Introduction to Communications

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Contents

Introduction

Welcome to *Introduction to Communications*

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This adaptation has reformatted the original text as needed, added content from other resources, included original writing, replaced images and figures and added review activities to make the resulting whole more shareable.

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CHAPTER I
INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

1.1 Introduction to Interpersonal Communication

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to

1. Articulate communication principles and how they make you a more effective communicator
2. Explain how communication models help address communication challenges
3. Explain how the influence of others, past experiences, and cultural background shape a person's communication skills
4. Explain what an effective communicator looks like in various settings, including workplace and intercultural contexts
5. Describe the importance of cultural diversity in communication

Chapter Overview

Communication is an integral and ongoing part of everyday life. As such, knowledge of communication and an understanding of how it develops and evolves throughout the lifespan is necessary, both for those studying communication and for all other professionals as well. This chapter endeavors to provide you with the basic knowledge and theoretical foundations needed to continue your learning about the subject throughout this book. The discussion will focus on communication principles, theories, models, types of communication, and what makes a competent communicator. This chapter, and book, will provide opportunities for you to gain knowledge, practice using that knowledge, and develop the ability to adapt your communication across a wide range of interpersonal interactions.

1.2 Communication Basics

Communication is an ever-present phenomenon. It is such a dynamic and enduring process that often we are not even aware of when it starts or ends. We continue to develop our communication ability and knowledge throughout our lives. This book strives to assist in this development by providing the knowledge, theory, and practical application needed to create a solid foundation of knowledge of the complex concept we call communication.

There are countless definitions for the term "communication," and they vary widely (ISU, 2016). However, before we discuss communication, it is important to define the term. **Communication, for the purpose of this book, is the process of generating meaning by exchanging verbal and nonverbal symbols in various contexts.** Although this is the definition used for this book, it is also important for you to develop your own definition of communication and what it means to you (ISU, 2016). This personalized definition will likely evolve and change as you go through this book, and then further develop through your future experiences.

Communication Is a Process

Communication is a process that involves an exchange of both verbal and nonverbal messages between individuals. When we refer to communication as a process, we imply that it doesn't have a distinct beginning and end or follow a predetermined sequence of events. It can be very difficult to trace the origin of any communication encounter because communication doesn't always follow a neat or discernible format, which makes studying communication interactions or phenomena difficult. There are, however, certain principles that apply to the concept of communication.

Communication Principles

The cognitive process that allows people to send, receive, and understand messages is the **encoding and decoding process**. **Encoding** is the process of turning thoughts into communication by the sender of the information. The level of conscious thought that goes into encoding messages varies. **Decoding** is the process of turning communication into thoughts by those that receive the information from others. For example, you may realize you're hungry and encode the following message to send to a family member: "I'm hungry. Do you want to get pizza tonight?" As your family member receives the message, they decode your communication and turn it back into thoughts to make meaning out of it. Image 1.1 provides a basic illustration of communication between a sender and receiver.

Of course, we don't just communicate verbally—we have various options, or channels, for communication. Encoded messages are sent through a **channel**—a sensory route on which a message travels—to the receiver for decoding. Although communication can be sent and received using any sensory route (sight, smell, touch, taste, or sound), most communication occurs through visual and auditory channels.

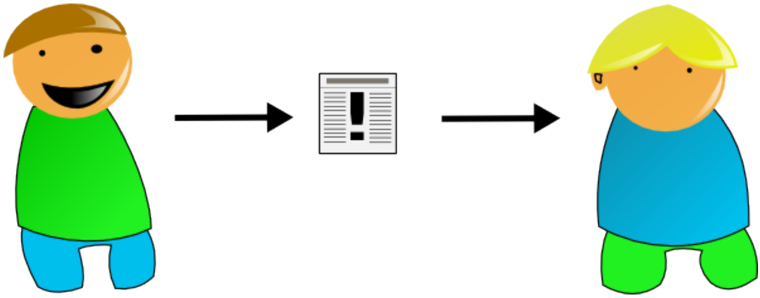

Image 1.1

The amount of conscious thought that goes into communication varies. In general, we can say that **intentional communication** usually includes more conscious thought, and **unintentional communication** usually includes less. For example, some communication is **reactionary** and almost completely involuntary. We often scream when we are frightened, say "Ouch!" when we stub a toe, and stare blankly when we are bored. This isn't the richest type of communication, but it *is* communication. Some of our interactions are more substantial and include more conscious thought but are still very routine. For example, we say "Excuse me" when we need to get past someone, "Thank you" when someone holds the door for us, or "What's up?" to a co-worker we pass every day in the hall. The reactionary and routine types of communication just discussed are common, but the messages that are most studied by communication scholars are considered **constructed communication**. These messages include more conscious thought and intention than reactionary or routine messages and often go beyond information exchange to also meet relational and identity needs, which will be discussed on the next page.

The dynamic nature of the communication process also means that communication is **irreversible**. After an initial interaction has gone wrong, characters in sitcoms and romantic comedies often use the line "Can we just start over?" As handy as it would be to be able to turn the clock back and “redo” a failed or embarrassing communication encounter, it is impossible. Miscommunication can occur regardless of the degree of conscious thought and intention put into a message. For example, if someone tells a joke that offends a co-worker, that person can’t just say, “Oh, forget I said that” or “I didn’t intend for it to be offensive.” The message has been sent, and it can’t be taken back. I’m sure we have all wished we could retract something we have said. Conversely, when communication goes well, we often wish we could recreate it. However, in addition to communication being irreversible, it is also **unrepeatable**.

If you try to recreate a good job interview experience by asking the same questions and telling the same stories about yourself, you can’t expect the same results. Even trying to repeat a communication encounter with the same person won’t feel identical or lead to the same results. The **context of communication** inevitably impacts the outcome, and context is ever-changing. Even if the words and actions stay the same, the physical, psychological, social, relational, and cultural contexts will vary and ultimately change the communication encounter. Have you ever tried to recount a funny or interesting experience to a friend who doesn’t really seem that impressed? These “You had to be there” moments illustrate the fact that communication is unrepeatable.

Content and relational dimensions are also important aspects of communication and are present in all communication exchanges. **Content dimension** refers to the content within a message. For example, the request “Turn up the heat,” contains the content that the house is cold, so the heat needs to be turned up. **Relational dimension** includes the existing interpersonal history and type of relationship we have with a person. We communicate differently with someone we just met versus someone we have known for a long time. For example, your tone or body language may be different when saying “Turn up the heat,” depending on how well you know the person and how well they know you. In Image 1.2 below, the couple appears to have a close, long-term relationship, and their verbal and nonverbal communication shows that. Initial interactions with people tend to be more highly scripted and governed by established norms and rules, but when we have an established relational context, we may be able to bend or break social norms and rules more easily. For example, you would likely follow social norms of politeness and attentiveness and might spend the whole day cleaning the house the first time you invite your new neighbours to visit. Once the neighbours are in your house, you may also make them the centre of your attention during their visit. If you end up becoming friends with your neighbours and establishing a relational context, you might not think as much about having everything cleaned and prepared or even giving them all your attention during later visits. Since communication norms and rules also vary based on the type of relationship people have, the relationship type is also part of the relational context.

Image 1.2

Communication is a complex process, and it is often difficult to determine where or with whom a communication encounter starts and ends because there may not be a specific start and end point. Communication may seem like a continuous process at times, and really, it is **impossible not to communicate with others**. Verbal and nonverbal communication occurs all the time. Models of communication simplify the process by providing a visual representation of the various aspects of a communication encounter. Some models explain communication in more detail than others, but even the most complex model can't recreate what we experience in a single moment of a communication encounter. Models still serve a valuable purpose because they allow us to see specific concepts and steps within the process of communication, define communication, and apply communication concepts. When you become aware of how communication functions, you can think more deliberately through your communication encounters, which can help you better prepare for future communication and learn from your previous communication.

Communication Meets Needs

Communication is far more than the transmission of information. We exchange messages and information for many important reasons and while the content of our communication may help us achieve certain physical and instrumental needs, it also feeds into our identities and relationships in ways that far exceed the content of the message we say verbally. Communication is needed to help meet various needs such as physical, instrumental, relational, and identity needs.

Physical Needs

Physical needs include needs that keep our bodies and minds functioning. Often when someone thinks about communication, it is associated with our brain, mouth, eyes, and ears; however, it has many more connections to our physical body and well-being. Even at the most basic level, communication can let others know that our physical needs are not being met. For example, babies communicate to let their caregivers know that they are hungry or cold, as shown in Image. 1.3. Human beings are social creatures, which makes communication important for our survival. Aside from surviving, communication skills can also help us thrive. Communication can also be therapeutic, which may lessen or prevent physical problems. Satisfying physical needs is essential for our physical functioning and survival, but in order to socially function and thrive, we must also meet instrumental, relational, and identity needs.

Image 1.3

Instrumental Needs

Instrumental needs include needs that help us get things done in our day-to-day lives and achieve short- and long-term goals. We all have short- and long-term goals that we work on every day. Fulfilling these goals is an ongoing communication task, which means we spend much of our time communicating for instrumental needs. To meet these needs, we often use communication strategically. Politicians, parents, bosses, and friends use communication to influence others in order to accomplish goals and meet needs. In short, communication that meets our instrumental needs helps us "get things done."

Relational Needs

Relational needs include needs that help us maintain social bonds and interpersonal relationships. Communicating to fill our instrumental needs helps us function on many levels, but communicating for relational needs helps us achieve the social relating that is an essential part of being human. Communication meets our relational needs by giving us a tool through which to develop, maintain, and end relationships. To develop a relationship, we may use nonverbal communication to assess whether or not someone is interested in talking to us, then use verbal communication to strike up a conversation. Then, through the mutual process of self-disclosure, a relationship forms over time. Once formed, we need to maintain the relationship, so we use communication to express our continued liking of someone. We can verbally say things like "You're such a great friend" or engage in behaviours that communicate our investment in the relationship, like organizing a birthday party. Although our relationships vary in terms of closeness and intimacy, all individuals have relational needs, and all relationships require maintenance. Finally, communication, or the lack of it, helps us end relationships. We may communicate our deteriorating commitment to a relationship by avoiding communication with someone, verbally criticizing the other person, or explicitly ending the relationship.

