my opinion, there's no excuse not to read – not only does it improve your vocabulary, but it will also help you become a well-rounded individual capable of conversing with virtually anyone.

5. If you aren't sure what a word means, ask. It's normal to feel embarrassed when someone uses a word that you don't recognize, but it's a golden opportunity to learn something new.

If someone tries to make you feel inferior on the basis that you don't happen to know what a word means, then that's their problem. If you really can't ask at the time, at least make a note of the word and look it up later in your dictionary.

Put It Into Practice

Exercise I

Today I want you to learn five new words, and then incorporate them into your spoken or written communication.

Exercise II

Take a look at the apps and websites mentioned in this chapter and commit to using one of them for at least five minutes each day for a week.

240 Litemind. (2017). Top 3 Reasons to Improve Your Vocabulary. litemind.com

241 Ibid.

Day 5:

Swap “But” For “And,” & Embrace “Yet”

Sometimes, it’s the little things that make a huge difference. Today, I’m going to draw your attention to “but”, “and”, and “yet.” The words we choose shape not only how other people see us but how we see ourselves.

When you master the art of positive communication, the world will start to appear more welcoming. You will begin seeing opportunities rather than problems, and other people will be drawn to your proactive, upbeat personality. You don’t have to believe that these tips will work – just put them into practice and see the difference for yourself.

“But”, “and”, and positive communication

How often do you hear people say “but” statements? Here are a few examples:

“I’d love to go on vacation, but I’m scared of flying.”

“I’d like to go back to school, but I don’t have any free time.”

“I want to run a marathon, but I’m so out of shape.”

In each of these statements, the speaker ascribes a particular explanation to a problem or situation. They assert that because they are scared of flying, they can’t go on vacation, or that

they have no free time so they can't go to school, or that they are out of shape and therefore cannot run a marathon.

What most people don't realize is that a typical "but" statement is unnecessarily limiting and negative. This becomes more apparent if you take out "but" and then insert "and" instead. Take the first example in the list above – "I'd love to go on vacation, but I'm scared to fly."

Swap "but" for "and" and you notice the difference immediately:

"I'd love to go on vacation, and I'm scared to fly."

The revised version suggests that the speaker just so happens to be afraid of flying, plus they want to go on vacation. It's a subtle difference but it matters! It implicates that the person has a desire plus a problem to be solved, rather than a desire that will be thwarted by their problem.

When I start working with a client, I often notice that they parrot the same old "but" statements repeatedly. They become our own personal stories – excuses that we don't question. We assume that they are true and take them to heart as the gospel truth.

These intrinsic beliefs become somewhat akin to a script. The more you repeat them, the further entrenched you are in the role of someone who would love to change their life yet cannot do so because they are held back by a single factor beyond their control.

When I teach my clients to drop the "buts" and swap them for "and" instead, I usually see a rapid transformation. Within a few minutes, this mindset shift starts to show in their

expression. Hope replaces desperation as they realize that the way you frame a situation makes all the difference when coming up with solutions to a challenge.

Another problem with using “but”

“But” can also make people defensive. As soon as we hear that little word, most of us assume that criticism or bad news is on the horizon.

For instance, if you were to tell someone that you understand their point but want to use another approach, they are likely to feel threatened and criticized. However, telling them that you understand their view and want to use another strategy will usually elicit a more positive response.

It implies that you value their input, even though you won’t put it into action. This technique generates a sense of closeness and mutual allegiance.²⁴²

The power of “yet”

Simply putting “yet” on the end of a negative statement can transform its meaning.

Let’s look at a few examples:

“I don’t know enough about this topic to pass the exam.”

“I don’t know enough about this topic to pass the exam yet.”

“I can’t get a girlfriend.”

“I can’t get a girlfriend yet.”

“I just don’t earn enough money to buy a house.”

“I just don’t earn enough money to buy a house yet.”

Using “yet” signals to yourself and others that you haven’t given up. You are acknowledging that things might change. You may not understand exactly how you will make these changes come to pass, but you are at least open to the possibility. It immediately transforms you into a more positive, optimistic person – at least in the eyes of others.

This technique doesn’t just work in conversation. It is also effective when it comes to your own self-talk. It promotes a sense of positivity and potential, while still encouraging you to remain realistic. It acknowledges your current situation and problems but makes it clear that you are on the right track.

Put It Into Practice

There are two exercises for you to try today.

Exercise I

Whenever you catch yourself making a negative statement that includes the word “but”, substitute “and” instead. Don’t be surprised if your optimism turns out to be contagious.

This one little change will make you sound confident and positive. This will inspire others. If you aren’t able to try this out in conversation, use it as a journaling exercise instead.

Give yourself five minutes to write down any “but” statements you’ve been making recently. What happens if you use “and” instead of “but”? Personally, I feel less helpless in the face of my difficulties when I make this simple swap

Exercise II

Go on a “Yet Hunt”. Whenever you make a negative statement or bemoan that you are lacking some kind of resource, stick a “yet” on the end. You could also silently add

a “yet” to the end of other people’s sentences and see for yourself how it changes their meaning. You might be tempted to start telling others that they’d feel better if they started using “yet” more often, but this is best avoided unless you’re certain they value constructive feedback.

242 Balint, J. (2014). Use “And” instead of “But.” [linkedin.com](https://www.linkedin.com)

Day 6:

Watch Your Pronouns

Unless you are reciting a monologue, you need to always consider the needs of your conversation partner. Never bore them. Break this rule at your peril. There's no point in getting your views across if no one is going to be listening to them anyway.

Do you like to talk about yourself? You're normal!

If you were to ask the average person whether they enjoy talking about themselves and listening to the sound of their own voice, they would probably say "Me? No, of course not". But let's get real – most of us love talking about ourselves. In moderation, that's perfectly okay. You are living your own life, so it's natural that you find your own experiences fascinating.

In addition, people who never reveal anything about themselves are not perceived as trustworthy. The best communicators know how to balance self-disclosure with respect for other people.

Limit your "I"s

A fascinating research study carried out in 1988 at the University of California found a link between narcissism and the number of times a person used "I" during a five-minute monologue. The subjects, 24 men and 24 women, were allowed to speak on a topic of their own choosing for several minutes.

Their monologues were recorded, and the researchers then counted the number of times each person used first person pronouns. The participants who achieved higher scores on measures of narcissism tended to use “I” more often.²⁴³

So, does this mean that “I” talk is a reliable indicator of narcissism? Not quite. Later research has shown that there actually is no relationship between the two.²⁴⁴ What does this mean for those of us who want to make a good impression?

Here’s the important part – although psychologists disagree on whether “I” talk is really related to narcissism; the average layperson picks up on it. In other words, a psychologist might realize that “I” talk doesn’t necessarily mean you are narcissistic, but most other people will.²⁴⁵ In conclusion, it’s safe to say that avoiding excessive “I” talk will benefit you.

When to use “I”

Too much “I” talk will not endear you to anyone, but sometimes it’s the best approach. Here’s when you should use it:

1. When you are being assertive: If you are standing up for your rights, using “I” draws a firm line between you and someone else, allowing you to state exactly how the situation makes you feel.

Let’s suppose that your partner fails to do their fair share of the household chores. Instead of listing their faults in an aggressive manner and telling them that they need to change immediately, it would be more effective to use “I” talk to explain how their actions have made you feel.

Someone can argue with your interpretation of their actions, but they can't argue with your own feelings. "I" statements are less inflammatory than accusations beginning with "you."

To continue with the above example, it would be better to say, "I feel undervalued when I come home to find that you have not cleaned the kitchen after you promised to do so" than "You don't do anything, and the house is a complete mess!"

2. When you want to introduce a potentially controversial opinion: If you are talking about a sensitive topic, such as religion or politics, it's a good idea to communicate to everyone listening that you can tolerate other people's opinions. Your views are your own and do not represent those of everyone else.

To avoid appearing rude, do not present your opinion as fact – preface it with an "I." Countless arguments could be prevented if only people took a second to acknowledge that not everyone feels the way they do, and that differences are okay.

3. When you want to claim credit for an idea: In most cases, it's to your advantage to work with others when coming up with a plan or new idea. You will be more popular if you are willing to work as part of a team.

However, sometimes it's better to establish that you alone deserve the credit. For example, if you are aiming for a

promotion at work and your manager values self-sufficiency, use “I” when talking about your ideas.

Cut down on “I” talk, and use “we” talk instead

The word “we” instantly conjures up a feeling of solidarity. “We” talk emphasizes similarities and common experiences, which generates a sense of intimacy. You can do this in such a subtle way that no one will notice. You don’t have to change the meaning of what you say. Simply make a few minor adjustments.

Look at the examples below to see how this works:

“I think the meeting starts at three.”

“We have to be at the meeting room by three, right?”

“I remember the summer of 2012. It was really hot.”

“We had a really hot summer in 2012.”

“I think that house will be too expensive.”

“We need to find out whether that house will be too expensive.”

Put It Into Practice

Exercise I

Today, you are going to count the number of “I”s you use. Don’t worry if you start to lose track. It’s not necessary to cut “I” out completely. Just challenge yourself to remain aware of what you are saying.

Exercise II

Sit in on a conversation and monitor the number of times each party starts a sentence with “I.” Keep two running tallies

for a few minutes, one for each individual. Are the numbers roughly even? Do they both seem happy with the way the conversation flows?

This exercise works particularly well if you can observe two strangers, because you won't have any preconceptions about their personalities or the events they are discussing. Whenever I've tried it, I usually notice that if one person uses a lot of "I" talk, their conversation partner will start to sound bored. Bear this in mind the next time you catch yourself saying "I" too often.

243 Raskin, R., & Shaw, R. (1988). Narcissism and the Use of Personal Pronouns. *Personality*, 56, 2, 393-404.

244 Carey, A.L., et al. (2015). Narcissism and the Use of Personal Pronouns Revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 109, 3, 1-15.

245 Ibid.

Day 7:

Offer A Helping Hand

Giving and receiving help is part of being human. Lending a hand to someone who needs practical or emotional support is rewarding, and it can enrich your relationship. Unfortunately, offering help isn't always simple. Today, you'll learn how to reach out to someone in need.

Why asking someone if they need help can get complicated

There is a fine line between offering someone help and making comments that imply they are incompetent. Unless you approach the issue in a sensitive way, the other party may feel patronized. They might also suspect that you are trying to meddle in their lives. On the other hand, withholding help can make you appear cold and aloof.

Here are a few tips you can use to strike the right balance:

1. When offering someone help, tell them exactly why you are reaching out: When you do this, the other person will understand that your offer is motivated by a desire to make their life easier. Make it clear that you don't want to order them around.

For example, let's suppose that your friend has recently moved into a house that requires extensive structural and

cosmetic work. When you visit them in their new home, you note that the place is a complete mess. Your friend appears tired, almost on the verge of tears.

