Understanding Communication:

Hello, Hello, Can you hear me now?  
or  
Is Anybody Really Listening?

Communication is the means by which we form relationships with others. By exchanging our feelings, thoughts, likes, dislikes, observations, and intentions with each other, we form cooperative and interactive bonds with the people in our lives. Understanding communication is necessary to understanding our and others’ behavior, including behavior that is problematic or challenging.

Understanding communication is key to:

- Understanding and improving relationships.
- Effective persuasion.
- Effective instruction or teaching.
- Understanding and improving group dynamics.
- Understanding and resolving conflict.
- Understanding, predicting, and responding to problematic behavior.
- Understanding, predicting, and managing escalating behavior (crisis intervention).

Discussion: Think about your communication with others: List three communication strengths you have and briefly explain them with an example (some strengths you may have: good listener, good at seeing others’ perspective, patient when someone has trouble getting their words out, keeping your cool, good at coming up with ideas that work, good at giving others some say, ...)

Expressive and Receptive Communication

Communication is the exchange of messages between two or more people. Communication can be viewed as a combination of expressive and receptive processes.

- **Receptive communication** is the process of receiving and understanding a message from another person. It can be thought of as “input” (to invoke information processing and the computer as a metaphor for the human nervous system)
- **Expressive communication** is the sending of a message to another person. It can be thought of as “output”.

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DHS – Seniors and People with Disabilities
Understanding the relative strength of these two processes within a person can help us understand their behavior. For example, it might help us understand a person who engages in repetitive, aggressive communication when we notice that although talkative, he has difficulty understanding and retaining incoming information. What seems like intentional, stubborn, defiant behavior really has its root in the problems the individual has with processing incoming information and making sense of it.

Observing the relative strength of expressive and receptive processes can aid us in not only understanding and interpreting a person’s behavior; it can help us improve instruction, design structure and develop communication strategies to improve processing in the short and long term.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORDS COMING IN (receptive skills)</th>
<th>WORDS GOING OUT (expressive skills)</th>
<th>WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| High skills                       | High skills                         | • Person in control of interactions  
| Low skills                        | Low skills                          | • Alternate communication system necessary  
| High skills                       | Low skills                          | • Feels “trapped” - Experiences frustration  
| Low skills                        | High skills                         | • People likely to “burn out” on conversations & answer for the person  

Discussion: Think about a person for whom you provide support. What expressive and receptive communication combination do you identify for that person? Give a brief example of how that affects the person you’re thinking about. How can you help the person?

Non-verbal Communication

Communication is composed of verbal and non-verbal components. The words we choose impart only a part of the message. Non-verbal communication, often called body language, carries a substantial amount of information.

- Verbal communication
Words – can convey different meanings depending on delivery and accompanying body language.

Tone – varies according to situation. A change of pitch can indicate fear or anxiety (higher pitch), or anger (lower pitch).

Volume – often increases with anger, irritation, or frustration.

Rate - often increases with anger, irritation, or frustration.

Nonverbal communication

Personal space – a volume of space around us that feels like an extension of ourselves. Our sense of that space varies by situation, mood, age, and mental state. A person that is afraid or angry may demonstrate extended personal boundaries. They may experience another’s movement into their space as invasive or provocative.

Posture – overall arrangement of the body. Crossed legs and/or arms are described as closed postures, and can convey irritation, anger, or defensiveness. Open postures (erect, arms and hands at sides, relaxed) can convey openness, receptiveness, comfort, self-control.

Gestures – talking with our hands. Gestures like pointing can convey irritation, anger, or coercion. In general, palm up gestures convey an offer of assistance and reassurance; palm down gestures convey a request for self-control.

Eye contact – conveys powerful messages. There are cultural differences in the way that people use eye contact. A range of non-verbal messages can be discerned from phrases like “She gave him an angry stare” or “She glanced timidly in his direction”.

Physical contact – can also convey a range of messages from reassuring embrace to hurtful assault.

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Personal Space Exercise

Non-verbal Communication Exercise
Interpersonal Communication

Communication can be viewed as interpersonal exchange. Person one expresses information; person two receives that information. Then person two expresses information and person one receives it. You might envision two people practicing tennis – they hit the ball back and forth across the net just as we pass a conversation between ourselves.

A graphic way of thinking about the interchange between two people is to visualize a line or spectrum of communication styles, and then map the intent and perception of each expression as it occurs in the appropriate position on the line. For example, see the figure below.

1. 

Withdrawn Communication  Passive Communication  Assertive Communication  Aggressive Communication  Assultive Communication

I'll never have any friends, nobody likes me...