Identity Needs

Identity needs include our need to present ourselves to others and be thought of in particular and desired ways. What adjectives would you use to describe yourself? Are you funny, smart, loyal, or quirky? Your answer isn't just based on who you think you are because much of how we think of ourselves is based on our communication with other people. Our identity changes as we progress through life, but communication is the primary means of establishing our identity and fulfilling our identity needs. Communication allows us to present ourselves to others in particular ways. Just as many companies, celebrities, and politicians create a public image, we present different faces in different contexts.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Consider your own definition of communication.
    - What is it?
    - Now compare your definition to the definition of a classmate or friend.
    - How is the other person's definition different? How is it the same?
    - After hearing their definition, does that change yours at all?
2. Identify some physical, instrumental, relational, and identity needs that communication helps you meet in a given day.
3. In this section, we learned that communication is

irreversible and unrepeatable. Identify a situation in which you wished you could reverse communication. Then identify a situation in which you wished you could repeat communication. Even though it's impossible to reverse or repeat communication, what lessons can be learned from the two situations you identified? How can you can apply this to future communication?

References

Department of Communication, Indiana State University (ISU). (2016). *Introduction to public communication.* Indiana State University. http://kell.indstate.edu/public-comm-intro/, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

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The way you hold me by William Stitt willpower, Unsplash licence

A newborn child crying by KAI Productions™, CC BY 2.0

1.3 Models and Forms of Communication

Models of Communication

The two models we will discuss, the **linear model** and the **transactional model**, include the following parts: participants, messages, encoding, decoding, and channels (ISU, 2016). In the models, the participants are the senders and/or receivers of messages in a communication encounter. The message is the verbal or nonverbal content being conveyed from sender to receiver (ISU, 2016). For example, when you say "hello" to your friend, you are sending a message of greeting that will be received by your friend.

The basic components listed below apply to both models:

- A **sender** is someone who encodes and sends a message to a receiver through a particular channel. The sender is the initiator of the communication. For example, when you text a friend, ask a teacher a question, or wave to someone, you are the sender of a message (ISU, 2016).
- A **receiver** is the recipient of a message. Receivers must decode (interpret) messages in ways that are meaningful for them (ISU, 2016). For example, if you see your friend make eye contact, smile, wave, and say "hello" as you pass, you are receiving a message intended for you. When this happens, you must decode the verbal and nonverbal communication in ways that make sense to you.
- A **message** is the particular meaning or content the sender wishes the receiver to understand (ISU, 2016). The message can

be intentional or unintentional, written or spoken, verbal or nonverbal, or any combination of these. For example, as you walk across campus you may see a friend walking towards you. When you make eye contact, wave, smile, and say "hello," you are offering a message that is intentional, spoken, verbal, and nonverbal.

- A **channel** is a method a sender uses to send a message to a receiver (ISU, 2016). The most common channels that humans use are verbal and nonverbal communication. Verbal communication relies on language and includes speaking, writing, and sign language. Nonverbal communication includes gestures, facial expressions, paralanguage, and touch. We also use communication channels that are mediated, such as television or the computer, which may use both verbal and nonverbal communication. Using the greeting example above, the channels include both verbal and nonverbal communication.
- **Noise** is anything that interferes with the sending or receiving of a message (ISU, 2016). Noise can be **external**, such as a jackhammer outside your apartment window or loud music in a nightclub. Noise can also be **internal,** such as psychological factors like stress or nervousness, or **physical factors**, such as pain. External and internal noise make encoding and decoding messages more difficult. Using our ongoing example, if you are on your way to lunch and listening to music on your phone when your friend greets you, you may not hear your friend say "hello," and you may not wish to chat because you are hungry. In this case, both internal and external noise influence the communication exchange. Noise occurs in every communication context, so no message is received exactly as it is transmitted by a sender because noise distorts it in one way or another (ISU, 2016).

Linear Model

The **linear model** (originally called the **mathematical model of communication**) serves as a basic model of communication and was developed by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver in 1949. This model suggests that communication moves only in one direction from one source to another (ISU, 2016). The sender encodes a message, then uses a certain channel (verbal or nonverbal communication) to send it to a receiver who decodes (interprets) the message. You also act as the receiver when you watch a video or receive a message from another source. Noise is anything that interferes with, or changes, the original encoded message (ISU, 2016). Image 1.4 is a basic illustration of the linear model, and the video below provides an overview of this model of communication.

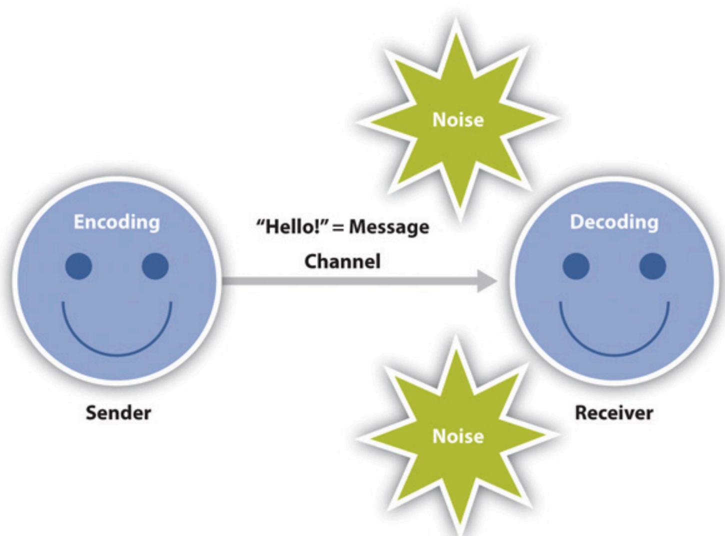

Image 1.4

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=50#oembed-1

(Communication Studies, 2020)

A major criticism of the linear model of communication is that it suggests communication only occurs in one direction (ISU, 2016). This model also does not show how context, or our personal experiences, impact communication. Television serves as a good example of the linear model. Have you ever talked back to your television while you were watching it? Maybe you were watching a sporting event or a dramatic show and you talked at the people on the television. Did they respond to you? We're sure they did not. Television works in one direction. No matter how much you talk to the television it will not respond to you. Now apply this idea to the communication in your relationships. It seems ridiculous to think that this is how we would communicate with each other on a regular basis. This example shows the limits of the linear model for understanding communication, particularly human-to-human communication (ISU, 2016).

Transactional Model

The **transactional model,** which was adapted by Dean Barnlund in 1970, demonstrates that communication participants act as senders and receivers simultaneously, creating reality through their interactions (ISU, 2016). Communication is not a simple one-way transmission of a message—the personal filters and experiences of the participants impact each communication exchange. The transactional model demonstrates that we are simultaneously senders and receivers and that noise and personal filters always influence the outcomes of every communication exchange (ISU, 2016). This more complex model of commination is shown in Image 1.5.

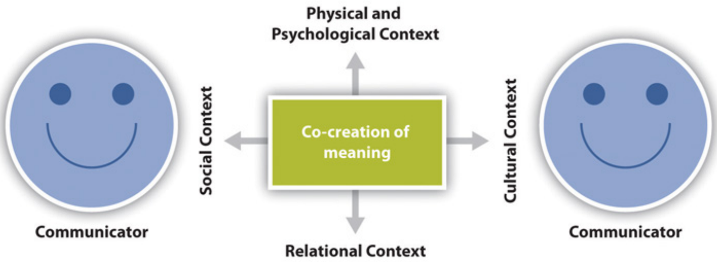

Image 1.5

This model also suggests that meaning is co-constructed between all parties involved in any given communication interaction. This notion of co-constructed meaning is drawn from the relational, social, and cultural contexts that make up our communication environments. Personal and professional relationships, for example, have a history of prior interaction that informs present and future interactions (ISU, 2016). Social norms, or rules for behaviour and interaction, greatly influence how we relate to one another. For example, if your instructor taught the class while sitting down rather than standing up, you and your colleagues would feel awkward because that is not an expected norm for behaviour in a classroom setting. How we negotiate cultural values, beliefs, attitudes, and traditions also impacts our communication interactions. Theses concepts are elaborated more below.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=50#oembed-2

(Instructional Design Team – Seattle Central College, 2018)

Communication Contexts

The contexts below are all factors that affect communication and must be considered in any communication exchange:

Physical Context

The **physical context** includes the environmental factors in a communication encounter. The size, layout, temperature, and lighting of a space influence our communication. Imagine the different physical contexts in which job interviews take place and how that might affect your communication. I have had job interviews on a sofa in a comfortable office, sitting around a large conference table, and even once in an auditorium where I was positioned on the stage facing about 20 potential colleagues seated in the audience. I've also been walked around campus in freezing temperatures to interview with various people. Although I was a little chilly when I got to each separate interview, it wasn't too difficult to warm up and go on with the interview. During a job interview in Puerto Rico, however, walking around outside wearing a suit in very hot temperatures created a sweating situation that wasn't pleasant to try to communicate through. Whether it's the size of the room, the temperature, or other environmental factors, it's important to consider the role that physical context plays in our communication.

Psychological Context

The **psychological context** includes the mental and emotional factors in a communication encounter. Stress, anxiety, and emotions are just some examples of psychological influences that can affect our communication. I recently found out some troubling news a few hours before a big public presentation. It was challenging to try to communicate because the psychological noise triggered by the stressful news kept intruding into my other thoughts. Seemingly positive psychological states, like experiencing the emotion of love, can also affect communication. During the initial stages of a romantic relationship, individuals may be so "lovestruck" that they don't see incompatible personality traits or don't negatively evaluate behaviours they might otherwise find off-putting.

Social Context

Social context refers to the stated rules or unstated norms that guide communication. As we are socialized into our various communities, we learn rules and implicitly pick up on norms for communicating. Some common rules that influence social contexts include not lying to people, not interrupting people, greeting people when they greet you, thanking people when they pay you a compliment, and so on. Parents and teachers often explicitly convey these rules to their children or students.

Norms are social conventions that we pick up on through observation, practice, and trial and error. We may not even know we are breaking a social norm until we notice people looking at us strangely or someone corrects or teases us. For example, as a new employee you may over- or underdress for the company's holiday party because you don't know the norm for formality. Although there probably isn't a stated rule about how to dress at the holiday party, you will notice your error without someone having to point it out, and you will likely not deviate from the norm again in order to save yourself from any potential embarrassment. Even though breaking a social norm doesn't result in the formal punishment that might be a consequence of breaking a social rule, the awkwardness we feel when we violate social norms is usually enough to teach us that these norms are powerful even though they aren't as explicit as rules. Norms even have the power to override social rules in some situations. To go back to the examples of common social rules mentioned before, we may break the rule about not lying if the lie is meant to save someone from feeling hurt. We often interrupt close friends when we're having an exciting conversation, but we wouldn't be as likely to interrupt a professor while they are lecturing. Since norms and rules vary among people and cultures, relational and cultural contexts are also included in the transactional model to help us understand the multiple contexts that influence our communication.