They tell you that the house is proving to be a far bigger project than they'd anticipated. You want to offer to help your friend, but you don't want to patronize them by implying that they can't possibly undertake the work alone.

Which of the following questions do you think would work best in this case?

“Do you need help with this place?”

OR

“Hey, I've noticed that you seem really tired lately, and this house is a pretty big project. I'd love to help you. Could I come over this weekend and lend a hand with the wiring?”

The latter is more sensitive, because it shows your friend that you have taken the time to understand the problem they face. It suggests that you have taken an inventory of their situation and are not just making a misguided offer of help because you think they are incapable of doing the job themselves.

2. Ask “How can I help?” or “Can I help by doing X?” instead of making a vague offer of assistance: Does the following situation sound familiar? You've had some bad news. You tell someone else about it. They say, “Just call me if you need help”, or “If I can do anything, let me know”.

These offers are well-meaning, but they are vague. They also sound formulaic and platitudinous. It's hard to know whether they have been made just for the sake of politeness.

What's the lesson here? If you are offering help, make your offer specific. Failing that, at least ask a question that gives the other person a chance to let you know what they need. Think about the day-to-day challenges someone in their situation might face.

For example, if your friend's child is in hospital, you might realize that shopping for groceries and keeping the house clean may seem overwhelming under the circumstances. You could ask, "Can I help by doing a grocery run?" or "Would you like me to come over and do the housework for you?"

The same principles apply in the case of minor problems. If your colleague appears overworked and stressed one morning, don't just stand there and say, "You look busy, so let me know if you need help." It would be better to say, for example, "Can I help by doing that filing for you?" or "Would you like me to take the notes for this afternoon's meeting?"

3. Focus on helping a person change their circumstances, not their character: Sometimes, a person's problems are caused by their character deficits. For instance, if your friend has lost their job because they are habitually late and tend to daydream while sitting at their desk, they have caused their

own problems by failing to adhere to basic standards of behavior expected of an employee.

However, your role in this situation is not to “fix” their character, or to lecture them on how to live their life. Yes, profound personal change is possible – but it must come from the individual, and it may require professional assistance.

You could help them look for a new job or help them to research training providers if they want a change of career. It is futile to tell someone about their own faults and then expect instant change.

They probably already know what they need to work on and will not appreciate your amateur psychoanalysis. In fact, they will probably resent your attempts to interfere, and it could damage your relationship. Offer practical help or offer to listen, but never try to “help” by remodeling someone’s personality.

4. Don’t offer emotional help or support unless you know you can remain nonjudgmental: Offering to help someone by “talking over a problem” or “just listening” is great – if you have the right skills.

Be honest with yourself. If your friend or relative faces a huge problem, can you trust yourself to stay quiet and listen, even if they choose to do something you don’t agree with? (This is especially important if their next steps could have a direct impact upon your personal life.)

If you are not able to listen, help them find someone else who can be relied upon to hear them out. Ideally, this

person will not have any emotional investment in the situation.

5. Be flexible if you want to offer money: If you have a friend or relative who is in financial trouble, you might want to help out. (Assuming, of course, that you can afford it) However, many people are sensitive when it comes to the topic of money and are reluctant to accept it from friends and family. Don't be surprised if someone turns down your offer of financial aid.

If someone is too proud to accept a gift of money, or if it goes against their principles, you could either offer a loan instead (at no interest) or provide them with opportunities and services that will help them get back on their feet. For instance, you could offer to babysit their kids for free while they attend job interviews or set them up with professional contacts in your field.²⁴⁶

Put It Into Practice

Do you know someone who has been having a hard time lately? Call them up and offer your help. Make sure you know in advance what you are capable of giving and that you don't promise more than you can deliver.

246 Wilde, A. (2017). Etiquette for the Best Way to Offer Money Without Offending. pocketsense.com

Day 8:

Practice Saying “Thank You”

Thank you” is one of the most important phrases in our language. Human relationships are built on shared interests and good communication but also on mutual acts of service. For example, close friendships are based on an agreement (usually left unspoken) that each friend will listen to the other in times of need.

Today, you are going to think about how often you give thanks to those who offer help. Even self-made men and women need a helping hand or two on their way to success.

No one likes whiny, ungrateful individuals who refuse to acknowledge their good fortune. There are few things more annoying than someone who has so many reasons to be thankful but complains all the time. Even more unpopular are those who receive help from others but rarely bother to acknowledge it.

It doesn't matter how much status you have, or even how famous you are – you are never “too good” to stop and give thanks to everyone who helps you out. It's an easy way to develop a reputation as a happy, positive individual that everyone wants to be around.

1. Build on a bare “Thank you:” A simple “Thank you” is always appreciated, but there's a quick trick that will ensure you leave a lasting impression. Using a

few extra words, tell someone precisely what has filled you with gratitude.

For example, suppose a colleague has agreed to attend a meeting on your behalf and take notes because you are urgently needed on a project. Most people would take the notes and say, “Thank you so much!”

That’s fine, but what do you think might happen if you were to use one of the following phrases instead?

“Thank you for taking the time to make those notes for me.”

“Thank you for standing in for me and getting that information.”

“Thank you for taking such detailed notes, that was so helpful of you.”

These alternatives are specific and personal. This tactic will make the other person feel more appreciated for what they have done, which will enrich your relationship. It also prevents you from taking others for granted.

For example, if your partner fixes dinner most evenings, you may find that over time you stop showing a noticeable degree of appreciation. Making an effort to show how much you value them will nurture your relationship.

2. Offer to repay their kindness: If someone has gone out of their way to help you, offering them assistance in return will demonstrate your appreciation. Most people won’t take you up on it, but they’ll still be

pleased that you asked. Ask, “How can I return the favor?” or “Is there anything I can do in return?”

You could also tell them that if there’s anything they need in the future, they can call on you to help. Remember, relationships are built on give and take. In a healthy friendship, both parties are willing to give and receive support.

3. Never reject a compliment: I think most of us are occasionally guilty of brushing off a compliment or piece of praise. Even a well-timed compliment can be enough to make some of us blush with modesty but arguing with someone trying to compliment you is rude.

The only appropriate response is a sincere “Thank you” “I’m so glad you think so” or similar.

What if you suspect that someone is merely trying to flatter you, or is giving you a sarcastic compliment? You should still say “Thank you” because you’ll win no matter what. If they are giving you a true compliment – you win.

If they are being sarcastic or manipulative and you say “Thank you” before changing the subject, you still win because you haven’t allowed them to drag you down to their level.

Gratitude and mental health

Saying “Thank you” will also make you feel grateful for what you have, which in turn will make you happier. Research shows that “gratitude listing” – literally writing down what

you are thankful for – improves mood and well-being. This is even true for people living with a chronic health condition.²⁴⁷

When you make a point of thanking other people, you will automatically start noticing what goes well in your life. It helps you develop a growth mindset, which encourages you to identify opportunities instead of obstacles. Unsurprisingly, research has also shown that people who are thanked for their efforts enjoy greater mental health than those who feel underappreciated.²⁴⁸

Put It Into Practice

Exercise I

Today, your challenge is to find opportunities to express thanks and gratitude. There are bound to be at least a few people to thank. Let everyone know how much their help means to you.

Even if someone just holds the door open, look them in the eye and say, “Thanks a lot!” If you are lucky enough to be on the receiving end of a significant act of kindness, let the other person know how much you appreciate them.

Exercise II

If possible, take it one step further and make time to tell a loved one how much you value their ongoing help and support. You could even call them up just to tell them how wonderful they are!

One day, I realized that I had never told my mother how much I appreciated all the support she’d given me during my college years, especially those times I struggled to stay motivated.

That night, I called to let her know how vital her love and help had been on my academic journey. I told her that although I should have made that call years ago, I figured it was better late than never. She was surprised, but then burst into happy tears. Never underestimate the power of a sincere “Thank you.”

247 Emmons, R.A., & McCullough, M.E. (2003). Counting Blessings Versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 2, 377-389.

248 Lanham, M.E., Rye, M.S., Weill, L.S., & Rimsky, S.R. (2012). How gratitude relates to burnout and job satisfaction in mental health professionals. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 34, 4.

Day 9:

Stop Trying To Score Points

I'll admit it, I like being right – and I'm not the only one who feels this way! We all have our own points of view, and it's gratifying when we know (or rather, think we know) best. The trouble comes when we set out to prove the validity of our opinion just for the sake of scoring points or making someone else confess that they were in the wrong all along.

Don't be too harsh on yourself if you've ever spent hours trying to browbeat someone into accepting your perspective on an issue or situation. We've all done it. It wasn't until my mid-twenties that I gave up on the idea of “winning” every and any debate.

When I was younger, I thought that I had somehow lost, or shown myself to be weak, unless I forced my poor opponent to concede that I was “right.” Half the time, I didn't even care that much about the topic under discussion. My key concern was proving how much better I was than everyone else in the room.

Looking back, I'm embarrassed for my younger self. He was so busy trying to convince everyone of his so-called intelligence that he missed out on the chance to build some good friendships and romantic relationships.

I used to wonder why my dates rarely developed into something more. It seems so obvious in hindsight! Not many

women tolerate self-righteous men who enjoy telling them why their views are totally wrong.

Needless to say, a confrontational approach doesn't lay the groundwork for a good friendship or romantic relationship, and it can drive your relatives crazy, too. It's fun to have a debate every now and then, but frequent sparring is exhausting.

You know the old saying, "Sometimes, it's more important to be happy than it is to be right"? That's what I'm talking about here. Let go of the inconsequential little arguments and save your reasoning abilities for the stuff that actually matters.

Let me be clear on what I mean in this chapter. I'm not talking about those instances where you actually need to change someone's mind. For example, if your spouse wants to move to the city whereas you think it's far better for both of you to remain in the country, you would need to make a case against the move. That's common sense.

If you want other people to like you and open up to you, it's unwise to impose your views on them for the sake of winning an argument. By all means exchange opinions and ideas but watch out for that moment you make the transition between constructive conversation and petty debate.

Why point scoring is, well, pointless

Bear in mind that point scoring rarely works anyway. The harder you push someone, and the more aggressive you are in insisting that you are in the right and they are in the wrong, the more likely it is that they will start to shut down. There is a sound neurological reason for this phenomenon.

When we find ourselves in a threatening situation, our fight or flight reflex kicks into high gear. Activity levels in the parts of the brain responsible for logical thought and reasoning drop, and the areas related to conflict are triggered to act.

The result? We become less and less interested in actually evaluating the evidence someone else provides and instead concentrate on fighting back. This is why two people can be having a rational conversation one minute then a short time later be shouting and screaming at one another.

Even if you do “win” an argument, you might suffer in the long run. You can never be certain whether someone gives in because you have managed to convince them of your point of view, or they have just stopped engaging with you because they are tired of the whole situation.

Conflict can lead to resentment when there are issues left unresolved. Just because you have apparently succeeded in bulldozing your opponent doesn't mean that they are going to forget it any time soon. If you want to preserve your relationship, make sure that any important underlying issues have actually been resolved.

