

CHAPTER 7

Understanding Each Other

In relationships it is important to show understanding first, then seek to be understood. In order to establish good relationships with our families and friends we need to understand them in order to communicate effectively.

People can see the same thing very differently. One person may approach a problem with a creative and intuitive mind, while someone else approaches the same problem from an analytical and logical viewpoint. Each may think their own view is the correct one, based on the “facts.”

The more deeply we can understand others, the more we will value them. We need to learn to listen to our families and friends and extend understanding to them. We need to see situations and the problems they face through their eyes. We can also try to view our own problems from the perception of our parents, teachers and friends.

Empathic listening

Empathic listening is listening with intent to understand. We look from the other person's perception and see the world the way they see it. We understand how they feel. Empathy is not the same as sympathy. Sympathy is feeling pity for someone. Empathy is not necessarily feeling pity but rather fully and deeply understanding another person, both emotionally and intellectually.

Much more is involved in empathetic listening than understanding the words being spoken. We still listen with our ears but we also listen with our eyes and our heart.

When other people speak to us we may sometimes ignore them or not really listen at all, or pretend to listen: “Yeah. Uh-huh. Right.” Perhaps we do listen attentively and focus on the words that are being said. But very few people practice empathetic listening which is the highest quality of listening.

Ivan: I can't understand my little brother. He just won't listen to me.

David: You don't understand your little brother because *he* won't listen to *you*?

Ivan: That's right.

David: I thought that to understand another person *you* needed to listen to *him*.

Ivan: Oh yeah! *(Pause)* Well, I do understand him. I know what he's going through, because I've been through the same thing myself. What I don't understand is why he won't listen to me.



Ivan has no real idea what is going on inside his little brother's head. He only thinks about what is in his own mind and thinks he knows what his brother is going through. It is certainly easier to see from our own point of view. We want to be understood, but often we fail to try to understand others. Through empathetic listening we attempt to understand what it is that is going through other people's minds and hearts. We don't assume that other people see the world the way we do. It means to open our ears sincerely to what people have to say.

Unclear expectations

How many times have we had conversations like this?

"You said..."

"I did not! I said..."

"No, you're wrong! You never told me..."

"Oh, yes I did! I definitely remember saying..."

The root of most difficulties in relationships is unclear expectations. Whether it is a mother communicating with her child about house chores or an office manager dealing with the work of his staff, unclear expectations can lead to misunderstandings, disappointments and distrust.

People often have expectations that are not outwardly expressed, but assumed. In a marriage, husband and wife usually have expectations of one another. Although these expectations may not have been communicated or even consciously recognized, satisfying them creates trust in the relationship while breaking them creates distrust.

It is important in new situations for everyone to clearly state their expectations. Problems can develop by simply assuming that our own expectations are automatically understood and agreed upon by other people. Simple misunderstandings can become complicated leading to personality conflicts and communication breakdowns.

Sometimes making our expectations clear takes a lot of courage. It often seems easier to pretend that differences do not exist and to hope that things will work themselves out. However, it is better to admit our differences and work together to create expectations that everyone can agree upon.

Seek to be understood

After seeking to understand, seek to be understood. Seeking to understand requires consideration towards others. Seeking to be understood requires the courage to express oneself honestly.

Effectively presenting our ideas involves the quality of our character, our ability to relate to others and the logic of our argument. When we can present our ideas clearly

while showing an understanding of the other person's viewpoint, we enhance the validity of our own views. Understanding the other's point of view gives one a better perspective of the larger picture.

By making an effort to understand another person's perspective our own viewpoint changes. Not only does it make us a better communicator but efforts to understand others also helps to broaden our own views. This is why we should seek to understand other people.

Becoming a good communicator

A good communicator is aware of what is going on within himself and others. Self-awareness is being in touch with our own perceptions, views, feelings and desires. Outward awareness means observing the feelings and emotions in others, "reading" their body language, beyond merely listening to what they say. An obvious example

is if someone says in a loud voice that he is not angry. The passionate outburst of someone declaring that they are not upset about the subject matter is a clear indication that the opposite is probably true.

To really understand others, we need to be able to interpret the shorthand that we all use to communicate. For example, people often generalize. Generalizing can be convenient and save time, but it can also be harmful. If someone says "Girls can't be trusted", the word "girls" should be interpreted to mean a specific girl that the speaker can't trust.

