

## Guidelines for Effective Communication in Therapy (and Life)

**Start with something positive.**

**Care.** If you didn't care you wouldn't be in relationship. Remember to express your care. Be courageous. Honesty takes courage.

**State feelings and take ownership of them:** Others cannot make us feel our feelings. While others may say or do something that may result in anger in most people, still, the feeling of anger, for example, is yours. Claim it. If you state, "I feel that..." it is not a feeling. The use of "that" is actually a judgment, projection or a thought process disguised in feeling language.

**Step into the other person's shoes:** If you want the other person to "get" you, where you're coming from and what your experience is, you have to be willing to try to understand them and their experience as well. Relationship is a two way street.

**Do not name call.** It disrespects the other person and puts them on the defensive. When you disrespect another, you dishonor your relationship.

**Do not critique.** Pointing fingers puts people on the defensive and they will never hear what you really need them to hear. They are likely to respond in ways that get you exactly the opposite of what you really need.

**Do not use this sheet to critique.** Good communication, like any skill, takes time and none of us can live up to perfection.

**First look for your own contribution in any interaction before naming the other's fault.** This does not mean that the other person's behavior isn't at fault. It does mean that we take responsibility for whatever we have done to contribute to the relationship dynamic that exists.

**Do not exaggerate.** Using words like always and never are rarely accurate reflections of reality. It also leaves no room for doubt and puts the other person on the defensive.

**Listen actively.** Do not prepare your next argument in response to what they are saying. See if you can set your reactions aside for the moment to just really hear what the other person has to say. Remember that if you can't really listen to them when they're talking...they are not likely to listen to you.

**Reflect back** what the other person has said. Sometimes we interpret what other's say rather than listen. Reflecting back with "Okay, I heard you say....Is that correct?" Helps to stop projection.

**Do not interrupt.** The exception to this is when someone is breaking a critical rule such as name calling or yelling. In which case you can calmly ask them to stop, make note of their behavior, and ask if they can tell you in a way that is respectful or follows the guidelines.

**Watch your body language.** Rolling eyes, crossed arms, pursed lips all make it difficult for the other person to speak honestly. It has been suggested that 70%-90% of our communication is nonverbal. What is your body telling the other person? Make it a practice to place your body in a neutral and open position.

**Express your feelings honestly but take ownership of your feelings.**

**This means even your anger.** But do not let your anger get bigger than you. If you need to, take a breath or a break.

**Do not yell.** This is particularly true if you are a parent or larger in size than the person you're in conflict with. IT DOES NOT HELP. Also, because of the nature of the power imbalance and size, yelling can be very scary for kids even if they don't show they're scared. In fact, scary parents often result in kids that look like they're hard. It's a coping mechanism to deal with how scared they really are inside.

**Be respectful in your communication.** You can stand up for yourself without putting the other person down. Putting the other person down hurts your relationship and puts the other person on the defensive.

**Remove yourself if you are too activated.** If you can, explain that you are not able to communicate safely and let the other know that you are going to take a breather. Also, let them know when you'll check back with them. This helps to alleviate the other's potential sense of abandonment or the feeling that you may be blowing them off.

**Pause.** Breath. Take a few moments to calm down when you're upset.

**Respond rather than react.** This usually requires pausing. Slowing things down.

**Give up being right.** Instead, focus on righting your relationship.

### **SPECIFIC TO FAMILY THERAPY:**

- Note that I will be acting like a coach. I will be interrupting when communication guidelines aren't being followed so that you can learn how to interact differently.
- I will instruct you to speak directly to your family member, rather than speaking "about" them (in 3<sup>rd</sup> person) to me. The purpose here is to help family members communicate with each other without having a therapist/mediator involved.
- If it appears that one person is becoming overly charged/emotional, I may ask one of you to step out of the room so that I can help each person individually.
- We will only deal with one topic at a time. If we get through the topic of contention and we have enough time, we may address a second topic.
- Complaining about your family member is not effective therapy. If I am meeting with you individually as well as in family/couples sessions, there will be space to address your frustrations and concerns; however, the focus will remain on you. We have no power to change another person, but we do have power to change ourselves. If all family members are working on their own stuff, the family can more readily heal.