

WHAT IS A FRIEND?

Interpersonal Relationships



SECTION I: WORDS HAVE POWER

"Sticks and stones may break my bones..."

Picture yourself sitting across from someone with whom you have a strong relationship. You've known them for a long time; you trust them and they trust you. Now, you lean over to this person. They lean in close to you. You whisper to them, "What did the five fingers say to the face?" They look at you confused and say, "What?" "Slap!" Then you slap them across the face and laugh.

"...But words will never hurt me."

You may have been joking or you may have been mad, but your words hurt them as much as the physical slap did. We make a big deal about physical assault because it is a big deal, but a verbal assault can be just as damaging. In some cases, the way we convey emotions through words not only acts as a slap in the face, but it also leaves a longer lasting scar. Words have weight. We sometimes pretend that they don't, but we know they do. The words we collect in papers, journals, letters, e-mails, and notes have value. Spoken words also have value. Just ask a poet. We need to work on not taking words, or the people that we speak these words to, for granted. Think of the absence of words as well. Silence is often viewed as consent. We need to think about what it means when we speak up, and what it means when we don't. We should learn to listen before we speak. This is the philosophy behind interpersonal communication – the kind of communication that we engage in with the people close to us.



COMMUNICATION BEGINS WITH LISTENING

Imagine standing in front of a classroom full of people and not speaking for one full minute. How would you feel? Would you be comfortable? Why or why not? Now you get an idea of the significance of both speaking and listening. It is possible to “listen” to someone when they are not saying a word.

Passive Listening: *Are you listening to me?*

Have you ever been asked this question? Sure, everyone has. It’s often hard to pay attention. Life has many distractions. We get distracted during a boring lecture, in traffic, when we are waiting, and sometimes when people we care about are talking to us. It’s completely common to be distracted, but we need to notice what it is we miss; we need to understand the effect that passive listening has on those we have relationships with.

Active Listening: *Did you hear me?*

There is a difference between listening and hearing. Hearing involves understanding the person or people you are listening to, and it has to do with more than just words. How are they sitting or standing? Is their posture open to you or closed off? Do they seem relaxed or tense? To better illustrate this, think of a pet. Its primary way of communicating with us is non-verbal. Because we have extremely rewarding relationships with pets, perhaps we should pay a little attention to the non-verbal signals of the humans in our lives as well.

CAN CONFLICT BE A GOOD THING?

Conflict can be good! We often think of conflict as being dangerous or detrimental to us in some way. In drama (on stage and screen), conflict is the word used to describe when something is happening – something interesting. So try to think of conflict in this way – as a signal that something interesting is happening. We should stick around instead of running away. Stay to see what happens next.

SELF-REFLECTION: FACTUAL VS. EMOTIONAL

We all need to think about how we speak to everyone – how our words affect other people. We also need to think about how we react to others speaking with us. There are



two main areas that we all need to work on in our interpersonal communication within our relationships.

Factual:

The first question to ask when examining a conflict is "Do I know what's going on?" This is actually one big question that brings up other little questions, like:

1. ***Do I know the series of events that has led to this?*** What's happened every step of the way? Think about it honestly. Compare this process to backtracking after losing your keys. Put events together, in sequence, from beginning to end.
2. ***Am I open to this series of events being different than what I expect?*** Sometimes we preconceive notions that may or may not be true. Be sure not to project what you don't know onto the situation at hand.
3. ***Am I open to others viewing this situation differently than I am viewing it?*** Everyone has a different set of eyes or a different lens; we need to practice leaving room for other interpretations of the same situation. Try to avoid thinking of yourself as "right" and others as "wrong."
4. ***Am I aware of how this event will fit into a future series of events?*** What will happen next? Things don't always go your way. How do you handle it when they don't? Practice being prepared for anything- we are not in control of the future!

Emotional:

Remember, our remarks are cumulative: they build on each other. If we aren't careful with our emotions and with other people's emotions then...SLAP!

1. ***Is there anything happening that is affecting my emotions in dealing with this situation?*** Are you moody, cranky, tired, happy, excited, anxious, upset, angry, or stressed? You get the idea!
2. ***Is there anything happening that is affecting others' emotions in dealing with this situation?*** Same deal, how are other people feeling? Sounds easy, but you really have to work at putting yourself in their shoes.
3. ***What is my motivation? What are you getting out of this?*** Are you boosting your ego or covering up your incompetence? Are you looking for facts? Are you attempting to build (or sabotage) a relationship?



4. ***What is their motivation?*** Same deal again, what are they getting out of it, try to be objective. Put yourself in their position.
5. ***What are your scripts?*** Scripts can be thought of as stereotypes. They affect the way we perceive and define certain contexts and relationships during our conversations with others. Put more plainly, the type of relationship we have with people, whether personal or professional or scholastic, dictates how we talk to them. Think of how you talk to your teacher versus how you talk to your best friend. Your teacher might think it odd if you talked to them like you did to your best friend, and vice versa. These scripts are powerful and affect all types of communication: in person, on the phone, in the mail, instant messaging, even text messaging! Do you know what your different scripts are?

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SECTION II: MAINTAINING FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Family can be the most important resource you have both in college and life. For this reason you should strive to maintain a relationship with your family during your transition to college. Becoming more independent can give you many advantages. Be careful, however, not to lose important family connections.

Use the following list as a guideline to maintaining those connections.

1. Keep in touch

- Send handwritten letters to your parents and other family members. Keep pre-addressed postcards on hand.



- Commit to sending a letter home every month – it will brighten your family’s day. Share your accomplishments and disappointments with them. Not only does this provide a good source of “venting,” but you can also gain their valuable insight.
- Use email, instant messaging, and web chats.
- If you’re still living at home, leave cards for your family and send email messages to let them know you are still thinking of them.

2. Be engaged

- Continue to communicate with your family.
- Ask about what’s going on at home and what everyone in the family is up to.
- If you have younger siblings at home, stay in touch with them and see what they are involved with and how they are doing.
- Share with your siblings what college is like. If you have younger siblings talk with them before you leave and reassure that you will keep in touch.
- Take pictures of your life on campus and send them to your siblings.

3. Expect change

- Be open-minded. Your family members are changing as well and it may take time for them to realize that you are an adult and living life on your own.
- Parents and other family members are going through their own transitions as well. Keep in mind they may be experiencing similar issues. For example, it’s difficult for many parents/family members when a son or daughter leaves for college. They may have anxiety about “letting go” and letting you live life on your own (also known as “Empty Nest”).
- Be understanding with yourself and your family members – everyone makes mistakes.
- Be patient!

4. Visit

- Encourage your parents and other family members to visit you while you are at school.



- Share with your family what you are involved in. If there's a special event, invite your family to attend.
- If you have siblings at home, invite them to spend a weekend with you or visit during their spring break.
- Don't forget to visit home. Although you may be having a great time living on your own, your family still misses you!

5. Trust

- Your parents and other family members are always going to be there – trust they may have some really good advice and insight on life.

*Adapted from "Survival Tips for Families"; Orientation Director's Manual; published by the National Orientation Directors Association

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