2. 

Withdrawn Communication  Passive Communication  Assertive Communication  Aggressive Communication  Assultive Communication

Oh give me a break! Maybe if you'd learn how to act people would want to be

As a conversation unfolds, each expression can be placed on the line so that patterns of expression and response can be seen.

Styles of Communication

Following are descriptions of each style of communication illustrated on the communication line. It’s important to remember that all of us use a variety of passive, assertive, and aggressive communication behaviors depending on circumstances, stress, and sometimes, on the extent of our self-control.

Withdrawn Communication

A person engaging in withdrawn communication:

- Is often are under the influence of physiological arousal – namely the flight response.
• Will often (but not always) express themselves non-verbally.
• May isolate themselves.
• May engage in self-destructive behavior (self-abuse)

**Passive Communication**

A person engaging in passive communication:

- Often sounds “whiney”
- Doesn’t accept responsibility for their situation
- Looks to others to improve their situation
- Are talked into things they don’t want
- Often attract aggressive communicators

**Aggressive Communication**

A person engaging in aggressive communication:

- Is intent on winning, or controlling the other.
- May be angry, threatening, or sarcastic
- May be losing self-control
- Isn’t considering the others perspective
- Isn’t acting out of mutual respect
- May seek passive communicators.

**Assaultive Communication**

A person engaging in Assaultive communication:

- Is often are under the influence of physiological arousal – namely the *fight* response.
- Will often (but not always) express themselves non-verbally.
- May engage in violent physical behavior like property destruction or assault of others
- Has lost self-control

Withdrawn, passive, aggressive, and assaultive communication are *instinctual* ways of responding. They can seem like automatic reactions. Assertive communication (our next definition) is thoughtful rather than automatic.
Assertive Communication

A person engaging in Assertive communication is:

- communicating effectively
- expressing themselves using “I” statements
- listening
- considering the other’s perspective
- considering options in the situation, and is giving and making choices
- seeking win/win outcomes

Assertive communication can be thought of as balanced communication. It is neither aggressive nor passive.

Five Vital Ingredients of Assertive Behavior

1. Listen
2. Demonstrate that you understand the person
3. Say what you think and feel using “I” statements, and avoiding “you” statements and blame
4. Say clearly and specifically what you want to happen
5. Consider the consequences of decisions both for others and yourself.

Non-Verbal Assertive Communication

Assertive behavior is conveyed by:

- Direct eye contact without staring
- Shoulders back
- Upright posture
- Open hand and arm movements
- Relaxed
- Expression on face fitting feelings being expressed
- Taking up appropriate amount of space
Common Patterns of Interpersonal Communication

As an interpersonal interaction unfolds, communication is passed from one party to another, with each party responding in turn to their perception of the other’s communication style.

A very common pattern is to respond to unbalanced communication with communication from the style on the opposite side of the assertive zone. Thus we often respond to aggression with passivity, and to passivity with aggression.

Impatience, irritation, or anger are frequent reactions to passive communication

Passivity, submission, compliance, or giving in are frequent reactions to aggressive communication
Another common pattern of interactive communication occurs when both parties react to each other’s communication on the same side of the assertive zone. So, for example, two people interacting with each other in an aggressive fashion will move together toward increasing threat or violence. We often refer to this kind of a pattern as a “power struggle”, typified with two individuals competing to win, attempting to coerce one another, and progressing toward threats and violence.

Two Aggressive Communicators Engage in Power Struggle as they Move Together Toward More Violent Interaction

Responding to Problem Behavior

Problem behavior will usually involve unbalanced, non-assertive, communication. Our usual “automatic” reaction or response to unbalanced communication is also unbalanced. As a result we “add fuel to the fire”, and interactions become increasingly unbalanced as they progress.
When we are confronted with problem behavior and its accompanying unassertive communication, we need to suspend our “automatic” reaction, and respond with assertive communication.

Reliably responding to off balance communication with assertive communication is difficult, and will often require us to run our self-control plan (discussed in the Self-Control Section). Part of our self-control plan should include insight into issues or expressions that elicits unbalanced communication from us, and methods for re-establishing our balance and self-control.

**Assertive Communication Exercises**

Think of a situation that elicits passive or withdrawn communication from you.

With whom does it occur? About what?

What does your passive or withdrawn communication look and sound like?

How in the future will you change your communication with this person and situation to be more assertive?

Think of a situation that elicits aggressive or assaultive communication from you.

With whom does it occur? About what?

What does your aggressive or assaultive communication look and sound like?