Tune in to your emotional state. If you feel tense, angry, or want to punch a wall, it's a safe bet that whatever comes out of your mouth isn't going to be helpful or constructive.

Another key sign that you are more interested in scoring points than having a fruitful discussion is a sudden realization that you can't even remember what started the fight in the first place – and you don't even care!

If you still aren't convinced, think how much more relaxed you'll feel if you drop the idea that you always have to have

the last word. Wouldn't it be nice to know that if someone holds a view that doesn't align with your own, you are under no obligation to start dissecting everything they say?

If you crave the excitement of a fiery argument, then why not join a philosophy discussion group or debating society? Choose a more constructive outlet for your dramatic nature. Don't let it ruin your relationships.

Put It Into Practice

Today, you are going to let other people be wrong. If you have to spend time with someone who holds views different to your own, this will be a challenge – but that's the whole point.

You are not going to waste your time and breath telling them why their opinion is null and void. Where has that gotten you in the past? Nowhere, probably. What does point scoring do for your relationships? Nothing!

If you have to excuse yourself from a situation to avoid an argument, then so be it – but try and tough it out. This exercise will show you that the world doesn't cave in when other people see things in a different way.

You'll soon learn that there is enough room in the world for opinions of all kinds. No one has a moral obligation to agree with you. You don't have a duty to convince them of your views either.

Day 10:

Ask Questions That Get Results

When you need to uncover information fast, what do you do? Ask questions, of course! It should be so simple, shouldn't it? Unfortunately, as you know, it's not always easy to get clear answers from other people.

You can't force anyone to answer you, but you can greatly increase your chance of a good result by refining the way you ask questions.

Here's how to get answers:

1. **Build up gently to high-pressure questions.** No one likes having an important question sprung upon them. Show some empathy for their position. For example, let's say that you want to ask your manager some questions about your chances of receiving a raise next year.

Rather than charging in and asking immediately whether you think your salary will receive a boost, ask them whether it's a good time to talk about your position at the company and prospects for the future.

2. **Decide whether an open or closed question is better.** We're often told that asking open questions –

those beginning with “Why” and “How” – is a better approach than asking closed questions that can be answered with a “Yes” or “No.”

It’s true that the former will yield more in-depth responses, but this isn’t always a good thing. For instance, if you are talking to someone who is renowned for rambling on without getting to the point, it might be best to use a closed question instead.

3. Use a four-part structure when helping someone deal with a problem. Questions don’t just help you obtain information. They are also a good way of helping someone through a crisis.

Empathy and sympathy will only take you so far. Asking the right questions will help someone come up with a plan of action that gets to the root of the problem.

Executive coach Irene Leonard recommends taking a four-step approach:²⁴⁹

A. Ask someone questions that will help them hone in on their issue. “What seems to be the issue here?” is a good starting point.

B. Obtain further information. Once you have established the underlying cause of their distress, you can then use prompts to get the full story, if necessary. Questions like “Can you tell me more about that?” and “What else can you tell me?” are useful in this context.

C. Ask them questions that establish their ideal outcome. Specifically, encourage them to tell you what a successful resolution would look like. Ask them what

they want to happen, what their priorities are, and their preferred way of solving the problem. For instance, do they want to figure things out alone, with a friend, or with the assistance of a third party?

D. Ask them questions that help them pin down their next steps. For instance, you could ask them whether they have any firm ideas with regards to how they plan to proceed and how they will know when they have met their objectives.

4. **Don't lead people to a particular answer.** If you want to know what someone really thinks of an idea, you need to ask your question in a neutral way. In other words, you need to avoid asking leading questions. Think about how you phrase them.

Here are three examples of terrible questions that encourage an individual to give a particular kind of answer:

“Does everyone agree that we should streamline the department?”

“Don't you think that we should spend Thanksgiving at Peter's house this year?”

“Shouldn't we put this into action as soon as possible?”

If you asked these questions, you'd be making your own biases plain. If someone disagreed strongly, they may raise objections, but most people like an easy life. Consequently, open questions can encourage poor decision-making at both home and work, which can be disastrous.

This is even more likely if you have a strong personality, because not many people will be willing to tackle your assumptions and challenge your thinking.

Let's look at a better way to ask those questions:

“What does everyone think we should do with regards to the department's structure?”

“Where do you think we should spend Thanksgiving this year?”

“When do you think we should put this plan into action?”

5. Don't force people to pick between two or three options. This approach assumes that you have already thought of all the available options. There might be viable alternatives, but you will never know if you ask questions in this format.

It's more effective to simply ask someone for their suggestions, or open with a broad statement like, “How would you handle this situation?”²⁵⁰

6. Prepare for the unexpected. Never assume that you know in advance what someone is going to say. Give them your full attention and be ready with a few phrases you can use if they share some shocking information.

“Thank you for telling me – I need time to process that,”
“This is a surprise, can I have a minute to take that on board?”
and “I'll admit this has shocked me a little, but I'd like to talk about it further,” can all help smooth over an awkward situation.

There's even more advice on the art of asking questions in my book [The Science of Effective Communication: Improve Your Social Skills and Small Talk, Develop Charisma and Learn How to Talk to Anyone.](#)

Put It Into Practice

Today, you are going to put the above principles into practice when asking questions. If you have been meaning to get some clarification on an issue for a while and haven't gotten around to it, now is the perfect time! These questions don't have to be of great significance.

The objective is to practice getting the information you need and to have a positive conversation at the same time. Remember to put your listening skills to good use whenever the other person provides an answer.

²⁴⁹ Leonard, I. (n.d.). The Art of Effective Questioning: Asking the right question for the desired result. coachingforchange.com

²⁵⁰ Haden, J. (2014). 5 Ways to Ask the Perfect Question. inc.com

Day 11:

Refine Your Voice & Speaking Style

It's not just what you say but how you say it. Speaking at a suitable volume and pitch will make other people more inclined to listen to you. We all know people who aren't especially brilliant or interesting but still know how to engage a crowd.

These folks use their voices to grab their audience's attention. You should do likewise. It's not just actors and singers who can develop their voices. Anyone who wants to leave a positive impression should learn how to make the most of their vocal cords.

Today, you are going to discover your personal vocal range, and fix some of the most common speaking mistakes everyone makes from time to time. It doesn't matter how fascinating your message, it won't get through if no one is listening. A dull, monotonous voice will kill your communication dead.

Here's how to make your voice more exciting and easier on the ear:

1. **Lower the pitch of your voice.** Research has demonstrated that people who speak in a low pitch are perceived as more confident and competent than those who talk in a breathy voice. This applies to

both men and women.²⁵¹ Like it or not, people can and will judge you based on your speaking voice.

Practice sitting and standing up straight, taking deep breaths, and then counting slowly from one to five as you exhale. You can also experiment with pitch by repeating the same word or sound (such as “No”) at various intervals.

It’s a good idea to learn how to breathe properly, regardless of whether you are seriously interested in developing a good speaking voice.

I know what you’re thinking – doesn’t everyone know how to breathe? Unfortunately, this isn’t the case. Most of us breathe from our chests, not our diaphragms. Taking up yoga and breath-based meditation practices will help relax your muscles and ensure a consistent flow of oxygen around the body, which is great for your health.²⁵²

2. Use vocal exercises to develop a smoother voice. If your voice tends to quiver, particularly when you are under stress, you need to practice keeping it smooth and stable.

Take a deep breath in, then exhale at a steady rate while making a hissing sound. Repeat this several times. Tongue twisters also help you practice speaking in an even tone – try saying “three free throws,” “strange strategic statistics,” or another difficult phrase repeatedly until it becomes easy. Repeat these exercises a few times per day.²⁵³

Here’s another exercise that will help you develop a sharper, cleaner voice. Moving up and down your vocal

range say, “ney, ney, ney, ney, ney” ten times over. Repeat this exercise daily.²⁵⁴

3. Cut out any verbal tics. I used to say “um” a lot.

At the time, I knew that I didn’t sound as confident as I would have liked, but I had no idea that it was so noticeable until a friend kindly pointed it out. I was embarrassed at the time, but she helped me realize that if I wanted to be taken seriously, I’d have to work on eliminating my verbal tic!

Aside from “um,” other frequent offenders include “er,” “like,” “yuh,” and “y’know.” They are okay in moderation, but if you use them repeatedly, your listeners will assume that you aren’t really sure what you are talking about. If you happen to have any video or audio recordings of yourself lying around, watch or listen to them.

Count the number of times you use the words and phrases listed above. The results might surprise you, but they will spur you to action. If you don’t have any material to work with, ask a friend to make a discreet recording when you are distracted.

4. Stick to short sentences and choose short words

where possible. Whatever the education level of your audience, they will find short sentences easier to digest. Use technical terms if necessary but pick short words if it’s practical to do so. Ideally, you should speak in sentences that you can get through on a single breath.²⁵⁵

5. **Master the art of the pause.** Effective speakers know that pauses lend extra weight to their message. For example, a brief pause between two points provides your audience with a chance to appreciate their importance. Pausing after a rhetorical question will give them a moment in which to consider the broader point you are making.
6. **Vary the pitch and tone of your voice.** Keeping your voice relatively low will make you sound more authoritative. However, speaking in a monotone will just bore everyone around you. Let yourself express some emotion. For example, it's fine to raise your voice in surprise or to adopt a softer tone when comforting a friend.

Put It Into Practice

Today, I'm assigning you two challenges.

Exercise I

Make sure you have at least ten minutes to yourself, or else those around you might assume you've gone crazy. Find an article or book and read it aloud for a minute. Record yourself speaking, then listen to it.

Pay attention to your volume and pitch. We don't tend to really listen to the sound of our own voices, so you may be in for a shock the first time you play it back!

Appraise your voice. Do you speak softly, loudly, or somewhere in between? Are you high-pitched, low-pitched, or "average"? Using your recorder, experiment until you know

how it feels to speak in a steady, even voice at a relatively low pitch. Try the vocal exercises outlined above.

Exercise II

The second challenge is to practice speaking in a different tone of voice when in conversation. If you already know the other person, don't change your tone completely - they will just want to know why you suddenly sound completely different. Most of us can't help but respond differently to voices of varying pitches and inflections. You may be surprised at how everyone around you reacts.

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252 Ni, P. (2014). How to Strengthen & Improve the Sound of Your Speaking Voice. psychologytoday.com

253 Peters, K. (2010). Pump Up Your Speaking Voice with a Strength Training Workout. sixminutes.dlugan.com

254 Ibid.

255 Vanderkam, L. (2016). How To Make Your Voice Sound Better So People Will Actually Listen To You. fastcompany.com

Day 12:

Focus On Behavior, Not Character

Today's challenge won't just improve your communication skills, it'll also give your social intelligence a boost. You're going to learn a simple trick that will help you resolve arguments, get your needs met in a relationship, and stay on everyone's good side.