Relational Context

The **relational context** includes the previous interpersonal history and type of relationship we have with a person. We will communicate differently with someone we just met versus someone we've known for a very long time. Communication will also vary depending on the type of relationship we have with someone. For example, there are certain communication rules and norms that apply to a supervisor–supervisee relationship that don't apply to a brother–sister relationship and vice versa. Just as social norms and relational history influence how we communicate, so does culture.

Cultural Context

Cultural context includes various aspects of identities such as race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and ability. It is important for us to understand that whether we are aware of it or not, we all have multiple cultural identities that influence our communication. Some people, especially those with identities that have been historically marginalized, are regularly aware of how their cultural identities influence their communication and influence how others communicate with them. Conversely, people with identities that are dominant or in the majority may rarely, if ever, think about the role their cultural identities play in their communication.

Although some of these models are overly simplistic representations of communication, they illustrate some of the complexities of defining and studying communication. Hopefully, you recognize that studying communication is simultaneously detail oriented (looking at small parts of human communication) and far reaching (examining a broad range of communication exchanges). Knowledge of these models, their components, and how they apply in various contexts can show us how complex communication is. Because of this, it is also not surprising that often there may be communication challenges, but knowing why they occur—possibly owing to some of the factors discussed above—can help to avoid, or at least overcome, these challenges.

Forms of Communication

Forms of communication vary in terms of participants, channels used, and contexts. The five main forms of communication are intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, public, and mass communication.

Intrapersonal Communication

Intrapersonal communication is communication with oneself using internal vocalization or reflective thinking, as shown in Image 1.6. Like other forms of communication, intrapersonal communication is triggered by an internal or external stimulus. For example, the internal stimulus of hunger may prompt us to communicate with ourself about what we want to eat, or we may react intrapersonally to an event we witness. Unlike other forms of communication, intrapersonal communication takes place only inside our head. The other forms of communication must be perceived by someone else to count as communication. So what is the point of intrapersonal communication if no one else is aware of it?

Image 1.6

Intrapersonal communication serves several social functions. For example, a person may use self-talk to calm down in a stressful situation, or a shy person may remind themself to smile during a social event. Intrapersonal communication also helps build and maintain our self-concept. We form an understanding of who we are based on how other people communicate with us and how we process that communication intrapersonally. The shy person in the earlier example probably internalized shyness as part of their self-concept because other people associated that individual's communication behaviours with shyness and may have even labelled that person "shy" before they had a firm grasp on what that meant. We also use intrapersonal communication, or "self-talk," to let off steam, process emotions, think through something, or rehearse what we plan to say or do in the future. As with the other forms of communication, competent intrapersonal communication helps facilitate social interaction and can enhance our well-being.

Sometimes we communicate intrapersonally for the fun of it. I'm sure we have all had the experience of laughing aloud because we thought of something funny. We also communicate intrapersonally to pass time. There is likely a lot of intrapersonal communication going on in waiting rooms all over the world right now. We can, however, engage in more intentional intrapersonal communication. In fact, deliberate self-reflection can help us become more competent communicators as we become more mindful of our own behaviours. For example, your internal voice may praise or scold you based on a thought or action.

Of all the forms of communication, intrapersonal communication has received the least amount of formal study. It is rare to find courses devoted to the topic, and it is generally separated from the remaining four types of communication. The main distinction is that intrapersonal communication is not created with the intention that another person will perceive it. In all the other forms, the fact that the communicator anticipates consumption of their message is very important.

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication is communication between people whose lives mutually influence one another. This type of communication builds, maintains, and ends our relationships, and we spend more time engaged in interpersonal communication than the other forms of communication. Interpersonal communication occurs in various contexts and is addressed in subfields of study within communication studies, such as intercultural communication, organizational communication, health communication, and computer-mediated communication. After all, interpersonal relationships exist in all those contexts.

Interpersonal communication can be planned or unplanned, but because it is interactive, it is usually more structured and influenced by social expectations than intrapersonal communication. Interpersonal communication is also more goal-oriented than intrapersonal communication and fulfills instrumental and relational needs. In terms of instrumental needs, the goal may be as minor as greeting someone to fulfill a morning ritual or as major as conveying your desire to be in a committed relationship with someone. Interpersonal communication meets relational needs by communicating the uniqueness of a specific relationship. Couples, bosses and employees, and family members all have to engage in complex interpersonal communication, and it doesn't always go well. In order to be a competent interpersonal communicator, you need conflict management skills and listening skills, among others, to maintain positive relationships.

Group Communication

Group communication is communication among three or more people interacting to achieve a shared goal. You have likely worked in groups in high school and college, and if you're like most students, you didn't enjoy it. Even though it can be frustrating, group work in an academic setting provides useful experience and preparation for group work in professional settings. Organizations have been moving towards more team-based work models, and whether we like it or not, groups are an integral part of people's lives. Therefore, the study of group communication is valuable in many contexts.

Group communication is more intentional and formal than interpersonal communication. Unlike interpersonal relationships, which are voluntary, individuals in a group are often assigned to their position within the group. Additionally, group communication is often task focused, meaning that members of the group work together for an explicit purpose or goal that affects all the members of the group. Goal-oriented communication in interpersonal interactions usually relates to one person; for example, I might ask a friend to help me move this weekend. At the group level, goal-oriented communication usually focuses on a task assigned to the whole group; for example, a group of people may be tasked to figure out a plan for moving a business from one office to another.

You know from previous experience working in groups that having more communicators usually leads to more complicated interactions. Some of the challenges of group communication relate to task-oriented interactions, such as deciding who will complete each part of a larger project. But many challenges stem from interpersonal conflict or misunderstandings among group members. Because group members also communicate with and relate to each other interpersonally and may have preexisting relationships or develop them during the course of group interaction, elements of interpersonal communication occur within group communication, too.

Public Communication

Public communication is a sender-focused form of communication in which one person is typically responsible for conveying information to an audience. Public speaking, as shown in Image 1.7, is something that many people fear, or at least don't enjoy. But just like group communication, public speaking is an important part of our academic, professional, and civic lives. When compared to interpersonal and group communication, public communication is the most consistently intentional, formal, and goal-oriented form of communication we have discussed so far.

Public communication, at least in Western societies, is also more sender focused than interpersonal or group communication. It is precisely this formality and focus on the sender that makes both new and experienced public speakers anxious at the thought of facing an audience. One way to begin to manage anxiety about public speaking is to try to see connections between public speaking and other forms of communication with which we are more familiar and comfortable. Despite being formal, public speaking is very similar to the conversations that we have in our daily interactions. For example, although public speakers don't necessarily develop individual relationships with audience members, they still have the benefit of being face-to-face with them so they can receive verbal and nonverbal feedback.

Image 1.7

Mass Communication

Public communication becomes **mass communication** when it is transmitted to many people through print or electronic media. Print media such as newspapers and magazines continue to be an important channel for mass communication, though they have suffered much in the past decade due in part to the rise of electronic media. Television, as shown in Image 1.8, websites, blogs, and social media are mass communication channels that you probably engage with regularly. Radio, podcasts, and books are other examples of mass media. The technology required to send mass communication messages distinguishes it from the other forms of communication. A certain amount of intentionality goes into transmitting a mass communication message because it usually requires one or more extra steps to convey the message. This may require pressing “Enter” to send a Facebook message or involve an entire crew of camera people, sound engineers, and production assistants to produce a television show. Even though the messages must be intentionally transmitted through technology, the intentionality and goals of the person actually creating the message, such as the writer, television host, or talk show guest, vary greatly.

Image 1.8

Mass communication differs from other forms of communication in terms of the personal connection between participants. Even though creating the illusion of a personal connection is often a goal of those who create mass communication messages, the relational aspect of interpersonal and group communication isn't inherent in this form of communication. Unlike interpersonal, group, and public communication, there is no immediate verbal and nonverbal feedback loop in mass communication. Of course, you could write a letter to the editor of a newspaper or send an email to a television or radio broadcaster in response to a story, but the immediate feedback available in face-to-face interactions is not present. With new media technologies such as Twitter, blogs, and Facebook, feedback is becoming more immediate. Individuals can now tweet directly "at" (@) someone and use hashtags (#) to direct feedback to mass communication sources. Many radio and television hosts and news organizations specifically invite feedback from viewers/ listeners via social media and may even share the feedback with the audience.

The technology to mass produce and distribute communication messages brings with it the power for one voice or a series of voices to reach and affect many people. This power makes mass communication different from other levels of communication. Although there is potential for unethical communication at all the other levels, the potential consequences of unethical mass communication are important to consider. Communication scholars who focus on mass communication and media often take a critical approach in order to examine how media shapes our culture and who is included and excluded in various mediated messages.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Use the **transactional model of communication** to analyze a recent communication encounter you had.
2. Sketch out the communication encounter and make sure to label each part of the model:
    - Communicators
    - Co-created meaning
    - Channels involved
    - Physical, psychological, social, relational, and cultural contexts
3. Imagine an interaction with a client or co-worker in your future workplace. Describe how each element of context might influence the interaction.

Attribution

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1.4 The Importance of Communication

Communication Skills Are Essential in All Areas of Life

Communication is used in virtually all aspects of everyday life. In order to explore how communication is integrated into all parts of our lives, let us divide up our lives into four spheres: academic, professional, personal, and civic. These spheres overlap and influence one another. After all, our personal experience is brought into the classroom, much of what goes on in a classroom is present in our professional and personal environments, and the classroom has long been seen as a place to foster personal growth and prepare students to become active and responsible members of society.

Academic Success

You will bring your current communication-related knowledge, skills, and abilities to the classroom. Aside from wanting to earn a good grade, you may also be genuinely interested in becoming a better communicator. Research shows that even people who are poor communicators can improve their verbal, nonverbal, and interpersonal communication skills by taking communication courses (Zabava & Wolvin, 1993). Communication skills are also tied to academic success. Poor listening skills have been shown to contribute significantly to failure in a person's first year of college. Also, students who take communication courses report having more confidence in their communication abilities, and these students have higher grade point averages and are less likely to drop out of school. Much of what we do in a classroom, whether it is the interpersonal interactions with our classmates and instructor, individual or group presentations, writing assignments, asking questions, or listening, can be used to build or add to a foundation of good communication skills and knowledge that can carry through to professional, personal, and civic contexts.

