

How to Communicate in the Middle of a Conflict

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I have been teaching Communication from the Heart Classes, where people learn a method for communication derived from IFS, the Pattern System, Interactive Groups, and other approaches. This article discusses one aspect of good communication—how to handle the situation where you are talking with someone and the two of you get into conflict or upset with each other.

Realizing there is a Problem. One of the most important aspects of good communication is realizing there is a communication problem as soon as possible after things get off in an interaction. The sooner you notice, the less charged things will be. Often the first thing you notice is that the other person is triggered and communicating badly. When this happens, immediately look at yourself. It is very likely that you are triggered, too. **One way to tell is when you realize that what you are about to say isn't going to help the situation. You can also ask: What do I feel toward the person? What am I trying to accomplish by what I am about to say? How charged up am I?**

If you are triggered, you must regain Self before anything else. The Self in IFS means your true self or spiritual center, where you are open and compassionate and non-reactive.

Degrees of Self in the midst of a conflict

1. You are so solidly in Self that you won't be triggered very easily no matter what the other person says.
2. You are in enough Self that you can communicate well but you could still be triggered pretty easily. Continue but look out for getting triggered.
3. You are aware that you are having a communication problem and mildly triggered. You need a moment to gather yourself, return to Self, decide what to say, and then you can communicate well.
4. You are aware that you are having a communication problem but so triggered that you need a time out before you can communicate well.
5. **You are lost in the conflict, highly triggered and not aware of it. First you must notice the problem.**

Getting to Self. You can begin by noticing your degree of Self and taking appropriate action to get to the high levels of Self (1 & 2). **If appropriate, mention to the other person that there is a communication problem and invite them to join you in trying to communicate better. Saying this is an important moment because you have switched from talking about the issue to talking about communication.** If

needed, you can ask the other person to give you a moment to get centered so you can communicate more effectively.

If you suggest a time out, explain that you need to take time out to be able to communicate in a helpful way. You need to cool down, explore what got triggered in you, and get into a non-reactive place. Tell the other person when you would like to talk again —10 minutes, an hour, tomorrow morning. This way they won't feel abandoned. If appropriate, invite them to also explore what happened to them.

What to Do Next. When you have regained Self, you can immediately begin to apply your knowledge of skillful communication (see <http://www.earley.org/Communication%20Articles.htm> for articles on this).

1. Improving the Relationship. You want to work thru the difficulty to improve your relationship with the person. You aren't looking to assign blame for the problem but to be heard and reconnect. You want to find a resolution that feels good to both of you.
2. Understanding The Other Person. From an open, curious, and compassionate place, you want to understand what the person might be upset about.
3. Communicating You. You want to communicate about what you are upset about without hurting the person so that you will be heard.
4. Responsibility. You are willing to look at what your part may have been in the difficulties with this person, to be open to what they may say to you about your contribution to the problem, even if this hurts you. You are willing to consider working on changing your behavior or growing in ways that will improve things in the future.

Start with deciding whether to express yourself or listen to the other person. If the other person is still quite triggered, try expressing yourself

Expressing Yourself

Start with: "When you do that, I feel this" (or "a part of me feels this")

When you do that. When describing the other person's behavior do it objectively or in terms they can understand and agree with, **rather than interpreting their behavior, judging it, or talking about their feelings or underlying issues.** This is so they understand what you are talking about, and they aren't hurt or offended.

A part of me feels this. When describing your feelings, be clear about the difference between feelings and interpretations. You can include both, but be clear about which is

which. **Your interpretation will often determine your feeling response and what parts get activated.**

Make sure not to leave out your emotional reaction, and take responsibility for that.

Speak for your part, not as your part. Speaking for a part means being in Self and talking about what the part is feeling from a centered place. It is especially problematic to speak as a part that is angry or judgmental, which usually means dumping this on the other person. This may not work. You may have to listen to their feelings

Listening to the Other Person

Understanding Their Feelings. Set aside your feelings for the moment and concentrate on the other person's. Listen to their feelings with curiosity about what is upsetting them, even if they are misinterpreting what you said or over-reacting to you. Respond to their feelings with understanding and empathy if you can. This means resonating with their feelings and their perceived reason for feeling that way.

Let them know that you understand them by reflecting back what they say or paraphrasing it. For example, "You are feeling angry at me because what I said felt judgmental to you." **Ask them questions to draw them out further about this.** "What was it that felt judgmental?"

This is not easy to do and can only work if you are in Self. Watch for parts popping up and interfering with your being able to listen with an open heart. Work on returning to Self in all the ways we have used, and call a time out if you can't, so you can listen to your parts first.

Guessing about their Feelings. If they aren't talking or if they are expressing themselves by focusing entirely on you, then **you must do something to get to their feelings before you can empathize with them.** Try to guess what they are feeling and experiencing. What might you have done that upset them? What emotions might they be feeling? What needs of theirs aren't getting met. How might they be interpreting your behavior that is bothering them?

Communicate your guesses by asking about them. For example, "Are you feeling hurt because you think I don't care about you?" Even if your guess is wrong they are likely to feel that you want to understand them. They will often tell you what they are feeling, or you can then ask.

What not to ask about:

- **Make sure that your guesses are about what they are feeling on the surface**, which means they are consciously aware of them. They are more likely to be able to agree with those.
- **Your guesses should also be about feelings that they would feel OK about having. For example, if you are talking with someone who would be ashamed to be frightened, don't ask them if they are scared.**
- **Don't guess about their underlying motivations or deep-seated psychological issues.** Most people don't like being psychologized in this way. **For example, don't ask them if their abandonment issue is up. Don't ask if they are really trying to push you away.**
- **Don't ask them if they are upset about something completely different from what they are saying they are upset about.** For example, don't ask if they are upset about their daughter and taking it out on you.

Let them go first until they feel heard and have calmed down. Then you can express yourself. If you are triggered enough that you can't really listen to them from Self, then you must take a time out.

If you are in Self and they aren't, you can try listening to them. If that doesn't help them to feel heard and calm down, bring up to them that there is a communication problem and ask them what they would like to do about it. You may need to ask them to consider taking a time out. Do this in a way that doesn't blame them for the problem.