Do you happen to know someone who seems popular with everyone, yet at the same time refuses to sugarcoat the truth? These folks have the ability to give criticism without making enemies and to patch up any disagreements within minutes.

I had a boss like this a few years ago. Everyone respected him. He had a reputation as a straight shooter and could be a bit blunt sometimes, but he was pretty popular. I'd watch him carefully in meetings, trying to work out how he got the balance right. He was calm and polite, but I sensed there was more to it than that.

One day, I worked up the nerve to ask him for a few tips. I had recently moved into a management position and was trying to learn how to call out unacceptable behavior in my team without earning myself a reputation as a mean or harsh boss.

"Ah," he said. "One rule. Focus on their behavior, not their character." I asked him for an example. "Well," he went on,

“Last week I had to write someone up for wasting a lot of time on social media when he should have been working on a big project. He was being lazy. But I never used the word lazy and I never implied that he was wasting time.”

“Instead, I talked about the facts. I explained why his conduct was inappropriate. I talked about the exact number of hours that he’d been spending online, and I actually had a printed copy of his contract on the table during our meeting. It clearly stated that he was not allowed to use company networks for personal communication. He agreed he’d messed up, and that was pretty much the end of it.”

In hindsight, it sounded so obvious. My boss didn’t assassinate anyone’s character. All he did was take a moment to gather his evidence and ascertain the facts. He focused on what someone had actually done rather than their personality or attitude in general. He spelled out the consequences someone would face if they didn’t change their behavior, but he never took the opportunity to rip someone apart.

This doesn’t just work in professional settings. Use it whenever you need to call someone out on their behavior. It’s an awesome technique because it stops people from getting defensive.²⁵⁶

If you start analyzing their personality and passing harsh judgements on their character, you will find yourself drawn into an argument about what they are “really” like. This is a total waste of time and will harm the relationship.

Let’s take a look at two examples that show the value in emphasizing actions and consequences instead of personality and threats.

Example 1: Your teenage son's room is a mess. You want him to clean it up.

Don't say: "Your room is a total mess. I can't believe how lazy you are. You'd better get it straightened up right now, or you'll be in trouble!"

Instead, you could say: "Your room is messy and needs a cleaning. This is my home, and you must respect that. I expect you to have cleaned it by the weekend, or you will not be allowed to use the car on Friday night."

Example 2: You are a manager. A member of your team has been late three mornings over the past two weeks, and you want them to start turning up for work on time.

Don't say: "You obviously don't care about your job, and you are letting the team down. Start getting here on time!"

Instead, you could say: "You have been late three times over the past fourteen days. As you know, it is important for the sake of the team's performance that everyone is here on time. If you are late again, you will receive a written warning."

By the way, this doesn't have to be a conversation about a serious, life-altering event. For example, let's suppose that a friend asks you out for dinner but then asks you to pay for everything.

They promise that they will pay you back once payday comes around, but then they don't make contact. This leaves you feeling hurt and underappreciated. You might be thinking, "So-and-so is really selfish! They always take people for granted!"

However, using the approach outlined in this chapter, you'd talk only about their actions. Telling them that you think they are a selfish leech might be satisfying for a few seconds, but is it going to help your friendship?

Nope! Stick to the facts. If you have to make a request (in this case, for your money), keep calm. Focus on what you want, why you need it, and the time frame in which you expect it to happen.

Finally, there's another advantage to this technique. When you talk about someone's behavior as opposed to their character, you are signaling that it's what they do, rather than who they are, that matters.

This can encourage them to try harder in the future, especially, if you also take care to compliment them on everything they have done right.²⁵⁷ Whether they admit it or not, most people thrive on praise. Positive acknowledgement always goes down well.

Put It Into Practice

Today, you are going to have a conversation with someone who has recently hurt or inconvenienced you. This serves two purposes. First, it will help clear the air and get your relationship back on track.

Second, it will give you the opportunity to practice talking about a problem in terms of someone's actions. You are not going to make character judgments, create drama, or drag up the past just for the sake of hurting them.

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Day 13:

Uncover Your Communication Background

You have control over your communication style. If I didn't believe that we all have the potential to become better communicators, I wouldn't have bothered writing this book! However, there's no getting around the fact that the way you were raised has affected the way you talk to others and how you conduct yourself in relationships. It's human nature.

We are wired to imitate our parents, (or whoever was in charge of our well-being), because they were our first role models. Sigmund Freud held a lot of weird ideas, but he was right when he said that our early years play a key role in shaping our adult personalities.²⁵⁸

I believe that self-knowledge – plus action, of course – is a solid foundation for change. It can help you work your way around blocks or personal resistance. For example, you might realize that it makes sense to expand your vocabulary or talk in a more confident manner, because doing so improves your relationships and social standing. However, you may feel as though something is holding you back.

In these cases, it's a good idea to dig a little deeper and think about your underlying beliefs about who you are and how you “should” communicate affect you. For instance, if your parents

taught you that others will see you as arrogant or “overbearing” when you are confident, it shouldn’t come as a surprise when you feel a resistance to change.

The Story Of Jenny

Let me tell you about a client of mine. Jenny was in her mid-thirties, a successful lawyer who had been told by her work mentor that she was well on the way to being made a partner at her firm.

The problem? Her mentor advised her that her promotion was unlikely to happen until she learned to become “more assertive” with the firm’s biggest clients. Jenny had read books on assertiveness and even attended a seminar, but she still lacked the kind of confidence that would take her career to the next level.

“I don’t get it,” Jenny said in our first session together. “I know what I need to do, but something inside me just freezes up when I need to stand up for myself or argue against someone with a lot of power. Why can’t I put what I learned in the seminar into practice?”

At the time, I was starting to delve into developmental psychology and felt inspired to tackle the problem from another angle. “If you don’t mind,” I said, “could you tell me about how your parents used to communicate with you?”

Our conversation then went like this:

JENNY: Normally, I suppose. You know, whatever “normal” means. They were pretty patient most of the time. Occasionally, my father lost his temper. Sometimes my mother

would sulk if she couldn't get her way. Both of them had their own friends. Their social skills are okay.

ME: Alright. Would you say they were assertive people?

JENNY: No...yes? My father was quite assertive. If someone annoyed him, he'd always tell them. But my mother seemed to think...well, she didn't say so, but....

ME: But....?

JENNY: She didn't seem to think girls should cause anyone any bother, if you see what I mean. She never told me that women shouldn't be assertive, but now that I think about it, all her friends are the passive-aggressive type. I don't think she approves of strong women. She always praised me most when I was entertaining myself or being "nice and quiet".

As we talked further, it became apparent that Jenny's mother modeled a passive-aggressive communication style.

Jenny told me that her mother's sister had been much more straightforward and transparent, but unfortunately her aunt lived far away and was not available as a role model. Her mother was the only consistent female figure in her life, so she was the one who taught Jenny how to communicate with others.

If Jenny's father had been her primary caregiver, she would probably have learned to use a more assertive communication style. Social Learning Theory predicts that we adopt the behaviors and attitudes of the adults we spend the most time with.²⁵⁹

In this case, Jenny's mother was her main caregiver, so it was always more likely that Jenny would imitate her.

No wonder Jenny felt awkward when she tried to be assertive – it went against her early “training.” The good news is that Jenny realized that she didn’t have to be a replica of her mother. Once she figured out why she felt so uncomfortable when speaking up for herself, the answer motivated her to forge her own communication style.

I encouraged her to watch a couple of more assertive female lawyers in her firm and use them as new behavioral models. A few months after we started working together, Jenny got her promotion.

A few questions to ask yourself

Imagine that you and I are sitting in a coaching session right now. This is a list of the questions I’d ask you. Take your time when thinking about your answers; they can help you understand the lessons you’ve carried into your adult relationships.

1. **Did my parents have solid social skills?** It’s simple – if your parents knew how to create healthy relationships with others and sustain a good conversation, you probably picked up these skills. If not, you probably find social situations a bit confusing. This can cause you to doubt yourself and to feel shy around new people.
2. **Did my parents have friends?** While it’s natural to prefer a larger or smaller social circle, it isn’t normal to be completely friendless. If your parents never showed interest in other people, you may be confused by the rules of normal social interaction

and might not know how to respond when other people show an interest in you.

- 3. Did my parents pass on any “rules” when it came to communication or relationships?** As the case of Jenny proves, our parents’ communication rulebook can come to be a defining factor in our social lives. These “rules” don’t even have to be stated upfront.

Children pay more attention to what adults do than what they say. If it’s a toss-up between learning from words or learning from actions, it’s the actions that carry more weight every time.

- 4. Did my parents show me how to make up after an argument, or settle a difference of opinion?** Disagreements are inevitable in any close relationship. If we don’t understand how to understand someone’s point of view, or how to reconcile following a fight, any kind of dispute will feel frightening.

- 5. Did my parents encourage me to express myself?** I’ve worked with a lot of clients who don’t even have the vocabulary to say how they feel. Obviously, this means they run into trouble in their relationships, because they don’t have the ability to communicate with other people in an honest, authentic manner.

These clients were usually raised by parents who reacted badly to any display of strong emotion, even enthusiasm. They sent their children a clear message: It’s inappropriate to express yourself.

Put It Into Practice

Today, you are going to do a bit of introspection. You don't have to write a lengthy journal entry or subject yourself to hours of analysis, but you might come up with some useful insights.

Take a piece of paper and divide it into two columns. At the top of each, write down the name of your two most important caregivers from early childhood. For most people, this will be "Mom" and "Dad," but you might have been cared for by another relative or even friends of the family.

Now, think about their communication styles. What did you learn from each of these individuals? Write down the beliefs they passed on to you. Do you want to hold on to these beliefs, or is it time to swap them for better, healthier ways of communicating?

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Day 14:

Understand How Different Generations Communicate

You've probably heard the old cliché, "Men are from Mars, women are from Venus." There are thousands of books and articles out there about sex differences and why men and women often misunderstand each other.

But what about age differences? We don't tend to talk about the challenges that come with communicating with people from other generations. In this chapter, you'll learn more about these differences, and how you can adjust your approach depending on your audience.

I'm going to focus on communication in the workplace, but this information is also useful when it comes to understanding generational differences in general.

Before we go any further, I want to make it clear that everyone has their own personality and preferred communication style. It's not a good idea to assume that just because someone was born in a particular era that they will behave in a certain way.

On the other hand, there are plenty of academic researchers who believe that our approach to work and relationships is partly influenced by when we were born.

The Generations You'll Meet At Work – And How To Communicate With Them

1. **Baby Boomers (Born between 1946-1964):** These workers triggered a revolution. When they entered the workplace, women and ethnic minorities were gradually starting to take on roles that had usually been occupied by white men. They have a proactive attitude, are competitive, and value their work as much as their family life. ²⁶⁰

They came of age during a time of social change, and they tend to distrust authority. This isn't to say that they cannot work well with managers; just that they question power and believe that those in management positions should have to work for their status. They don't have time for aloof, arrogant bosses. They prefer to work for people who try to understand everyone's point of view before deciding, rather than pull rank.