Image 1.9

Professional Skills

The *Corporate Recruiters Survey Report* (Graduate Management Admission Council, 2017, p. 50) found that employers in health care and pharmacy, technology, nonprofit and government, and products and services industries list oral, written, listening, and presentation communication skills in their top five skills sought for midlevel positions. Adaptability was also ranked in the top five in three out of the four industries—the ability to be adaptable can be the result of a person's ability to perceive, interpret, and share information. The survey also found that the need for teamwork skills is growing in demand. The ability to follow a leader, delegation skills, valuing the opinions of others, cross-cultural sensitivity, and adaptability were listed as teamwork skills, and these skills can also be the result of one's communication skills.

Table 1.1. Top Five Skills Employers Seek, in Order of Required Proficiency, by Industry

Rank	Health Care and Pharmacy	Technology	Nonprofit and Government	Products and Services
1	Oral communication	Oral communication	Oral communication	Oral communication
2	Listening skills	Listening skills	Listening skills	Integrity
3	Written communication	Written communication	Written skills	Written communication
4	Presentation skills	Adaptability	Presentation skills	Drive
5	Integrity	Presentation skills	Adaptability	Adaptability

Note: Adapted from *Corporate Recruiters Survey Report* 2017, by the Graduate Management Admission Council, p. 50. https://www.mba.com/-/media/files/gmac/research/employment-outlook/2017-gmac-corporate-recruiters-web-release.pdf?la=en

Desired communication skills vary from career to career, but again, the academic sphere provides a foundation onto which you can build communication skills specific to your professional role or field of study. Poor listening skills, lack of conciseness, and the inability to give constructive feedback have been identified as potential communication challenges in professional contexts. Despite the well-documented need for communication skills in the professional world, many students still resist engaging in communication classes. Perhaps people think they already have good communication skills or can improve their skills on their own. Although either of these may be true for some, studying communication can only help.

Personal Communication Skills

Many students know from personal experience and from the prevalence of communication counselling on television talk shows and in self-help books that communication forms, maintains, and ends our interpersonal relationships, but they do not know the extent to which that occurs. Although we learn from experience, until we learn specific vocabulary and develop a foundational knowledge of communication concepts and theories, we do not have the necessary tools to make sense of these experiences. Just having a vocabulary to name the communication phenomena in our lives increases our ability to consciously alter our communication to achieve our goals, avoid miscommunication, and analyze and learn from our inevitable mistakes.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, communication is required for us to meet our personal **physical**, **instrumental**, **relational**, and **identity** needs.

- **Physical** needs are needs that keep our bodies and minds functioning.
- **Instrumental** needs are needs that help us get things done in our day-to-day lives and achieve short- and long-term goals.
- **Relational** needs are needs that help us maintain social bonds and interpersonal relationships.
- **Identity** needs include our need to present ourselves to others and be thought of in particular and desired ways.

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement refers to working to make a difference in our communities by improving the quality of life of community members; raising awareness about social, cultural, or political issues (Image 1.10); or participating in a wide variety of political and nonpolitical processes (Ehrlich, 2000). The civic part of our lives is developed through engagement with the decision making that goes on in our society at small-group, local, state, regional, national, and international levels. Such involvement ranges from serving on a neighbourhood advisory board to sending an email to a political representative. Discussions and decisions that affect our communities happen around us all the time, but it takes time and effort to become part of that process. Communication scholars have been aware of the connections between communication and a person's civic engagement or citizenship for thousands of years. Aristotle, who wrote the first and most influential comprehensive book on communication 2,400 years ago, taught that it is through our voice, our ability to communicate, that we engage with the world around us and participate in our society.


Image 1.10

Diversity in Communication

Communication is the sharing of understanding and meaning (Pearson & Nelson, 2000), but what is **intercultural communication**? If you answered "the sharing of understanding and meaning across cultures," you'd be close, but what is a **culture**? Culture is defined by more than ethnicity, race, or geography. A culture can exist wherever there is a group of people with shared beliefs, attitudes, values, and traditions. Multiple factors can shape a culture, including but not limited to age, gender, ethnicity, race, geography, workplace settings, family, abilities, and interests. According to Rogers and Steinfatt (1999), intercultural communication is the exchange of information among individuals who are "unalike culturally." Let's explore what intercultural communication can look like.

A culture's beliefs, attitudes, values, and traditions are represented and expressed by the behaviours of its members. The language we use, the holidays we celebrate, the clothes we wear, the movies we watch, or the video games we play are just some of the ways we express our culture. Environment also shapes a culture, and a culture can shape the environment. For example, a person can grow up in a mountainous region and value the environment. If the person moves to a beach town, they may display pictures of their favourite mountains and participate in an outdoor club to continue to express and engage in their culture. Culture also involves the psychological aspects of our expectations of the communication context. For example, if we are raised in a culture where males speak while females are expected to remain silent, the context of the communication interaction governs behaviour, itself a representation of culture. From the choice of words (message), to how we communicate (in person or by email), to how we acknowledge understanding with a nod or a glance (nonverbal feedback), to the internal and external interference, all aspects of communication are influenced by culture.

Can there be intercultural communication within a culture? If all communication is intercultural, then the answer would be yes, but we still have to prove our case. Imagine a three-generation family living in one household. This family is a culture, but let's look a bit closer. The grandparents may represent another time and different values from the grandchildren. The parents may have a different level of education and pursue different careers from the grandparents. The schooling the children receive may prepare them for yet other careers. From music to food preferences to how work is done may vary across time—singer Elvis Presley may seem like ancient history to the children. The communication across generations represents intercultural communication, even if only to a limited degree.

Another example is student culture. Let's consider what other cultures likely impact the student culture at a school, university, or college. A group of students are likely all similar in age and educational level (Image 1.11). Do gender and the societal expectations of roles influence their interactions? Of course. And so we see that, among these students, the boys and girls not only communicate in distinct ways, but not all boys and girls are the same. A group of siblings may have common characteristics, but they will still have differences, and these differences contribute to intercultural communication. We are each shaped by our upbringing, and it influences our worldview, what we value, and how we interact with each other. We create culture, and it creates us.

Image 1.11

If **intercultural communication** is the exchange of information among individuals who are "unalike culturally," after reflecting on our discussion and its implications, you may arrive at the idea that ultimately we are each "a culture of one"—we are simultaneously a part of community and its culture(s) and separate from it in the unique combination that represents us as an individual. All of us are separated by a matter of degrees from each other even if we were raised on the same street, have parents of similar educational background and profession, and have many other things in common.

Communication with yourself is called **intrapersonal communication**, and it may also be intracultural, as you may only represent one culture, but most people belong to many groups, each with their own culture. Within our imaginary intergenerational home, how many cultures do you think we might find? If we only consider the parents, and consider work one culture and family another, we now have two. If we were to look more closely, we would find many more groups, and the complexity would grow exponentially. Does a conversation with yourself ever involve competing goals, objectives, needs, wants, or values? How did you learn of those goals or values? Through communication within and among individuals, they themselves are representative of many cultures. We struggle with the demands of each group and their expectations, and could consider this internal struggle intercultural conflict, or simply intercultural communication.

Culture is part of the very fabric of our thought, and we cannot separate ourselves from it, even when we leave home, defining ourselves anew in work and achievement. Every business or organization has a culture, and within what may be considered a global culture, there are many subcultures or co-cultures. For example, consider the difference between the sales and accounting departments in a corporation—we can quickly see two distinct groups, each with their own symbols, vocabulary, and values. Within each group there may also be smaller groups, and each member of every department comes from a distinct background that in itself influences behaviour and interaction.

Intercultural communication is a part of our everyday lives and occurs interpersonally (with others) and intrapersonally (within ourselves). Intercultural communication competency is rooted in understanding the cultures around us and adapting our communication to establish, maintain, and grow positive intercultural relationships.

Relating Theory to Real Life

Consider the definition of culture:

1. What cultures do you feel you are a part of? What beliefs, attitudes, values, traditions, and behaviours represent your cultures?
2. What cultures do you see within your own family?
3. What cultural groups will you encounter in your future professional role?
4. What will you need to learn to be a competent intercultural communicator in the workplace?

Ethical Communication in the Workplace

As demonstrated by the communication models presented earlier in this chapter, when we communicate, there is an immediate impact on others. This means communication has broad ethical implications. Not only do we need to learn how to communicate, but we also need to become ethical communicators by learning how to communicate the "right" way. But what does that look like?

Communication ethics deals with the process of negotiating and reflecting on our actions and communication regarding what we believe to be right and wrong. For example, we may make the choice to communicate our opinions about education to others. We would undergo a process of negotiating the ethics of this decision, such as to whom is it okay to communicate our opinions? When is it appropriate to tell others about our personal opinions? What details about our opinions is it okay to share? What is the right method for sharing our opinion? In communication ethics, we are more concerned with the decisions people make about communicating what is right and wrong than the systems, philosophies, or religions that inform those decisions. Much of ethics is a grey area. Although we talk about making decisions in terms of what is right and what is wrong, the choice is rarely that simple. Aristotle said that we should act "to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way." This quote connects to communication competence, which focuses on communicating effectively and appropriately.

We all make choices daily that are more ethical or less ethical, and we may confidently make a decision only to learn later that it wasn't the most ethical option. In any given situation, multiple options may seem appropriate, but we can only choose one. If, in a situation, we make a decision and reflect on it, and then realize we could have made a more ethical choice, does that make us a bad person? Although many behaviours can be easily labelled as ethical or unethical, communication isn't always as clear. Physically assaulting someone is generally thought of as unethical and illegal, but many instances of hurtful speech, or even what some would consider hate speech, have been protected as free speech. This shows the complicated relationship between protected speech, ethical speech, and the law. In some cases, people see it as their ethical duty to communicate information that they feel is in the public's best interest. The people behind WikiLeaks, for example, have released thousands of classified documents related to wars, intelligence gathering, and diplomatic communication. WikiLeaks claims that exposing this information forces politicians and leaders to be accountable and keeps the public informed, but government officials claim that the release of the information should be considered a criminal act. Both parties consider their own communication ethical and the other's communication unethical, so who is right?