Failing to communicate clearly can lead to misunderstandings, unnecessary accusations, or distortions. Saying things like "You drive me crazy" or "You give me a headache" are distortions. Sometimes we go even further, using statements like "I know that you wanted to hurt me," or "I know you don't care about me." Cause-effect accusations usually reflect our resentment or desire to protect ourselves, and not the real situation. These kinds of messages only block our

understanding of one another.

It is also very important for us to take responsibility for our own feelings, perceptions and desires. We need to express them in clear, responsible terms without being harsh, rude and commanding. For example, it is better to say "I need you to return the science book you borrowed from me", rather than demanding "Give back the book you borrowed from me!"

A good communicator has the courage and ability to give good feedback. One form of good feedback is to confront the other person on how they look, sound and seem to feel. For example, "You seem angry. Your jaw is clenched and your fist looks tight and you haven't spoken for thirty minutes." Confronting is an act of communicating the truth. Secure partners communicate honestly with each another.

Apologizing sincerely

When we hurt others or cause misunderstandings, we need to apologize and do so sincerely. This may seem obvious, yet it is often very difficult. Apologizing can resolve bad feelings and open new paths for communication.



"I was wrong."

"That was thoughtless of me."

"I did not show you respect, and I apologize."

"I embarrassed you in front of other people. I wanted to prove my point, but I shouldn't have done it at your expense. I'm very sorry."

It takes a lot of inner strength to apologize humbly from the heart. People who are insecure and have a lack of self-worth often feel that apologizing makes them appear weak and vulnerable. They are afraid that others will take advantage of them. Their self-view is based on the opinions of others. They worry about what others might think. They usually justify their actions by pointing at the other person's wrongdoing. "Well, maybe I did do that, but look at what you did." If they apologize at all, it is usually superficial.



Win/win relationships

Win/win is a state of mind and heart that always seeks the benefit of all parties involved in the communication process. A win/win solution to problems and disputes means that everyone involved will feel committed to the plan of action to resolve a problem. Win/win views life as cooperation, not competition.

We can build and keep win/win relationships on the foundation of our personal honesty and integrity. If there is strong trust and mutual respect, people are focused on issues, not on personalities or positions.

When there is trust, we know that we can be open. Even though we may see things differently than others, we feel assured that our opinions will be heard respectfully. The others know that, in turn, their opinions will be respected by us. Everyone is committed to trying to understand each other's point of view and to work together to find solutions that will be satisfactory for all parties involved.

Perhaps it is most difficult to reach a common understanding when communicating with people who are guided by a win/lose mentality. For them it is about winning and losing and not coming to some kind of happy resolution. It is about "getting it my way". People with this kind of mentality tend to use any means to get their own way.

Four important steps to any win/win solution

1. See the problem or situation from the other point of view.
2. Define the main issues and concerns involved.
3. Decide what would be a fully acceptable solution.
4. Determine possible alternatives to achieve the solution.

The most effective way to deal with such people is to express genuine courtesy, appreciation and respect for them and their viewpoint. We should listen intently, yet not be afraid to express our own viewpoint. We should avoid responding in an emotional manner as this will only fuel their determination to get their way.

Open communication has the power to solve minor problems and major crises. It takes a continuous investment of mind and heart. While the path is not an easy one, it is a journey filled with incredible rewards, as we learn to connect more deeply with ourselves, others and the world around us.

Group Exercise



Sveta and Olga, who live in neighboring flats, have the following conversation one night:

Olga: I want to go to the store tonight to get some milk for breakfast tomorrow morning. Will you go with me?

Sveta: I'm afraid to go out to the store so late. Two weeks ago some guys took my little brother's wallet and his leather coat.

Olga: Sveta, I don't want to go alone. But, anyway, those type of things don't happen very often. You can't live your life in fear.

Sveta: Olga, I know it sounds stupid, but I am really afraid. I don't want to take a chance. My brother was so scared when he came home he was crying. I just don't want to take a chance.

Olga: Thanks, Sveta. Now I won't have any milk for tomorrow morning. Maybe I should just ask Tanya to go, I know she would.

Questions for Discussion

- What do you think of Sveta's attitude towards Olga?
- Sveta tells Olga that she shouldn't live her life in fear, but how honest is she about her own fear?
- How do you think Olga feels after this conversation?

For Your Journal



Before the next class practice empathic listening. Try it as an experiment. After you have had an opportunity to be an empathetic listener write down what happened: What kind of a situation was it? What did you say to the other person? How were you able to see things from the other person's point of view? How did the person react to you? Was the person surprised? What was the final result of your empathetic listening?