Some are skeptical of modern working practices such as remote working and flexible hours. In this respect, they are quite traditional.

Many are workaholics who believe that workplace competition is healthy and that loyalty to a company should be rewarded. They like teamwork and tend to believe that meetings are a productive use of their time. ²⁶¹

Communication tips: A typical Boomer will appreciate a detailed explanation of how their contribution is making a difference to the company's bottom line. They appreciate regular recognition, particularly if they devoted many years of their life to an organization. For this reason, they place more value on titles than their younger coworkers.

They came of age in an era where face-to-face communication was highly valued. If you have something of importance to say to a Boomer, schedule an in-person meeting. Most are perfectly capable of using e-mail and other modern technologies, but they were raised to value face-to-face conversations.

Boomers are not usually enthused by the idea of regular performance reviews or ongoing feedback. As far as they are concerned, they can do their jobs and appreciate the space in which to get their tasks done.

It may be necessary to explain to a Boomer that even the most competent of people can benefit from ongoing feedback, and that regular reviews do not imply that their managers believe them to be incompetent.

2. Generation X (Born between 1965-1980): More entrepreneurial than their Baby Boomer predecessors, Gen Xers grew up in relatively insecure financial circumstances with fewer economic opportunities. Compared with Boomers, they are more likely to prioritize a work-life balance, and to value independence.

They are not especially concerned with remaining loyal to an employer.²⁶² On the whole, they are more skeptical about life and the workplace in general than their parents and lack the optimism and appetite for change that characterized the Boomer generation. They are more comfortable using modern technology.

When it comes to authority, Generation Xers respect leaders who use a confrontational management style.

Compared to Boomers, they are more comfortable asking and answering difficult questions in the workplace.

Being more willing to switch jobs and careers rather than remaining loyal to one employer for decades, they are not so concerned with keeping the peace at work. They place more emphasis on personal freedom, and many aspire to work for themselves.

Communication tips: Gen Xers like regular feedback and appreciate prompt comments and constructive criticism. They want to discover their own strengths and weaknesses and enjoy planning out their careers.

They believe that successful people are lifelong learners. They are creative, often embrace change, and appreciate the opportunity to air their opinions.

They do not place so much value on face-to-face communication as the previous generation, but their favored style could best be described as “direct”. When talking to a Gen Xer, it’s best to get straight to the point. They do not have as much tolerance for meetings as the Boomer generation.

3. Generation Y (Born between 1981-1997): Also known as “Millennials,” this generation was the first to grow up with reliable access to computers and the internet. Compared with previous generations, they are happier to multitask, to get involved with multiple projects, and to take a flexible approach to work if the situation demands it.

For instance, the average Gen Yer will be glad to be seconded to another department or asked to apply their

skills to a new area. They see work as a route to personal fulfilment and think that it's acceptable to change jobs and careers often to pursue their happiness.²⁶³

Members of this group are accustomed to digital rather than in person communication. They like frequent feedback, and they favor leaders who invite them to give their opinions at each stage of a project. A Gen Yer may well be ambitious, but they believe that a good work-life balance is important.

Communication tips: This group assumes that e-mails, instant messages, and even social media are perfectly appropriate mediums for workplace communication.

For a Gen Yer, writing an e-mail instead of making a phone call is not a sign of disrespect – it's just the norm for their generation. This group also likes to have answers quickly. If you keep them waiting, they are liable to become annoyed.

Always play it straight with a Gen Yer. If you can't give them feedback immediately, give them a realistic time frame and then stick to it. They are not entitled by nature – they have just grown up in a world full of information that is available day and night.

They are fully capable of recognizing authority and complying with workplace rules, but they will want to know how decisions are made and why.

4. **Generation Z (Born from 1998 onwards):**²⁶⁴ These people have grown up in a period of increased social justice ideas and movements, and they tend to place

more value on inclusive communication. For example, they care passionately about transgender rights, overcoming sexism in the workplace, and other social justice issues such as racism and income inequality.²⁶⁵

They have come of age in a digital culture, and are comfortable with the idea of working remotely, working online, and working for a diverse range of clients and companies. They are unlikely to work for the same boss over a long period of time.

Gen Zers are aware of the privacy and security risks that come with technology. They love social media and cannot fathom life without smartphones, but they know that everything you post online lives forever.

Thanks to increased globalization and easy access to information, they are more aware of their career options than previous generations. They value independence, innovation, and creativity. They grew up during a time of economic recession, so they are keen to earn a steady wage.

Communication tips: Inclusive communication is a good idea regardless of your audience, but it's particularly important when dealing with Gen Zers.

They are the most diverse workforce America has ever seen. Specifically, over 50% of under-18s will be of a minority ethnic group or race by 2020, and company communication policies need to respect this fact.

Gen Zers are eager to learn and they like to be asked for their opinions. In many respects, they are similar to

Millennials, but they are likely to appreciate anonymous communication and to take more care when managing their online reputation. If a topic is particularly sensitive, they might prefer to meet in person so that no trace of the conversation is left online.

Put It Into Practice

Think about the people you work with, or the people in your social circle, who are from a different generation. Do you feel equally at ease with people much older or younger than yourself?

Pick someone from another generation that you have struggled to connect with in the past. Having read this chapter, do you think that age differences might contribute to the problem?

If so, your task today is to try relating to this person in a new way. Your next steps will depend on the situation. I'll give you an example. Let's say that you are working on a project with two Boomers and one Gen Xer. The Boomers are happy to meet every Monday, report on their progress, then return the following week with another update.

However, the Gen Xer seems to feel as though the group isn't offering them enough guidance. Bearing in mind that Gen Xers tend to value ongoing feedback, you might decide to check in with them every couple of days instead. This would show respect for their preferred communication styles and result in more harmonious work relationships.

²⁶⁰ Kane, S. (2017). Baby Boomers In The Workplace. thebalance.com

²⁶¹ Hammill, G. (2005). Mixing and Managing Four Generations of Employees. fd.edu

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Day 15:

Master The Art Of Communicating Via E-mail

Almost everyone uses e-mail and social media nowadays, both for professional and personal purposes. It's easy, free, and allows lots of room for creative expression. However, you need to be careful. Text-based messages can be misinterpreted, sometimes with devastating consequences. If you are sending e-mails on behalf of a company, you could end up in a lot of trouble if they cause any offense.

Here's a shocking statistic: We misjudge the tone and meaning of the e-mails we receive up to 50% of the time. Worse, most of us believe that we can accurately figure out a sender's underlying message.²⁶⁶ In this section, you'll learn how to get the tone right every time.

Here are the basic rules of writing effective e-mails that will get your message across:

- 1. If the other person is in a senior position, mirror their tone:** If your boss opens and closes with a few formal words, you should do the same. If they start signing off with a simple "Yours," or "Regards," feel free to follow their lead. Otherwise, assume that you should use formal business language.

2. Make it easy for the recipient to clarify any points raised: If you are contacting someone about a complex issue, or you need to share a lot of information, provide them with some other means of getting back to you.

This is especially important if you are working on a time-sensitive document or project. If any new developments come to light, how can they contact you? Make sure they have your phone number as well as your e-mail address.

3. Don't fire off requests, and don't launch into a lengthy series of bullet points: Keep e-mails efficient and concise, but don't be too cold. For instance, don't send one or two-line e-mails that contain a stark request or statement like "I need this task to be done today" or "You will need to rearrange your schedule to fit this in."²⁶⁷

If you were talking to someone face-to-face, your tone of voice and body language can stand in for niceties like "Please" and "Thanks." Unfortunately, when you only have words on a screen, you need to (literally) spell them out.

Stark, request-based e-mails make the recipient feel defensive, as though they have been given an order by a demanding drill sergeant. Even if you are the boss and your subordinate has an obligation to follow your requests, it will benefit your relationship if you make the effort to sound friendly.

Punctuation also helps. Exclamation points denote yelling so be sure to use them only when conveying extreme excitement or upset. There is a big difference between “I’ll see you this Friday” and “I’ll see you this Friday!” As well as an e-mail saying, “Your work on that important project could use improvement!” and “Your work on that important project could use improvement.” Which version would you rather receive from your superior?

4. **Keep your subject line to a few words:** If you can’t think of a concise subject line, there’s a chance that you’ve tried to fit too much information into one e-mail. Think about the true purpose of your message and rewrite it if necessary.

The average businessperson gets over 100 e-mails every day.²⁶⁸ Make it easy for them to pick out the key points of your message.

5. **Imagine that they are reading the message over your shoulder:** If you aren’t sure whether you’ve made an inappropriate remark, reread the message while imagining that they are in the room with you.

Only click “Send” if you’d be happy to say it to their face. It’s possible to insult someone to their face with no witnesses present but e-mail lasts forever.

6. **Explain your attachments:** If you need to attach a document, make sure that you reference it in the body of your e-mail. Give your attachment a relevant title that identifies it as a safe document that can be opened without risk to the recipient.

7. **Use a template:** Some of us don't like writing and others don't have time to craft a well-written message. Why not gather together a few templates and keep them at hand? There are plenty of free resources online.

For example, ThriveHive (thrivehive.com) offers 13 templates for small businesses²⁶⁹ and The Muse (themuse.com) has compiled 27 pre-written templates that can be used in a range of business situations.²⁷⁰ Why waste time working on the structure of a message when other people have already done the heavy lifting?

You can also compile your own templates. If you have written an especially fine e-mail, why not strip out the personal content and use the structure again in the future?

You can also use e-mails that other people have sent you for this purpose. However, be sure to remove all identifying information!

8. **Begin or end the message with a humorous disclaimer:**²⁷¹ If you are feeling especially pressured, tired, or angry when writing an e-mail and worry that the recipient will pick up on your negativity, type a quick disclaimer like “I’ve had a crazy week, but rest assured that I’m really looking forward to working with you!” or “In case I seem a bit sluggish this morning, it’s because I’ve only had one cup of coffee so far!”

9. **Where possible, use “Thanks in advance” to close an e-mail:** Given that e-mail is a key business tool, you won't be surprised to learn that researchers have

invested a lot of time into figuring out the words and phrases that get results.

Boomerang, a company that specializes in helping people manage their e-mail and improving their productivity, ran a study in which they looked at over 350,000 e-mails. The phrase “Thanks in advance” yielded a response rate of 65% according to their findings, outshining all other common sign-offs.²⁷²

10. Keep it simple: Unless you know the other party well, you should write using language that could be understood by a third-grader.

If you enjoy reading and writing, you might forget that most people don’t actually do much of either outside of work. Using straightforward language and short sentences also reduces the risk of cross-cultural misunderstandings.

11. Don’t use emojis in formal situations: This should really go without saying, but just in case it isn’t obvious – do not use emojis in formal business e-mails. Save them for colleagues you know well and silly conversations with your friends. The same applies for GIFs and novelty filters on photo attachments.