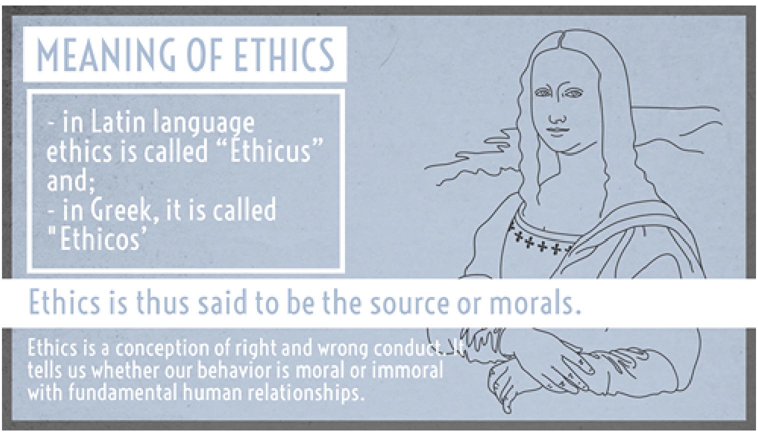

Image 1.12

Since many of the choices we make when it comes to ethics are situational, contextual, and personal, various professional fields have developed **codes of ethics** to help guide members through areas that might otherwise be grey or uncertain. A profession's code of ethics describes what ethical behaviours, including communication, are expected of any member of the profession. Table 1.2 below lists a few examples of professions and which communication behaviours are considered ethical and expected as described in that profession's code of ethics. Looking across different professions, we can see that ethical communication is expected in all service areas and that communication skills are key to meeting professional standards.

Table 1.2. Professional Organizations and Ethical Communication Expectation

Professional Organization	Expected Ethical Behaviour Related to Communication
Child and Youth Care Association of Alberta (CYCCA)	• Will maintain professionalism in consultation, communication, and collaboration with other professionals in p possible care for the client. In situations where the member believes that the involvement of another professi interests of a client, it is the member's responsibility to advocate for the client. • Treats colleagues with respect, courtesy, fairness, and good faith. • Relates to the clients of colleagues with professional consideration.
Alberta Public Service	• Employees are required to disclose to their Deputy Head or designate any situation involving them which is a conflict of interest. • Employees who speak or write publicly shall ensure that they do not release information in contravention of t in section 20 of the *Public Service Act*.
Alberta Therapeutic Recreation Association (ATRA)	• Will be consistent in their interactions and ensure that communication and treatment is the same for all clien • Requires high-level communication among disciplines and a clear understanding of the competencies of othe ensure safety to the patient and trust among the treatment team.

Therapy Assistant Association of Alberta (ThAAA)	• Members will work under the guidance and instruction of a supervising Occupational Therapist, Physical The Therapist, and/or Speech Language Pathologist.
College of Alberta Dental Assistants (CADA)	• Services are provided without bias or discrimination and communications are respectful and truthful. • Inform colleagues and other professionals about the dental assistant's role and capabilities. Share accurate, e information with colleagues to promote best practices in patient oral health care.
Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA)	• Must provide independent and impartial advice and inform a client of any conflict of interest. Communicatio no false, deceptive, or misleading statements or claims.
Alberta Health Services (AHS)	• Communicating in a timely and appropriate manner. • Coming forward if you think you have been treated unfairly, and supporting others to do the same. • Considering how what we say or do may impact our own reputation or that of AHS.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. What situations might arise in your future professional role that will require you to communicate ethically?
2. Why is it important for you, others, your workplace, and your community to be confident in communicating ethically?

Dynamic Communication Skills Are Needed in Current Workplaces

Communication Is Key to Your Success in Your Current Workplace

Your current ability to communicate comes from past experience, which can be an effective teacher. Now is the time to examine your current skillset and compare it to current workplace needs and skills that have been proven necessary when working on teams. "Great teams are distinguished from good teams by how effectively they communicate. Great team communication is more than the words that are said or written. Power is leveraged by the team's ability to actively listen, clarify, understand, and live by the principle that 'everything communicates.' The actions, the tone, the gestures, the infrastructure, the environment, and the things that are not done or said speak and inform just as loudly as words" (O'Rourke & Yarbrough, 2008).

Workplace environments have evolved. An article in the *Harvard Business Review* states that current workplace teams are more "diverse, dispersed, digital, and dynamic (with frequent changes in membership). But while teams face new hurdles, their success still hinges on a core set of fundamentals for group collaboration" (Haas & Mortensen, 2016). Haas and Mortensen further describe four conditions that need to be established for effective collaboration: compelling direction (when a team establishes explicit goals), strong structure (the team has the right mix of members, and the right processes and norms in place to guide behaviour), supportive context (the team has a reward system, an information system, and an educational system in place to enable progress), and a shared mindset (when a team develops a common identity and understanding). Communication is central to establishing all four conditions. Effective teams and groups in current workplace environments need effective communication. Now is the time to consider what communication skills you have and which ones you need to grow to effectively contribute to your future team.

Communication Merges You and Them

When we join a workplace team, communication is a non-negotiable skill in a complex environment. Being able to communicate allows us to share a part of ourselves, connect with others, and meet our needs on a team. Being unable to communicate might mean losing, hiding, or minimizing a part of yourself. Sharing with others feels vulnerable. For some, this may be a positive challenge, whereas for others it may be discouraging, but in all cases, your ability to communicate is central to your expression of self.

Image 1.13

On the other side of the coin, your communication skills help you understand others on a team—not just their words, but also their tone of voice, their nonverbal gestures, and the format of their written documents provide you with clues about who they are and what their values and priorities may be. Expressing yourself and understanding others are key functions of an effective team member and part of the process of becoming an effective team (Image 1.13).

Communication Influences How You Learn

You need to begin the process of improving your communication skills with the frame of mind that it will require effort, persistence, and self-correction. You learn to speak in public by first having conversations, then by answering questions and expressing your opinions in class, and finally by preparing and delivering a "stand-up" speech. Similarly, you learn to write by first learning to read, then by writing and learning to think critically. Your speaking and writing are reflections of your thoughts, experience, and education, and part of that combination is your level of experience listening to other speakers, reading documents and various styles of writing, and studying formats similar to what you aim to produce. Speaking and writing are both key communication skills that you will use in teams and groups.

As you study group communication, you may receive suggestions for improvement and clarification from professionals more experienced than yourself. Take their suggestions as challenges to improve—don't give up when your first speech or first draft does not communicate the message you intended. Stick with it until you get it right. Your success in communicating is a skill that applies to almost every field of work, and it makes a difference in your relationships with others. Remember that luck is simply a combination of preparation and timing. You want to be prepared to communicate well when given the opportunity. Each time you do a good job, your success will bring more success.

Communication Represents You and Your Employer

You want to make a good first impression on your friends and family, on your instructors, and on your employer. They all want you to convey a positive image because it reflects on them. In your career, you will represent your business or company in teams and groups, and your professionalism and attention to detail will reflect positively on you and set you up for success.

As an effective member of the team, you will benefit from having the ability to communicate clearly and with clarity. You will use these skills for the rest of your life. Positive improvements in these skills will have a positive impact on your relationships, your prospects for employment, and your ability to make a difference in the world.

Communication Skills Are Desired by Business and Industry

Oral and written communication proficiencies are consistently ranked in the top 10 desirable skills by employer surveys year after year. In fact, high-powered business executives sometimes hire consultants to coach them in sharpening their communication skills. According to the *National Association of Colleges Job Outlook* 2023 survey (Gray, 2022), the top five attributes that employers seek on a candidate's resumé are the following:

1. Problem-solving skills
2. Ability to work on a team
3. Strong work ethic
4. Analytical and quantitative skills
5. Written communication skills
6. Technical skills

Knowing this, you can see that one way for you to be successful and increase your promotion potential is to improve your ability to speak and write effectively.

Teams and groups are almost universal across all fields because no one person has all the skills, knowledge, or ability to do everything with an equal degree of excellence. Employees work with each other in manufacturing and service industries on a daily basis. An individual with excellent communication skills is an asset to every organization. No matter what career you plan to pursue, learning to interact, contribute, and excel in groups and teams will help you get there.

Digital and Electronic Communication Are Here to Stay

Computers and the internet entered the world in the 1940s and have been on the rise ever since. According to Jotform (2021), a global pandemic necessitated the use of digital and electronic communication because people were required to work from home as much as possible. Digital and electronic communication tools such as video-conferencing platforms, cloud storage, messaging platforms, and digital forms are now widely used and easily accessible. It's not clear yet what digital and electronic communication methods will remain in use; however, because of their prevalence, we need to consider our communication skills in these digital and electronic environments.

Netiquette refers to etiquette, or protocols and norms for communication, when communicating using digital and electronic methods. Whatever digital device you use, written communication in the form of brief messages, or texting, has become a practical way to connect when talking on the phone or when meeting in person would be cumbersome. Texting is not useful for long or complicated messages, and careful consideration should be given to the audience. Email is frequently used to communicate among co-workers and has largely replaced print hard-copy letters for external (outside the company) correspondence, as well as taking the place of memos for internal (within the company) communication (Guffey, 2008). Email can be very useful for messages that have slightly more content than a text message, but it is still best used for fairly brief messages. Emails may be informal in personal contexts, but business communication requires attention to detail, an awareness that your email reflects you and your company, and a professional tone so that the email may be forwarded to a third party, if needed. Remember that when these tools are used for business, they need to convey professionalism and respect.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Knowing what communication skills employers and current workplace environments require, what skills are you strong in right now? What skills do you need to develop?
2. How do you see face-to-face and digital and electronic communication skills being similar and/or different? Where do you see face-to-face and digital and electronic communication in your future professional role?

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1.5 Competent Communication

We have already defined communication, and you probably know that to be competent at something means you know what you're doing. When we combine these terms, we get the following definition, which has remained reasonably consistent over time: **competent communication** refers to the **knowledge of effective and appropriate communication** and **the ability to use and adapt that knowledge in various contexts** (Cooley & Roach, 1984; Adler et al., 2021).

 *Image 1.14*	**Knowledge:** The cognitive elements of competence include knowing how to do something and understanding why things are done the way they are (Hargie, 2011). People can develop cognitive competence by observing and evaluating the actions of others. Cognitive competence can also be developed through instruction.

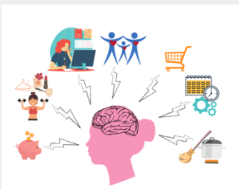

Image 1.15

Ability to use: Individual factors affect our ability to do anything. Not everyone has the same athletic, musical, or intellectual ability. At the individual level, a person's *physiological* and *psychological characteristics* affect competence. In terms of *physiology*, age, maturity, and ability to communicate affect competence. In terms of *psychology*, a person's mood, stress level, personality, and level of communication apprehension (level of anxiety regarding communication) affect competence (Cooley & Roach, 1984). All these factors will either help or hinder you when you try to apply the knowledge you have learned to actual communication behaviours.

