

Communication: How to Talk so People Will Listen

Many people feel like they really can't express their needs or stand up for themselves when necessary. This may be especially true if you feel guilty that you aren't contributing in the way you (or others) think you should. You may end up saying "yes" when what you really want to say is "no". At other times, you may end up "blowing your top" out of frustration because people are not hearing what you really need to say. This section will help you learn how to express yourself in a way that others can hear you. It takes courage not to cave in, but standing up for what you need while still listening to the other person actually improves relationships.

1. Be clear about what you really want to say. Express yourself clearly and make your position clear. This may mean taking a few seconds to make sure you are clear about what you want. Think about what you want from the other person. Is it information, help on a specific task, advice, understanding, reassurance? You can't expect the other person to be able to give you what you want if you aren't even sure yourself. Once you figure out what you are looking for (it may be more than one of the above), state it clearly to the other person; don't expect that they can mind-read or *should* know how you feel or what you would like from them (even if you asked the same thing last week!).

Think of an example of an unclear statement or request (e.g. I'm just so tired!). Then come up with one or two other statements that would help clarify what you are looking for the other person to hear (e.g. "I could really use some help with the laundry today" or "I'm really frustrated that this fatigue gets in my way and I can't get stuff done. It seems like you get frustrated with it, too.")

2. Be assertive. Most people make three key mistakes when trying to be assertive. First, they may not feel entitled to ask. Second, they don't know why they are feeling the way that they do (see point 1 about being clear). And third, they confuse being assertive with being either passive or aggressive. Being assertive means being in between these two extremes.

If you want to reduce your pain and are at the doctor's office, you could take any of the three approaches. A passive approach such as "you're the doctor, whatever you say", an aggressive approach "You don't understand anything!" or, more effectively, an assertive approach "I know you are offering me some ideas, but I've already tried those and they don't seem to work. I'm really frustrated with this constant pain. Is there anything else you can offer?" This last approach is more effective, because you state specifically what you are looking for, you are clear about your feelings, and your tone is less likely to make the doctor feel like they are being attacked. Practice being assertive. A great opportunity to practice this is when you get a sales call or a call from someone you don't know.

3. Learn to use active listening. Really listening to other people, even if you don't feel that you are getting the same in return, is a great way to improve communication and ultimately, get your needs met. Active listening is a way for you to get across to the other person that you really hear what they are saying to you. This isn't the same as parroting back what they say, but

instead saying back what the other person *meant* to say. Doing so lets the other person know that you are really listening to them, and that you care about what they are trying to get across. It also buys you some time to hear a bit more if you don't really know what's going on.

For example, let's say your partner comes home and starts yelling "This place is a pigsty! What do you do all day?" The natural reaction would be to make some snide remark right back, but usually, this kind of communication ends up with nobody winning. Instead, using active listening, you might say something like "You seem to feel like I don't pull my weight around here, especially because I'm staying home during the day." This gives your partner a chance to say more, and shows that you really hear what they said and value what they feel. They'll probably calm down much more quickly, and be more willing to hear about how part of your job right now is working on getting better. This may also open up some opportunity for shared problem-solving, where you'll have a chance to use your assertiveness skills.

4. Write it down. This last point is especially important when you have limited time, such as in doctor's appointments and to help address some of the cognitive post-concussive symptoms. Write questions you have down, with the most important ones first. Think about some of the questions your doctor may have and be prepared with answers. Write down your symptoms, including information such as the length, intensity, severity of the symptoms, when they started, and what triggers the symptoms. If it is a chronic concern, be prepared to include what is different now than in previous appointments. You may even consider doing a daily symptom diary for the week prior to your appointment to have really clear, tangible examples.
5. Learn effective problem solving. There are 6 steps to effective problem solving:
 - a. *Identify the problem.* This means having a very clear idea about what you are trying to solve.
 - b. *Goal selection.* Decide what parts of the problem you are working on.
 - c. *Generation of alternatives.* Come up with specific ideas of some solutions to the problem. At this point, don't get caught up with which one is best, just try to come up with solutions.
 - d. *Decision making.* This is where you decide on a course of action. There may need to be some discussion and give-and-take if other people are involved. Use your communication skills to come to a solution that works for you, as well as the other people.
 - e. *Implementation.* Try out your solution
 - f. *Evaluation.* Many people forget this all important last step. You should always evaluate if your decided solution is working the way you thought it should. If other people aren't completely happy with your decision, it can help tell them about how you will evaluate the solution. If your solution isn't working, go back and try another one.

Think of an example of a problem and how you used all 6 steps to solve it.

Source: Heather Simister