Put It Into Practice

There’s a good chance that you’ll have to send an e-mail today. Read it aloud before you press “Send.” You may discover that you haven’t got the tone quite right and that it needs rewriting.

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Day 16:

Stop Putting Yourself Down!

Do you tend to dismiss your own achievements? Do you tell people that you can't do X, Y, or Z, even though you managed it on previous occasions? Perhaps you even go so far as to insult yourself at every turn?

Everyone experiences moments of low confidence, and no one goes through life without at least a little self-doubt. It's healthy to take a step back sometimes and identify areas for improvement.

However, there's a big difference between staying grounded and beating yourself up in public. Today, you're going to learn why putting yourself down is a toxic communication habit that is harming your relationships, your happiness, and your chances of success at work.

Why do we put ourselves down in the first place? Well, there are a few reasons:

1. **We don't want to be arrogant:** This is the big one. Some of us believe that self-criticism acts as a magic spell that stops us from developing a massive ego.

Unfortunately, there's a trade-off. When you complain about your own inadequacies, you are actually being self-centered and, by extension, can come across as a tedious person with a sense of entitlement.

Do not subject everyone around you to a stream of unhelpful negativity that they don't want to hear. It's a waste of their precious time. They will resent you for taking up their energy.

Alternatively, we might think that minimizing our own accomplishments will stop other people becoming jealous, or even that it will protect us from bullying. Sadly, a lot of clever kids get bullied in school for being "nerds", and they learn to insult themselves first as a kind of protective mechanism.

If you were one of those kids, you may carry this behavior into the workplace and into your adult relationships.

2. Our parents or caregivers modeled the same behavior: A few days ago, I asked you to think about your personal communication history, and the messages you received from the people who raised you.

Children pick up their parents' habits. If they repeatedly undermined themselves, there's a good chance that you grew up thinking that this is a natural, normal way to behave.

3. We are so scared of failure that we'd rather preempt it by telling others how incompetent we are: If we tell everyone how unskilled and incompetent we are, they won't be surprised when we fail.

We don't have to deal with their disappointment, and we won't be expected to explain what went wrong. After

all, they should have known that we wouldn't get very far.

At least, that's the logic we use. In a twisted kind of way, it makes sense. The problem is that this kind of talk can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. When someone tells us that we can't do something, we start to believe it. Ironically, by telling everyone that we are incompetent and that we are doomed to failure, we actually hurt our chances!²⁷³

4. **We have low self-esteem or even clinical depression:** If you are plagued by negative thoughts about yourself, this could be a sign that you need professional help to raise your self-esteem or overcome depression.

It's worth making a doctor's appointment if you can't seem to find any enjoyment in life, or if you spend a lot of time feeling worthless, hopeless, or guilty.

Now, let's think about the consequences of self-deprecation:

1. **You make yourself feel even worse:** When you repeat the same message over and over again, even if you are alone, your brain starts believing it. A negative cycle is set into motion. You might even start beating yourself up for being so negative.
2. **You miss out on valuable opportunities:** Your closest friends will know whether your self-assessments are accurate, but new acquaintances and

colleagues are forced to rely on how you present yourself when they form an impression of you.

If you tell them how lousy you are, and how all your achievements were matters of luck rather hard work and skill, they'll assume that it's true. They don't know your personal history, so what else are they supposed to think?

Needless to say, others will be hesitant to develop a relationship – especially in professional settings – with someone who doesn't have anything to offer.

Philosopher Mark D. White believes that a lot of us harbor a fantasy that “people will see through the self-deprecation to the person underneath.” In this fantasy, we don't have to prove ourselves or be honest about our strengths and weaknesses.

If we wait long enough, someone will magically realize that we are actually a good, capable person. Writing in *Psychology Today*, White speculates that part of the problem is the fairytale narrative we were sold in childhood. Think of Cinderella – she got her happy ending when her prince looked beyond her meager home life and humble nature.²⁷⁴

- 3. Other people will assume that you are judging them:** When you hear someone gossiping about an absent friend or acquaintance, do you ever suspect that they will start speaking badly of you once your back is turned?

This principle applies even if the person you are badmouthing is yourself. A steady stream of self-deprecating

remarks sends a clear message – “I like judging people. I judge myself, and I may well be judging you, too!” Others will be slow to trust you.

How to conquer the self-deprecation habit

The good news is that you can make a conscious decision to stop putting yourself down. In brief, you need to take two steps:

Step 1: Learn how to self-monitor and catch the comments before they come out of your mouth: I won't deny that this is difficult. If you've always been quick to point out your so-called deficiencies, you will struggle with this step.

I'm asking you to break the habit of a lifetime here. Be patient with yourself. When you catch yourself making a self-deprecating remark, just note it and move on.

Step 2: Change your thinking! Earlier in this section, I put together a list of the most common reasons why people put themselves down. Which example resonated most strongly with you? Dig a little deeper and get to the root of the problem.

You may need to address some of the unhelpful beliefs you are carrying around with you. For instance, if you believe that making self-deprecating remarks stops you from developing a big ego, remind yourself that lots of evidence exists to the contrary.

I bet you know at least one person who doesn't insult themselves yet remains grounded and realistic instead of big-headed. You can choose to model your approach to theirs.

Problem-solving can also empower you to change. Take an inventory of the things you dislike about yourself. If you can change them, put together an action plan and execute it. If you can't, it's time to work on self-acceptance.

No one is perfect and expecting yourself to be a complete success in every area of your life is a recipe for self-hatred and general disaster.

Put It Into Practice

Today, you're going to keep a running tally of how many times you put yourself down or belittle your own achievements when in conversation with someone else. You may be astonished by the end of the day when adding up the total.

Don't worry! I've worked with clients who made self-deprecating remarks over a dozen times every day. If they can change, so can you.

Tomorrow, aim to halve that number. The day after, make it your goal to make no self-deprecating remarks whatsoever.

²⁷³ O'Banion, A. (2018). Self-Fulfilling Prophecy – Breaking The Cycle. socialanxietyinstitute.org

²⁷⁴ White, M.D. (2016). Why You Might Want To Reconsider Putting Yourself Down. psychologytoday.com

Day 17:

Ask Someone For Advice

We all love a story of a self-made man (or woman), but successful people often call on others for advice on their way to the top. Asking advice from someone who has already been in your situation can save you a huge amount of time, because you will benefit from their experience and mistakes.

Not only that but asking for advice – if you do it in the right way – can also lead to good professional and personal relationships. People like to help, especially if they get the satisfaction of seeing their mentee or protégé succeed.

Think about it. I bet that when someone asks you for guidance, you feel valued. A sincere request sends a clear message – “I think you are exactly the right person to lend me the support I need, and I think it’s worth making myself vulnerable if it means I get to hear your wisdom.”.

Let’s say you’ve found a person who is in a great position to offer you some valuable advice. For instance, they might be someone well-established in your field, or someone who has recently launched a successful venture. What should you bear in mind when reaching out?

1. **Clarify your objective.** What do you want to know? Before you pick up the phone or draft an e-mail, ask yourself about your end game. Imagine that you have

already reached out for advice and received a response.

What would a good result look like? If you don't know, you need to think harder about what it is you want to achieve.

2. **Give them some context.** Don't embarrass yourself by diving straight in and asking for advice. Even if you are writing to someone who has a reputation for embracing questions and extending help to others, include a couple of lines that either remind them how and where you met or else let them know why you are writing to them rather than anyone else.

You should briefly explain why their advice would be relevant to your situation.

Entrepreneur Nick Reese, who receives hundreds of e-mails every month from business owners, states on his website that those who outline their personal problem are more likely to get a helpful response because he can tailor his answer to their question.

It sounds obvious, but apparently a lot of people don't appreciate how important it is to provide him with some background information.²⁷⁵

On the other hand, don't overload someone with information. Respect their time, and just tell them what they need to know.

3. **Tell them what you want to achieve.** It isn't enough to spell out your problem if you don't then say what you actually want to happen. For example, "I want to

make a lot of money” is too general, whereas “My goal is to make at least \$10K from my website this year” is much better.

This entails making your goals clear, which means making yourself vulnerable to criticism. There is a chance that you’ll be told something you didn’t want to hear. For example, let’s say that you are looking to quit your job and start your own online business as an affiliate marketer.

Specifically, you want to be working full-time on your business within a year and generate at least \$25K in the first 12 months. Your correspondent tells you that your goal is unrealistic and that it’s more likely you will need to work on your site for a couple of years before quitting your job.

They tell you that if you can outsource some of your tasks and increase your advertising budget then you will make faster progress, but you don’t have the resources in place. The feedback is disappointing, but at least you now have a realistic view of the situation and can adjust your goals accordingly.

I know, I know – it’s awkward and painful to have someone tell you that your goals are unrealistic. But isn’t it better to hear it straight now, rather than learning your lesson the hard way? Put your pride to one side and give them the full story.

4. Tell them what you’ve already done. In all likelihood, the person you are writing to has earned their success through hard work and initiative. They

will have more respect for you if you tell them what you've already tried.

Be specific. "I've tried really hard and nothing's worked!" isn't informative. However, "I've invested \$5,000 in PCC marketing, revamped my website two months ago, and used a 25-page e-book as a lead magnet but my mailing list only has 2,000 subscribers" provides a useful overview and proves that you aren't looking for a magic bullet.

In addition, never make the mistake of asking someone for help with a problem if you could just Google the answer.²⁷⁶

5. Give them a compliment. You can end with a brief acknowledgement of how their work has already helped you. It doesn't matter how well-established someone is, they usually appreciate positive feedback.

Don't overdo it. Something like, "By the way, I loved your recent article on putting together a marketing budget!" will do the trick. A bit of flattery can take you far but keep it sincere.

6. If you have mutual acquaintances, ask them for insight. Do you know someone who has already asked this person for advice or, even better, knows them personally?

If so, ask them whether there are any topics or questions you should avoid. If they have succeeded in getting advice from this person, how did they phrase their

request? You could even ask to see any e-mails they sent, then use it as a template for your own message.

7. Follow their lead when it comes to tone and message style. Take a look at your target's website or social media presence and use it to guide your writing style.

If they tend to use formal sentences and technical jargon, then a businesslike approach is best. If they are keen to portray themselves as a regular everyday guy or gal, then you will enjoy a better result by keeping your correspondence casual. If you aren't sure what they'd prefer, then err on the side of caution and use a conservative style.

8. If you are writing an e-mail, encourage them to follow up. If there is a chance that you will run into this person, perhaps at a conference or social occasion, tell them that you look forward to seeing them there. This makes it clear that you are keen to develop a relationship with them.

Of course, you should always send a polite note of thanks if they reply. Unless you have paid someone for a coaching service or they happen to be your boss, no one is obliged to give you any of their time. Always express your gratitude.

Put It Into Practice

Do you have a problem that drives you crazy? It can be personal or professional, large or small. Today, your task is to reach out to someone and ask for their advice. Remember, you don't have to take it on board if you don't think it will work.