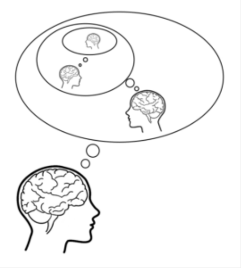

Image 1.16

Adapting to various contexts: Social and cultural contexts impact what is considered competent communication in one situation and incompetent communication in another. Competent communicators are able to adapt and apply their communication knowledge and skills across a variety of contexts.

Communication competence is also said to be about a balance between two approaches: task effectiveness and relational appropriateness (Study Hall, 2022). We have previously discussed that communication is used to accomplish goals, so we want our communication approach to be such that it allows us to reach those goals effectively, in terms of the use of time and resources to accomplish the task. Thus, our communication approach would be **task-effective**. In contrast, a communication approach that focuses on **relational appropriateness** will consider relationships. This approach might consider the word choice, tone, and body language used in the context of the social environment and the individuals being spoken with. The purpose of using relational appropriateness as a communication approach is to protect or create a positive relationship. Our communication impacts people and outcomes, so it is important to consider which approach to take and when. Both approaches are valuable in their own right, and a balanced use of both is ideal, as described in the following video (Study Hall, 2022).

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=54#oembed-1

(Study Hall, 2022)

Despite the fact that no guidelines for or definitions of competence will be applicable in all situations, the National Communication Association (NCA) has identified many aspects of competence related to communication.

To help colleges and universities develop curriculum and instruction strategies to prepare students, the NCA has defined what students should be able to do in terms of speaking and listening competencies by the time they graduate from college. The NCA's suggested speaking and listening competencies seem to focus on the task-effectiveness approach to communication (Morreale et al., 1998):

1. State ideas clearly.
2. Communicate ethically.
3. Recognize when it is appropriate to communicate.
4. Identify the communication goals.
5. Select the most appropriate and effective medium for communicating.
6. Demonstrate credibility.
7. Identify and manage misunderstandings.
8. Manage conflict.
9. Be open-minded about another's point of view.
10. Listen attentively.

Communication competence is a dynamic and evolving process no matter how much knowledge, ability, and adaptability we possess at any one point in time because our environment is always changing, which leads to the need for us to change. We will continuously have competencies we are skilled in and areas where we can improve.

The development of communication competence occurs over time and through a series of four stages. Different communication competencies can be at different developmental stages, and the developmental stages can change as the situations requiring communication competencies evolve.

- **Stage 1: Unconscious incompetence:** Before you have built up a rich cognitive knowledge base of communication concepts and practised and reflected on skills in a particular area, you may exhibit unconscious incompetence, which means you are not even aware that you are communicating in an incompetent manner.
- **Stage 2: Conscious incompetence:** Once you learn more about communication and have a vocabulary for identifying concepts, you may find yourself exhibiting conscious incompetence. This is when you know what you should be doing, and you realize that you're not doing it as well as you could.
- **Stage 3: Conscious competence:** As your skills increase, you may advance to conscious competence, meaning that you know you are communicating well in the moment, which will add to your bank of experiences to draw from in future interactions.
- **Stage 4: Unconscious competence:** When you reach the stage of unconscious competence, you communicate successfully without straining to be competent.

Again, just because you reach the stage of unconscious competence in one skill or with one person does not mean you will always stay there. We are faced with new communication encounters regularly, and though we may be able to draw on the communication skills we have learned about and developed, it may take a few instances of being in the conscious incompetence stage before you can advance to later stages.

One way to progress towards communication competence is to become a more mindful communicator. **Mindful communication** means the communicator actively and fluidly processes information, is sensitive to communication contexts and multiple perspectives, and is able to adapt to novel communication situations (Burgoon et al., 2002). Mindful communication can help us accomplish tasks and leans towards the relational appropriateness approach by helping us speak and listen in order to learn. Mindful communication involves processing information about the other person and about how we are feeling during the interaction. It allows us to form the truest meaning of the message as we form a deeper understanding of the other person and ourselves.

Image 1.17

Various communication behaviours can signal that we are communicating mindfully. For example, asking a person to paraphrase their understanding of the instructions you just gave them shows that you are aware that verbal messages are not always clear, that people do not always listen actively, and that people often do not speak up when they are unsure of instructions for fear of appearing incompetent or embarrassing themselves. Some communication behaviours indicate that we are not communicating mindfully, such as withdrawing from a romantic partner or engaging in passive-aggressive behaviour during a period of interpersonal conflict. Most of us know that such behaviours lead to predictable and avoidable conflict cycles, yet we are all guilty of them.

The following video by Sanvello (2021) briefly discusses mindful communication, how to avoid communication autopilot, and how to speak and listen supportively.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=54#oembed-2

(Sanvello, 2021)

Mindful communication can also help us develop competency in decoding important messages that would otherwise be missed. For example, our tendency to assume that people are telling us the truth can allow us to miss communication cues that might be more obvious if we were being mindful. Therefore, a certain amount of tentativeness and mindful monitoring of a person's nonverbal and verbal communication can help us detect deception. However, this is not the same thing as chronic suspicion, which would not indicate communication competence.

Becoming a more mindful communicator has many benefits, including achieving communication goals, detecting deception, avoiding stereotypes, and reducing conflict. Whether or not we achieve our day-to-day communication goals depends on our communication competence.

On a daily basis, all of this will take place in the simplest communication scenario—a conversation. We all have conversations in both personal and professional settings. Communication competence during conversations can help build and maintain positive relationships, be key to accomplishing goals in our personal and professional lives, or serve to simply learn something that we can apply in many ways. In the following Tedx Talks (2015) presentation, Celeste Headlee, an award-winning interviewer, demonstrates how mindful communication works in an everyday conversation. Headlee proposes that there are 10 rules to having a good conversation—one where our speaking and listening skills allow the best task and relational outcomes.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=54#oembed-3

(TEDx Talks, 2015)

Headlee shares the following 10 rules and gives further examples and context:

1. Stop multitasking.
2. Assume you have something to learn.
3. Use open-ended questions.
4. Go with the flow. Allow your own thoughts to enter, then

let them go. Remain focused on the speaker's messages.
5. If you don't know, say you don't know.
6. Don't equate your experience with theirs. Let the moment be about them.
7. Try not to repeat yourself. It's boring and condescending.
8. Don't get bogged down in the details. Focus on learning about the person, and them learning about you.
9. Listen. When we are speaking, we are not learning.
10. Be brief—short enough to retain interest, long enough to cover the subject.

Headlee suggests that the key to conversational communication competence is remaining interested in others.

The following chapters will provide opportunities to gain knowledge, practise using that knowledge, and develop the ability to adapt our communication across a wide range of interpersonal interactions.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Consider a former teacher, guardian, coach, or boss that you considered good at communication.
    a. What made them a good communicator?
    b. If you could adopt just one of their communication skills, what would it be and why?
2. Right now, are you a competent communicator? Do you see examples of the four stages in your life? Explain your answer using examples.
3. Right now, do you feel you are a balanced

communicator in terms of your use of task-effective or relationally appropriate approaches?

4. Right now, do you communicate mindfully? Explain your answer using examples.

5. What motivates you to become a competent communicator?

6. Create one to three personal goals that would move you towards communication competence.

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1.6 Review

Use the following review activities to assess your knowledge of the material in this chapter. These activities, along with the questions in each section, should allow you to assess your understanding of the communication concepts presented in the chapter.

Matching Review

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=56#h5p-1

Review Quiz

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

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CHAPTER II

THE ROLE OF PERCEPTION

2.1 Introduction to the Role of Perception

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to

1. Understand self-concept, self-esteem, and identity management as they influence communication in different settings
2. Describe the perception process and its impact on communication
3. Describe how perception can influence conflict and how perception checking can decrease conflict
4. Describe the difference between empathy and sympathy, and their role in communication
5. Explain the "pillow method" to understand another person's perspective
6. Explain "cultural considerations" as they relate to perception
7. Understand how aspects of personality affect perception and communication

Chapter Overview

As we go through our daily lives, we perceive all sorts of people and objects, and we often make sense of these perceptions by using previous experiences to help filter and organize the information we take in. Sometimes we encounter new or contradictory information that changes the way we think about a person, group, or object. The perceptions that we make of others and that others make of us affect how we communicate and act. In this chapter, we will learn about the perception process, how we perceive others, and how we perceive and present ourselves. We will then discuss ways that we can improve our perceptions. The chapter activities will help to bring theory to practice.

2.2 Perception

Perception is the process of **selecting, organizing, and interpreting information**. This process includes the perception of select stimuli that pass through our perceptual filters, are organized into our existing structures and patterns, and are then interpreted based on previous experiences. Although perception is largely a cognitive and psychological process, how we perceive the people and objects around us is also affected by our communication with others. This part of the perception process is referred to as **negotiation of meaning** (*Interpersonal communication*, 2012). We respond differently to an object or person that we perceive favourably than we do to something we find unfavourable (*Interpersonal communication*, 2012). Also, our perceptions can change after interacting with another person or group of people. But how do we filter the mass amounts of incoming information, then organize and create meaning from what makes it through our perceptual filters and into our social realities? The following video, which summarizes some of the main content from this chapter, provides some answers to that question. We will then continue to elaborate on this concept throughout the chapter.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=274#oembed-1

(Study Hall, 2022)

Perception Process

1. Selecting Information

We take in information through all five of our senses, but the world around us includes so many stimuli that it is impossible for our brains to process and make sense of it all. So, as information comes in through our senses, various factors influence what actually continues on through the perception process (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). **Selecting** is the first part of this process; we focus our attention on certain incoming sensory information. Think about how, out of many other possible stimuli to pay attention to, you may hear a familiar voice in the hallway, see a pair of shoes you want to buy from across the mall, or smell something cooking for dinner when you get home from work. We quickly cut through and push to the background all kinds of sights, smells, sounds, and other stimuli. But how do we decide what to select and what to leave out?

We tend to pay attention to information that is salient. **Salience** is the degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context. The thing that attracts our attention can be abstract, like a concept, or concrete, like an object. The degree of salience depends on three features: things that are visually or aurally stimulating, things that meet our needs or interests, and expectations that affect what we find salient (Fiske & Tayor, 1991).