How in the future will you change your communication with this person and situation to be more assertive?

Think of a person for whom you provide support. Describe a situation that elicits passive or withdrawn communication from them. Describe the behavior.

What will you do in the future to help the person communicate more assertively?

Think of a person for whom you provide support. Describe a situation that elicits aggressive or assaultive communication from them. Describe the behavior.

What will you do in the future to help the person communicate more assertively?
It is always appropriate to respond to off balance communication (passive or aggressive communication behavior) with assertive communication. Responding with assertive communication will tend to draw the interchange toward balance (where both parties are using assertive communication). Responding to unbalanced communication with further aggression or passivity will tend to push the interchange further out of balance. As communication moves into the withdrawn or aggressive mode it is likely associated with physiological escalation (stress response). While we will sustain our assertive, balanced communication, we need to attend, as well, to the diminishing cognitive abilities of the person we are responding to. Crisis communication reduces the number and complexity of words and relies on increased attention to non-verbal communication when assisting a frightened or angry individual.

The four common causes of dangerous behavior can help us organize our verbal and non-verbal communication. They also help us diagnose varying situations to aid in our decision making.

1. A person may engage in dangerous or assaultive behavior because they are frightened, under the influence of the flight response.

2. A person may engage in dangerous or assaultive behavior because they are angry, frustrated, under the influence of the fight response.

3. A person may engage in dangerous or assaultive behavior in an attempt to manipulate others.
4. A person may engage in dangerous or assaultive behavior in an attempt to intimidate others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four Common Motivations For Dangerous Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reactive Motives</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reacting to perceived threat or challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with physiological arousal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following tables are guidelines for responding to the four common motivations. These approaches are not rigid. Successful de-escalation will always involve good observation, “thinking on your feet”, and good decision making guided by the concept of reasonable response.

Response to the Reactive Motives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Fear</th>
<th>Frustration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>Signs of flight response: pale or ashen complexion, big eyes, shallow breathing, eyes scanning</td>
<td>Signs of fight response: reddened complexion, loud voice, angry affect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Outside of personal boundary, low in field of vision, a little offside, slightly turned</td>
<td>Outside of personal boundary, in the middle of field of vision,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posture</td>
<td>Relaxed, open</td>
<td>Erect, semi-open (avoid crossed limbs, hands on hips)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gestures</td>
<td>Both hands visible, “palm up” gestures</td>
<td>“Palm down” gestures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye Contact</td>
<td>Case by case, if person meets your eye continue, if person avoids eye contact don’t force them</td>
<td>Direct eye contact like that used in everyday discourse (avoid staring)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice Tone</td>
<td>Calm, reassuring, controlled</td>
<td>Controlled, moderate volume, confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech Content</td>
<td>Fewer words as person escalates, “I will help, I won’t hurt you”</td>
<td>Fewer words as person escalates, request or suggest what to do next in assertive manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Contact</td>
<td>If the person finds it reassuring OK to use (avoid contact with intimate areas, invasion of space), only as much force as needed if physical intervention is required</td>
<td>Avoid physical contact, only as much force as needed if physical intervention is required</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Response to the Operant Motives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Manipulation</th>
<th>Intimidation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy</strong></td>
<td>Disengagement</td>
<td>Clear Consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identification</strong></td>
<td>Series of requests or delivered with increasing threat of or loss of self-control</td>
<td>Series of demands delivered with increasing threat of serious harm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Position</strong></td>
<td>Outside of personal boundary, slightly off center</td>
<td>Position of safety, well outside personal boundary, easy access to evasion route, use physical barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Posture</strong></td>
<td>Relaxed</td>
<td>Relaxed appearance, prepared to move quickly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gestures</strong></td>
<td>Use very few gestures</td>
<td>Use very few gestures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eye Contact</strong></td>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>Direct but not intimidating, like eye contact used in general discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Voice Tone</strong></td>
<td>Matter of fact, little inflection</td>
<td>Well controlled, matter of fact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speech Content</strong></td>
<td>I know what you want, I understand, here’s the reality or boundaries of the situation</td>
<td>No threat or profanity, clear description of likely outcome if threat or violence continues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical Contact</strong></td>
<td>Avoid physical contact, only as much force as needed if physical intervention is required</td>
<td>Avoid physical contact, only as much force as needed if physical intervention is required</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Common Knowledge Discussion or Exercise

**Role Play**

1 person play each motive, another person play intervener and demonstrate technique.

5 minutes preparation  
5 minutes demonstrate \((x 4 = 20)\)  
Total 25 minutes