Your objective is to practice putting together a request and being brave enough to send it.

275 Reese, N. (n.d.) The Secret Art Of Asking For Advice (& Mentorship). nicholasreese.com

276 Gervais, B. (n.d.) 7 Deadly Sins Millennials Make When Approaching Mentors. americanexpress.com

Day 18:

Shut Down Nosy People

Human beings are curious by nature, but some people really take nosiness to the extreme. If you feel awkward when someone bombards you with inappropriate questions, today's exercise will be perfect for you.

I believe that most nosy people aren't even aware that they ask too many questions, or that their enquiries are about as welcome as wasps at a garden party. Fortunately, you can shut them down fast!

Here are a few ways to deflect someone who just won't take the hint. Obviously, you will need to pick the strategies that best suit your situation and the personality of the individual involved.

- 1. If you suspect they are bored, give them a task to do.** Some nosy people aren't interested in your private life – they just want to break up the monotony of their day.

You could answer their intrusive questions about your weekend or whatever else it is that seems to fascinate them so much, but you could also try giving them something else to do.

Exclaim that you are so glad that they are free because your to-do list is so long. Tell them that you are busy and

that perhaps they could lend you a helping hand? For instance, let's say you have a coworker with a habit of coming over to your desk and rambling on about nothing in particular. Here's how you could handle the situation:

COWORKER: Hi! How are you?

YOU: Ugh, I'm buried. Is there anything you need?

COWORKER: Not really. So how was your weekend? I went fishing. Caught a ten pound...

YOU: So, you've got a minute? That's great. Can I ask you to help me out with something? My to-do list is a mile long. Would you rather help out with photocopies or filing?

If you ask them for help every time they stop by "just for a chat," they'll soon get the message. Before using the above technique, make sure doing so won't put your position with the company in jeopardy. From an HR standpoint, there are situations where this technique would not be appropriate. For example, let's imagine the nosy co-worker is YOUR superior. You wouldn't ask your manager to run copies for you. Always utilize good common sense.

2. **Flip it around.** Although this isn't always the case, I've noticed that nosy people tend to love talking about themselves.

This is great news, because you can use the "flip it back" technique. All you have to do is give a non-committal answer to their nosy question, then turn it back on them.

In all likelihood, they'll promptly launch into a lengthy personal story. All you have to do is either pretend to listen or cut the conversation short and get on with your day.

If they don't want to share such personal details, they will be forced to acknowledge that their original question was inappropriate – if they don't want to answer it themselves, how can they reasonably expect someone else to respond? If they hesitate, you can say “Well it's a tough one, isn't it? Anyway...” and then shift the topic.

3. **Bore them rigid.** Perhaps a subtle approach isn't your style, and you want to use a bolder strategy? Try the “bore them rigid” technique. When you are asked an intrusive question, answer it – but in a really, really boring way that skips over the juiciest parts of a story.

For instance, let's imagine you've had a long day at work and you want to sit down with a nice glass of wine and read your mail. As you traipse out to the mailbox, your annoying neighbor asks a few awkward questions about your family life and presses you for the reason why you recently got divorced.

Rather than outline your spouse's affair with your best friend, you could give an intricate account of the nastiness of the rumor mill and how social media is ruining face to face communication.

Deliver all this information in a monotone without stopping for breath. If you pause, they will jump in and

ask an inappropriate clarifying question. In short, you need to be seriously boring.

You may have to use this technique on a couple of occasions, but your nosy neighbor will quickly learn their inappropriate questions won't get answered.

A variation on this strategy is the "broken record technique." Give a brief answer, then repeat it until they get the hint and back off. Reveal no hint of frustration, but deliver the response in exactly the same way each time, using the same tone of voice and facial expression.

4. **Say, "Why do you ask?"** This question can disarm nosy people. It makes them pause, and the answer they give will reveal their real motive. They might have a good reason for making their enquiry, in which case you can answer the question.

On the other hand, they might scrabble around for a half-hearted response, which should make it plain to you and anyone else listening that they have no business sticking their nose in where it's not wanted.

5. **Don't take it personally.** Remember, nosy people are generally, well, nosy. It's unlikely that they are singling you out for special treatment.²⁷⁷ Watch their interactions with their other coworkers or friends.

If you have a good relationship with their others in the same situation, you could even get together to swap strategies. You may gain fresh insight into the nosy person's psychology, and this will put you in a stronger position to deal with their behavior in the future.

6. **If you have a good rapport, use gentle teasing or quips.** Just because someone is nosy doesn't mean that they don't have a sense of humor. If possible, use this to your advantage. A remark such as, "You're far too nosy for your own good sometimes!" delivered with a smile and gentle laugh can be enough to draw a line under their question.
7. **If a nosy person crosses the line into bullying, take it seriously.** Nosiness is usually annoying rather than harmful, but occasionally it takes a more sinister turn. Anyone who uses invasive, inappropriate questions with the intention of making you feel uncomfortable, insecure or threatened is being a bully.

When challenged, they may contend that they just want to get to know you better, or even that they are trying to help you out. In this situation, you need to enforce your personal boundaries and let them know that their behavior will result in consequences.

The best tactic here will depend on the severity and context of the situation. Sometimes, all you need to do is tell someone that if they do not respect your privacy, you will leave the conversation.

It may be necessary to record their bullying behavior and then make a complaint to your company's HR department. Everyone has the right to go about their day without being subjected to scrutiny.

Put It Into Practice

If you come across a nosy person today, use the tips in this chapter and gently but firmly shut them down. If you escape all nosy people today, plan ahead for next time. We all have a nosy colleague, relative, neighbor, or acquaintance. Prepare yourself in advance, and you won't be at loss for what to say.

277 Green, A. (2014). How to fend off nosy co-workers. askamanager.org

Day 19:

Put Together A Persuasive Message

Do you work in a job that requires you to inspire, motivate, and instruct other people? Perhaps you just want to become more persuasive in general, or to dazzle people with your ability to put together a compelling message?

Some of us are born with the gift of persuasion, but don't worry if you weren't. We can all learn how to harness our inner motivational speaker. Today, you are going to practice using a tool that will make your speeches and everyday conversation more effective.

A few years ago, I came across a helpful technique that shows you how to do precisely that. It's called Monroe's Motivated Sequence, and it has a long and distinguished history. First developed by Alan H. Monroe at Purdue University in the 1930s, it's a template that will inspire any audience to take action. Obviously, you will need to tailor it to your specific situation, but the basic template will always be the same.²⁷⁸

I'll outline the steps, and then I'll provide a detailed example.

Step 1: Grab their attention Always open your argument with an emotive story, a shocking statistic, or a fact that will

be new to the audience. A quotation or a rhetorical question will work too.

Step 2: Establish the need. Let your audience know why the current situation is unacceptable. Emphasize that things need to change, and fast!

Spell out the consequences – what will happen if no one takes action? In what ways does the problem affect your audience? You can throw in a couple of statistics here if they are relevant and interesting.

Step 3: Tell them how you'll satisfy the need. Now that you've identified the problem, what's the solution? What options are available to you? What are the key principles underlying your approach? What, exactly, do you want the audience to do? If you have considered several options before settling on your preferred plan of action, explain how you arrived at the final decision. This kind of transparency will inspire trust.

Step 4: Paint a picture of the future. This step consists of two parts. First, you need to encourage the audience to imagine the consequences if they do not take action. Use emotive language but focus on facts and figures.

The second part is to share your vision of a brighter future. If the audience acts on your instructions, how will their lives improve? Don't be shy – spell it out! If you are giving a presentation with slides or handouts, include pictures or diagrams that will appeal to their emotions.

Step 5: Spell out the next steps. You should end by telling the audience what they can or should do next. After all, there's

not much point in inflaming their enthusiasm without giving them further direction.

Here's an example of the sequence in action. Let's suppose that you have taken responsibility for the implementation of a workplace initiative.

This initiative has been set up to encourage people to increase their productivity. As their manager, increasing productivity 10% will be part of your performance assessment. You have been told to give a presentation to your colleagues, encouraging them to utilize some new techniques.

You could make the following points:

Step 1: Grab their attention. “Studies consistently show that a disturbingly high number of non-management employees could care less about their company's success and aren't working to their full capacity because of it.”

Step 2: Establish the need. “If Corporate leadership expects non-management employees to be vigorously committed to the company's success, it's best not to neglect substantive incentives for lower-level employees.”

Step 3: Tell them how you will satisfy the need.

Step 4: Paint a picture of the future. “As a result, management has decided to roll out weekly face to face check in meetings, no more than ten minutes in length to provide immediate and relevant performance feedback.”

It's important to understand that the weekly meetings may not always provide positive feedback - that wouldn't be meaningful or effective - but that the communication will be thoughtful, accurate and relevant, regardless of the outcome. It

could include encouragement for a job well done, or ideas and suggestions for course correction.

Step 5: Spell out the next steps. “Starting the first week of next month, your manager will schedule a standing meeting with you via your electronic calendar. If for some reason, you’re not available, please work with your manager to re-schedule. All leadership will be receiving ongoing training for consistency across all divisions. Leadership will continue to meet at regular intervals to assess the effectiveness of the new program and also to review the productivity data.”

If you need to improve your presentation skills, there’s lots more advice on offer in my book [Communication Skills: A Practical Guide To Improving Your Social Intelligence, Presentation, Persuasion and Public Speaking.](#)

Put It Into Practice

If you work in a job that entails writing and giving presentations, you’ll have plenty of opportunity to put this method to good use.

But what if you don’t have to engage in much persuasion in the workplace? No problem!

This sequence – with a few minor adjustments – can work at home too. For example, let’s say that you like the idea of buying a cabin in the mountains for vacations, but your spouse isn’t keen.

You could grab their attention by showing them some photos of cabins (attention). Next, you could tell them that you need an economical solution for your vacation every year that

also doubles as an investment (need) and that purchasing a cabin would be one such solution (satisfying the need).

You could help them imagine how much fun vacationing in the mountains will be (visualizing the future). Finally, you could then ask them to view a cabin with you (action).

278 MindTools. (n.d.) Monroe's Motivated Sequence. mindtools.com

Day 20:

Improve Your Mediation Skills

Even the most non-confrontational people find themselves stuck in between two individuals from time to time. So, what should you do when faced with two warring colleagues, friends, or family members? In this section, you'll find a few useful tips that will help you defuse the situation while keeping everyone's dignity intact.

First, let's get clear on what it means to be a mediator. Whether it's a formal position at work, or a role you adopt in your social circle, a mediator's job is to act as an unbiased third party who helps two or more people sort out a conflict. The aim is to find an outcome that suits everyone – at least, as is reasonably possible.

Mediation is helpful when two people have tried to resolve their own problems but can't seem to arrive at a constructive solution. Don't confuse it with negotiation, which is a process by which the parties sit down and try to reach a solution together.