Visual and Auditory Stimulation

It is probably not surprising to learn that anything that creates visual or auditory stimulation becomes salient in our perceptual field and captures our attention. Creatures ranging from fish to hummingbirds are attracted to things like silver spinners on fishing poles or red birdfeeders, as shown in Image 2.1. Having our senses stimulated isn't always a positive thing, though. Think about the couple who won't stop talking during the movie or the upstairs neighbour whose subwoofer shakes your ceiling at night. In short, stimuli can be attention-getting in a productive or in a distracting way. As communicators, we can use this knowledge to our benefit by minimizing distractions when we have something important to say. It's probably better to have a serious conversation with a significant other in a quiet place rather than a crowded one. Altering the rate, volume, and pitch of your voice, known as **vocal variety**, can help keep your audience engaged, as can gestures and movement. Conversely, **nonverbal adaptors**, or the nervous movements we make to relieve anxiety, like pacing or twirling our hair, can be distracting. Aside from minimizing distractions and delivering our messages enthusiastically, the content of our communication also affects salience.

Image 2.1

Needs and Interests

We tend to pay attention to information that we perceive meets our **needs** or **interests** in some way. This type of selective attention can help us meet instrumental needs and get things done. When you need to speak with a financial aid officer about your scholarships and loans, you sit in the waiting room and listen for your name to be called. Paying close attention to whose name is called means you can be ready to start your meeting and hopefully get your business handled.

When we don't think certain messages meet our needs, stimuli that would normally get our attention may be completely ignored. Imagine that you are in the grocery store, and you hear someone say your name. You turn around, only to hear that person say, "Finally! I said your name three times. I thought you had forgotten who I was!" A few seconds before, when you were focused on figuring out which kind of orange juice to buy, you tuned other stimuli out, even something as familiar as the sound of someone calling your name.

We also find information that interests us salient. Of course, stimuli that meet our needs can also be interesting, but it's worth discussing these two items separately because sometimes we find things interesting that don't necessarily meet our needs. I'm sure we've all gotten sucked into a television show, video game (Image 2.2), or random project and paid attention to that at the expense of something that actually meets our needs like preparing dinner or spending time with a significant other. Paying attention to things that interest us but don't meet specific needs seems like the basic formula for procrastination, something we are all familiar with.

Image 2.2

In many cases, we know what interests us, and we automatically gravitate toward stimuli that match up with that. For example, as you flip through radio stations, you likely already have an idea of what kind of music interests you, so you will stop on a station playing something in that genre while skipping right past stations playing something you aren't interested in. Because of this tendency, we often end up being forced into or accidentally experiencing something new in order to create or discover new interests. For example, you may accidentally stumble on a new area of interest when you register for a class you wouldn't otherwise take because it fits into your schedule. As a communicator, you can take advantage of this perceptual tendency by adapting your topic and content to the interests of your audience.

Expectations

Another feature that affects the degree of salience is **expectations**.

However, the relationship between salience and expectations is somewhat complex. Basically, we can find expected things salient and also find things that are unexpectedly salient. Although this may sound confusing, a couple of examples should illustrate this point. If you are expecting a package to be delivered, you might pick up on the slightest noise of a truck engine or someone's footsteps approaching your front door. Since we expect something to happen, we may be extra tuned in to clues that it is coming. In terms of the unexpected, if you have a shy and soft-spoken friend whom you overhear raising the volume and pitch of their voice while talking to another friend, you may pick up on that and assume that something out of the ordinary is going on. For something unexpected to become salient, it has to reach a certain threshold of difference. If you walk into your regular class and there are one or two more students there than normal, you may not even notice. If you walk into your class and there is someone dressed up as a wizard, you would probably notice. So, if we expect to experience something out of the routine, like a package delivery, we will find stimuli related to that expectation salient. If we experience something that we weren't expecting and that is significantly different from our routine experiences, then we will likely find it salient.

There is a middle area where slight deviations from routine experiences may go unnoticed because we aren't expecting them. To go back to the earlier example, if you aren't expecting a package, and you regularly hear vehicle engines and sidewalk foot traffic outside your house, those routine sounds wouldn't be as likely to catch your attention, even if the traffic was slightly more or less than expected. This is because our expectations are often based on previous experience and patterns we have observed and internalized, which allows our brains to go on "autopilot" and fill in things that are missing or overlook extra things.

> **Look at the following sentence and read it aloud:**
> Percpetoin is bsaed on pateetrns, maening we otfen raech a cocnlsuion witouht cosnidreing ecah indviidaul elmenet.

The example above illustrates a test of our expectations and an annoyance to every college or university student. We may have had the experience of getting a paper back with typos and spelling errors circled, which can be frustrating, especially if we took the time to proofread. When we first learn to read and write, we typically learn letter by letter. Perhaps a teacher or parent showed us a card with A-P-P-L-E written on it, and we sounded it out. Over time, we learned the patterns of letters and sounds and could see combinations of letters and pronounce the word quickly. Since we know what to expect when we see a certain pattern of letters, and we know what comes next in a sentence if we wrote the paper, we don't take the time to look at each letter as we proofread. This can lead us to overlook common typos and spelling errors, even if we reread something multiple times. How can you avoid proofreading errors? First, ask a friend to proofread your paper. Since they didn't write it, they have fewer expectations regarding the content. Second, read your paper backwards. Since patterns of speech aren't the same in reverse, you have to stop and focus on each word. Now that we know how we select stimuli, let's turn our attention to how we organize the information we receive.

2. Organizing Information

Organizing is the second part of the perception process and involves sorting and categorizing the information that we perceive based on innate and learned cognitive patterns. Three ways we sort things into patterns are by using proximity, similarity, and difference (Coren, 1980). For **proximity**, we tend to think that things that are close together, go together. For example, have you ever been waiting to be helped in a business and the clerk assumes that you and the person standing beside you are together? The slightly awkward moment usually ends when you and the other person in line look at each other, then back at the clerk, and one of you explains that you are not together. Even though you may have never met that other person in your life, the clerk used a basic perceptual organizing cue to group you together because you were standing in proximity to one another.

We also group things together based on **similarity**. We tend to think similar-looking or similar-acting things belong together. For example, let's say that you have two friends who you occasionally go out with, and you are all three males, around the same age, of the same race, and with short hair and glasses. Aside from that, you don't really look alike, but a server at a restaurant may assume that you're brothers. Despite the fact that many other features are different, the salient features are organized based on similarity, and the three of you are suddenly related in the server's eyes.

We also organize information based on **difference**. In this case, we assume that an item that looks or acts differently from the rest doesn't belong with the group. Perceptual errors involving people and assumptions of difference can be especially awkward, if not offensive, in some cases.

These strategies for organizing information are so common that they are built into how we teach our children basic skills and how we function in our daily lives. We probably all had to look at pictures in elementary school and determine which things went together and which thing didn't belong. If you think of the literal act of organizing something, like your desk at home or work, we follow these same strategies. If you have a bunch of papers and mail on top of your desk, you will likely sort the papers into separate piles for separate categories or put bills in a different place than your personal mail. You may have one drawer for pens, pencils, and other supplies and another drawer for files. In this case, you are grouping items based on similarities and differences. You may also group things based on proximity, for example, by putting financial items like a calculator, your pay stubs, and business receipts in one area so you can update your finances efficiently. We simplify information and look for patterns to help us more efficiently communicate and get through life.

Simplifying and categorizing based on patterns isn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, without this capability, we would likely not be able to speak, read, or engage in other complex cognitive and behavioural functions. Our brain innately categorizes and files information and experiences away for later retrieval, and different parts of the brain are responsible for different sensory experiences. In short, it is natural for things to group together in certain ways. There are differences among people, and looking for patterns helps us in many practical ways. However, the judgements we place on various patterns and categories are not natural; they are learned and are culturally and contextually relative. Our perceptual patterns can become unproductive and even unethical when the judgements we associate with certain patterns are based on stereotypical or prejudicial thinking.

3. Interpreting Information

Although selecting and organizing incoming stimuli happens very quickly, and sometimes without much conscious thought, **interpretation** can be a much more deliberate and conscious step in the perception process. Interpretation is the third part of the perception process and is the point at which we assign meaning to our experiences using mental structures known as schemata. **Schemata** are like databases of stored, related information that we use to interpret new experiences. We all have fairly complicated schemata that have developed over time as small units of information combine to make more meaningful complexes of information.

Image 2.3

For example, we have an overall **schema** (singular form of "schemata") about education and how to interpret experiences with teachers and classmates, as shown in Image 2.3. This schema started developing before we even went to preschool based on information about school that we got from parents, peers, and the media. You may have learned that certain objects like a pencil, a ruler, and a notebook were associated with being a student or teacher. You also learned new concepts like grades and recess, and you engaged in new practices like doing homework, studying, and taking tests. In school, you formed new relationships with teachers, administrators, and classmates, and as you progressed through your education, your schema adapted to the changing environment. How smooth or troubling the process of re-evaluating and revising a particular schema is varies from situation to situation and person to person.

For example, some students adapt their schema relatively easily as they move from elementary to middle to high school and on to post-secondary education and are faced with new expectations for behaviour and academic engagement. Other students don't adapt as easily, and holding onto their old schema creates problems as they try to interpret new information through an old, incompatible schema. We've all been in a similar situation at some point in our lives, so we know that revising our schemata can be stressful and that such revision takes effort and usually involves some mistakes, disappointments, and frustrations. But being able to adapt our schemata is a sign of **cognitive complexity**, which is an important part of communication competence. So, even though the process may be challenging, it can also be a time for learning and growth.

It's important to be aware of schemata because our interpretations affect our behaviour. For example, if you are doing a group project for a class, and you perceive a group member to be shy based on your schema of how shy people communicate, you may avoid giving them presentation responsibilities in your group project because you do not think shy people make good public speakers. Schemata also guide our interactions and provide a script for our behaviours. We know, in general, how to act and communicate in a waiting room, in a classroom, on a first date, and even on a game show, as shown in Image 2.4.

Image 2.4

As we have seen, schemata are used to interpret others' behaviour and form impressions about who they are as a person. To help this process along, we often solicit information from people to help us place them into a preexisting schema. In Canada, the United States, and many other Western cultures, people's identities are often closely tied to what they do for a living. When we introduce others, or ourselves, occupation is usually one of the first things we mention. Think about how your communication with someone might differ if they were introduced to you as an artist versus a doctor. We make similar interpretations based on where people are from, their age, their race or ethnicity, and other social and cultural factors.