Here's how to mediate:²⁷⁹

Step 1: Make sure that you're a suitable candidate. Mediation should be voluntary for all parties, and a mediator should be as unbiased as possible. Furthermore, they should be capable of facilitating an exchange without imposing their opinion.

Does this sound like you? Be honest! If you have a stake in the outcome, or are biased towards one party, you shouldn't be acting as a mediator. There's good reason why organizations often call on the services of an external consultant when dealing with a dispute in the workplace – neutrality is key.

Step 2: Lay down the ground rules. A mediator is responsible for ensuring that discussions are carried out in a civilized manner. This means that everyone needs to follow an agreed set of guidelines.

As a general rule, the following are some good starting points:

- No one is allowed to speak over someone else;
- Everyone will get their chance to tell their side of the story;
- No one is allowed to bring up irrelevant issues;
- Everyone needs to actively engage with the process;
- All parties will focus on only one issue at a time;
- No one is allowed to verbally abuse, belittle, or harass anyone involved in the process;
- The main points of the conversation will be noted by the mediator, and copies will be made available to all parties following the meeting;
- Everything said in the mediation session will be kept strictly confidential, unless everyone agrees that the issue may be discussed elsewhere.

If you are mediating in a formal setting, you may wish to print the ground rules on a piece of paper and have everyone

sign it as an indication that they understand how mediation works, and that they are willing to follow the rules.

You should also set out what will happen if someone violates these guidelines. For instance, if one party verbally abuses the other, the proceedings will be halted for ten minutes while both sides cool off.

Then, the offending party should issue an apology before the meeting continues. It's essential that you implement the rules as necessary, otherwise the injured party will lose faith in your ability to act as mediator. If you are intimidated by any of the personalities involved, you should not assume the role.

Step 3: Put together an agenda. Explain to everyone present that mediation gives everyone the chance to express their opinions, and that it's important that each side gets the opportunity to speak. Ask both sides – separately – what key issues they want to address during the process.

Encourage all parties to separate the facts from their emotions. For example, while someone may want to vent about the hurt that the other party has caused them, the underlying issue could perhaps be summarized as “Party X feels disrespected by Party Y.”

You will need to draw on your best listening skills during this stage of the process. Unless everyone feels respected, the mediation won't be a success. Use active listening techniques such as paraphrasing and appropriate prompting. Paraphrasing is the act and process of restating or rewording. Appropriate prompting involves asking questions when you feel one or both of the parties are not being heard or understood.

Be sure to note down all the issues raised. The next step is to prioritize these issues so that they can be discussed in a logical order. It's impossible to be prescriptive here, because every situation is unique.

However, the final agenda should make sense to everyone present. It should have some kind of "flow." For instance, you may all decide to tackle the most recent issue first, or you may wish to talk about them in chronological order.

Step 4: Listen to both sides so that you can understand the nature of the conflict. The next step is to move through the items on the agenda and invite each party to air their grievances. Take notes of the main points.

Ask individuals to repeat themselves if you lose track of what they said or if you require clarification. Quite often, someone who has become fixated on a particular issue or has become highly emotional will need more time than usual to gather their thoughts.

If one party feels intimidated by the other, you can suggest that each side be given the chance to speak with you separately. Remind everyone of the ground rules if necessary – everyone needs to stick to the facts wherever possible, and summarize their problems in an objective, calm manner. No one should be launching into angry tirades, and verbal aggression should not be tolerated.

In the event that physical violence erupts, the mediation process should be brought to a halt immediately. There is no excuse, under any circumstances, for physical abuse. It definitely isn't your job to act as a bouncer or referee. Order the offending party to leave and call the police if necessary.

Step 5: Decide what issues need to be resolved. Put together a list of all details where the parties agree, together with their points of difference. Make this list as detailed as possible. When the parties can find some common ground, they are likely to approach mediation with renewed optimism.

Often, two people will enter mediation feeling somewhat hopeless. However, once they have calmed down and realize that they may have more in common with one another than they first suspected, this can break down a psychological barrier.

This phenomenon is frequently seen in child custody cases. Unfortunately, it is not unusual for parents to fight over child custody arrangements. Sometimes, a family lawyer will recommend mediation instead of a court case.

Trained mediators often encourage the parents to acknowledge their point of common agreement and interest – the well-being of their child. Despite their divorce and any grudges they may still hold against one another, most couples will agree that their primary objective is to provide the best possible life for their children.

Step 6: Oversee a brainstorming session. Your next task is to help everyone break the issues down into manageable chunks and to create a dynamic that encourages problem-solving rather than conflict.

Remind everyone present that they have some shared objectives – for a start, they both want to resolve the disagreement – and that they can take their time in coming up with solutions.

You can encourage everyone to brainstorm solutions as a group, or to come up with a list separately. You can then combine their ideas into one document, or pin them up side by side, and invite them to think about the pros and cons of each.

Remember, you must refrain from offering your opinion on which solution is “best.” Your job is to ensure that both parties are given the chance to put forward their ideas and to encourage everyone to evaluate every potential solution.

Step 7: Encourage both sides to agree on practical goals. It may take some time – possibly a few hours, depending on the complexity of the situation and the personalities involved – but eventually, a few solutions will emerge.

The final step in the mediation process is to ensure that everyone sets sensible goals that can be reviewed later. Use the classic SMART acronym to help with this phase. Remember, goals should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timely.

Invite the parties to draw up a written agreement and timeline for action, and then ask them to sign it. If one party refuses, it’s time to take a step back and re-evaluate the solutions devised during Step 6.

Mediation does not always work. It requires everyone involved to take a mature approach to resolving disagreements. As you know, not everyone is capable of behaving like a reasonable adult. If your attempts at mediation fail, try not to take it personally.

Put It Into Practice

If you just so happen to come across a conflict at work or at home today, then go ahead and practice your mediation technique using the steps above.

If not, you can use the following exercise to see how the process works in real life. Think back to the last time you witnessed a heated argument or dispute. For example, perhaps two of your coworkers disagreed about the best way to proceed on a project, and neither wanted to back down.

If you could go back in time and act as mediator, how would the scenario have played out? Try to think of at least two possible solutions that the warring parties could have used.

Day 21:

Drop The Clichés

We're going to round off this communication challenge with a simple rule that will immediately elevate you above other speakers. It's time to eradicate clichés from your everyday speech.

What's wrong with a cliché? In one sense, nothing. Popular phrases such as "smooth as silk," "Actions speak louder than words," "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," "It's not rocket science!" "He's not a happy bunny," and "It's a big ask" aren't offensive. However, I'd still urge you to quit using them.

The trouble with clichés is that they have been used so often that they no longer provide the intended emphasis. Even if the cliché is literally true, it's just conversation filler.

Whoever you're speaking to will understand your meaning, but your message will lack impact. They've already heard the exact same words thousands of times before!

What's the answer? Get rid of them!

If you use a lot of clichés, you might notice a gap. What should you do instead? This is where you can have a bit of fun making up your own substitutes. For example, let's suppose that you are guilty of saying, "The grass is always greener on the other side."

You could experiment with the nouns and verbs to make your own version. For instance, you could try, “The apples always seem juicier the other side of the orchard, don’t they?”

As you already know, a wide vocabulary makes you appear smart and engaging. Getting rid of the clichés automatically forces you to draw on a wider range of words, which in turn will give listeners the impression that you are an original thinker. If you can make up your own witty phrases and sayings, then so much the better!

These rules apply to written messages too. People skim over clichés. It’s hard enough to get someone’s attention these days, so don’t lose them by stuffing your messages with overused metaphors or tired similes. Remove them entirely. This makes way for something more creative.

If you often use clichés in your speech, you might need some help in breaking the habit. We all have our own verbal tics, and our family and friends notice them more often than we do.

Be brave and ask someone you trust whether you fall back on the same old words and phrases. As long as you can convince them that you won’t take offense, they are bound to have a couple of examples they can share.

Put It Into Practice

You have two exercises to complete today.

Exercise I

Monitor your speech for clichés. Try to catch yourself before you use one. If it’s too late, make a note of what you could have said instead.

You can also watch out for clichés in other people’s speech and writing. One piece of advice – don’t point it out. They probably won’t thank you for it.

Exercise II

Come up with three of your own cliché substitutes. Start by inventing your own version of “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

Personally, I prefer to say, “What doesn’t knock you down only helps you stand firmer.” The meaning is roughly the same, but it’s a twist on the original phrase. When you use your own version, it grabs your listener’s attention.

Conclusion

Congratulations! You’ve successfully completed the 21-day challenge, and your communication skills will be better than ever.

I hope you’ve had a lot of fun along the way and maybe even discovered something new about yourself. Other people will have started to notice the difference, too.

Check out my Amazon page for the full list and do stop by my website (mindfulnessforsuccess.com) to discover more about me and my work.

It doesn’t matter whether you are a social butterfly, an introvert, or fall somewhere in between. If you put in the work, you’ll see results. Anyone can learn to be a social success and enjoy all the benefits communication skills bring. May you reap the rewards of your efforts for many years to come!

“One last thing before you go – Can I ask you a favor? I need your help! If you like this book, could you please share your experience and write an honest review [here on Amazon?](#) It will be just one minute for you (I will be happy even with one sentence), but a GREAT help for me and definitely good Karma. “ Since I’m not a well-established author and I don’t have powerful people and big publishing companies supporting me, I read every single review and jump around with joy like a little kid every time my readers comment on my books and give me their honest feedback! If I inspired you in any way, please let me know. It will also help me get my books in front of more people looking for new ideas and useful knowledge.

If you did not enjoy the book or had a problem with it, please don’t hesitate to contact me at contact@mindfulnessforsuccess.com and tell me how I can improve it to provide more value and more knowledge to my readers. I’m constantly working on my books to make them better and more helpful.

Thank you and good luck! I believe in you and I wish you all the best on your new journey!

Your friend,

Ian

About The Author

Author's Page on Amazon, where you can find and buy all of his books:

<http://www.amazo.com/author/iantuhovsky/>

Hi! I'm Ian...

... and I am interested in life. I am in the study of having an awesome and passionate life, which I believe is within the reach of practically everyone. I'm not a mentor or a guru. I'm just a guy who always knew there was more than we are told. I managed to turn my life around from way below my expectations to a really satisfying one, and now I want to share this fascinating journey with you so that you can do it, too.

I was born and raised somewhere in Eastern Europe, where Polar Bears eat people on the streets, we munch on snow instead of ice cream and there's only vodka instead of tap water, but since I make a living out of several different businesses, I move to a new country every couple of months. I also work as an HR consultant for various European companies.

I love self-development, traveling, recording music and providing value by helping others. I passionately read and write about social psychology, sociology, NLP, meditation, mindfulness, eastern philosophy, emotional intelligence, time management, communication skills and all of the topics related to conscious self-development and being the most awesome version of yourself.

Breathe. Relax. Feel that you're alive and smile. And never
hesitate to contact me!