In summary, we have schemata about individuals, groups, places, and things, and these schemata filter our perceptions before, during, and after interactions. As schemata are retrieved from memory, they are executed like computer programs or apps on your smartphone to help us interpret the world around us. Just as computer programs and apps must be regularly updated to improve their functioning, competent communicators update and adapt their schemata as they have new experiences.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Take a moment to look around wherever you are right now. Take in the perceptual field around you. What is salient for you in this moment and why? Explain the degree of salience using the three reasons for salience discussed in this section.
2. Think about some of the schemata you have that help you make sense of the world around you. For each of the following contexts—academic, professional, personal, and civic—identify a schema that you commonly rely on or think you will rely on. For each schema you identified, note a few ways that it has already been challenged or may be challenged in the future.

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2.3 Self-Perception

Just as our perception of others affects how we communicate, so does our perception of ourselves. But what influences our self-perception? How much of our "self" is a product of our own making and how much of it is constructed based on how others react to us? How do we present ourselves to others in ways that maintain our sense of self or challenge how others see us? We will begin to answer these questions in this section as we explore self-concept, self-esteem, and self-presentation.

Self-Concept

Self-concept refers to the overall idea of who a person thinks they are. If I said, "Tell me who you are," your answers would be clues to how you see yourself—your self-concept. Each person has an overall self-concept that might be a short list of the overarching characteristics they find important. But each person's self-concept is also influenced by context, meaning that we think differently about ourselves depending on the situation we are in. In some situations, personal characteristics, such as our abilities, personality, and other distinguishing features, will best describe who we are. You might think of yourself as laid back, traditional, funny, open-minded, or driven, or you might label yourself a leader or a thrill-seeker. In other situations, our self-concept may be tied to group or cultural membership. For example, you might consider yourself a member of a book club, a gamer, or a sports geek.

Our self-concept is also formed through our interactions with others and their reactions to us. The concept of the **looking-glass self,** also known as **reflected appraisal**, explains that we see ourselves reflected in other people's reactions to us and then form our self-concept based on how we believe other people see us (Wallace & Tice, 2012). This reflective process of building our self-concept is based on what other people have actually said, such as "You're a good listener," and other people's actions, such as coming to you for advice. These thoughts evoke emotional responses that feed into our self-concept. For example, you may think, "I'm glad that people can count on me to listen to their problems."

We also develop our self-concept through comparisons to other people. **Social comparison theory** states that we describe and evaluate ourselves in terms of how we compare to other people. Social comparisons are based on two dimensions: superiority/inferiority and similarity/difference (Hargie, 2021). In terms of superiority and inferiority, we evaluate characteristics such as attractiveness, intelligence, athletic ability, and so on. For example, you may judge yourself to be more intelligent than your brother or less athletic than your best friend, and these judgements are incorporated into your self-concept. This process of comparison and evaluation isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it can have negative consequences if your reference group isn't appropriate.

Reference groups are the groups we use for social comparison, and they typically change based on what we are evaluating. In terms of athletic ability, many people choose unreasonable reference groups with which to engage in social comparison. If a someone wants to get into better shape and starts an exercise routine, they may be discouraged by difficulty keeping up with the aerobics instructor or their running partner and judge themselves as inferior, which could negatively affect their self-concept. Using as a reference group people who have only recently started a fitness program but have shown progress could help maintain a more accurate and hopefully positive self-concept.

We also engage in **social comparison** based on similarity and difference. Since self-concept is context specific, similarity may be desirable in some situations and difference more desirable in others. Factors like age and personality may influence whether or not we want to fit in or stand out. Although we compare ourselves to others throughout our lives, adolescence usually brings new pressure to be similar to or different from particular reference groups. Think of all the cliques in high school and how people voluntarily or involuntarily broke off into groups based on popularity, interest, culture, or grade level. Some kids in your high school may have wanted to fit in with and be similar to students in the marching band, as shown in Image 2.5, but be different from the football players. Conversely, athletes were probably more apt to compare themselves, in terms of similar athletic ability, to other athletes rather than to the kids in the band. But social comparison can be complicated by perceptual influences. As we learned earlier, we organize information based on similarity and difference, but these patterns don't always hold true. Even though students involved in athletics and students involved in arts may seem very different, a dancer or singer may also be very athletic, perhaps even more so than a member of the football team. As with other aspects of perception, there are positive and negative consequences of social comparison.

Image 2.5

We generally want to know where we fall in terms of ability and performance as compared to others, but what people do with this information and how it affects self-concept varies. Not all people feel they need to be at the top of the list, but some won't stop until they get the high score on the video game or set a new record in a track-and-field event. Some people strive to be first chair in the clarinet section of the band, while another person may be content to be second chair. We place evaluations on our self-concept based on many factors, and some of these bring in the concepts of **self-esteem** and **self-efficacy**, which are components of our self-concept, as can be seen in Image 2.6.

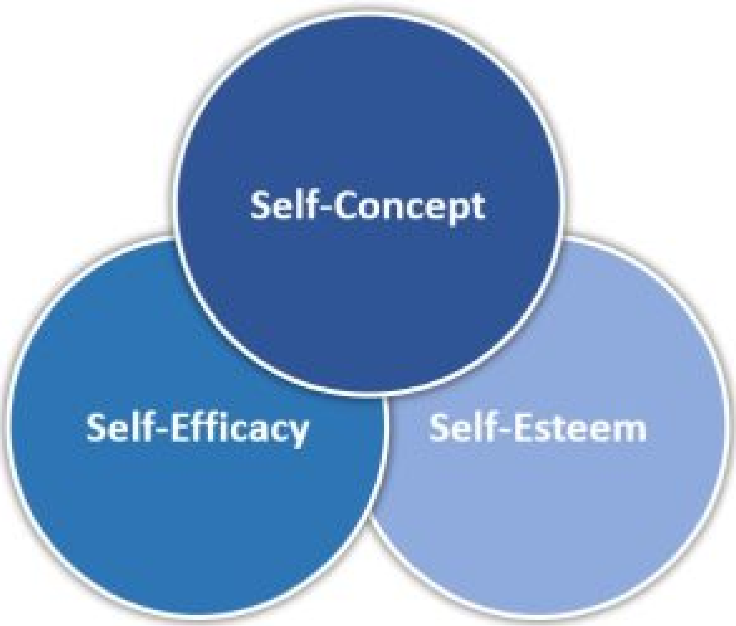

Image 2.6

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to the judgements and evaluations we make about our self-concept. Although self-concept is a broad description of the self, self-esteem is more specifically an evaluation of the self (Byrne, 1996). If you were again prompted to "Tell me who you are" and then were asked to evaluate (that is, label as good/bad, positive/negative, desirable/undesirable) each of the things you listed about yourself, you would reveal clues about your self-esteem. Like self-concept, self-esteem has both general and specific elements. Generally, some people are more likely to evaluate themselves positively, whereas others are more likely to evaluate themselves negatively (Brockner, 1988). More specifically, our self-esteem varies across our lifespan and across contexts.

How we judge ourselves affects our communication and our behaviours, but not every negative or positive judgement carries the same weight. The negative evaluation of a trait that isn't very important for our self-concept will likely not result in a loss of self-esteem. For example, you may not be very good at drawing. Although you may appreciate drawing as an art form, you might not consider drawing ability to be a very big part of your self-concept, and if someone criticized your drawing ability, your self-esteem wouldn't really be affected. On the other hand, you may consider yourself to be good at your job, and you may have spent considerable time and effort developing and improving the skills you need in your work. If your job skills are important to your self-concept and someone critiqued your ability, your self-esteem might definitely be hurt. This doesn't mean that we can't be evaluated on something we find important. Even though your job may be very important to your self-concept, you are likely regularly evaluated on it by your superiors and your co-workers. Most of that feedback is likely in the form of constructive criticism, which can still be difficult to receive, but when taken in the spirit of self-improvement, it is valuable and may even enhance your self-concept and self-esteem. In fact, in professional contexts, people with higher self-esteem are more likely to work harder based on negative feedback, are less negatively affected by work stress, are able to handle workplace conflict better, and are better able to work independently and solve problems (Brockner, 1988). Self-esteem isn't the only factor that contributes to our self-concept; perceptions about our competence also play a role in developing our sense of self.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to the judgements people make about their ability to perform a task in a specific context (Bandura, 1997). Judgements about our self-efficacy influence our self-esteem, which in turn influences our self-concept. The following example also illustrates these interconnections:

> Pedro did a good job on his first college speech. During a meeting with his instructor, Pedro indicates that he is confident going into the next speech and thinks he will do well. This skill-based assessment is an indication that Pedro has a high level of self-efficacy related to public speaking. If he does well on the speech, the praise from his classmates and instructor will reinforce his self-efficacy and lead him to positively evaluate his speaking skills, which will contribute to his self-esteem. By the end of the course, Pedro likely thinks of himself as a good public speaker, which may then become an important part of his self-concept.
>
> Throughout these points of connection, it's important to remember that self-perception affects how we communicate, behave, and perceive other things. Pedro's increased feeling of self-efficacy may give him more confidence in his delivery, which will likely result in positive feedback that reinforces his self-perception. He may start to perceive his instructor more positively since they share an interest in public speaking, and he may begin to notice other people's speaking skills more during class presentations and public lectures. Over

time, he may even start to think about changing his major to communication or pursuing career options that incorporate public speaking, which would further integrate being "a good public speaker" into his self-concept. You can hopefully see that these interconnections can create powerful positive or negative cycles. Although some of this process is under our control, much of it is also shaped by the people in our lives.

The verbal and nonverbal feedback we get from people affects our feelings of self-efficacy and our self-esteem. As we saw in the example above, being given positive feedback can increase our self-efficacy, which may make us more likely to engage in a similar task in the future (Hargie, 2021). Obviously, negative feedback can lead to decreased self-efficacy and a declining interest in engaging with the activity again. In general, people adjust their expectations about their abilities based on feedback they get from others. Positive feedback tends to make people raise their expectations for themselves, and negative feedback does the opposite, which ultimately affects behaviours and creates the cycle. When feedback from others is different from how we view ourselves, additional cycles may develop that impact self-esteem and self-concept.

Self-Discrepancy Theory

Self-discrepancy theory states that people have beliefs about and expectations for their actual and potential selves that do not always match up with what they experience (Higgins, 1987). To understand this theory, we have to understand the different "selves" that make up our self-concept—the actual, ideal, and ought selves. The **actual self** consists of the attributes that you or someone else believes you *actually* possess. The **ideal self** is made up of the attributes that you or someone else *would like you* to possess. The **ought self** consists of the attributes you or someone else believes you *should* possess.

These different selves can conflict with each other in various combinations. Discrepancies between the actual, ideal, and ought selves can be motivating in some ways and prompt people to act for self-improvement. For example, if your ought self should spend time volunteering for the local animal shelter, then your actual self may be more inclined to do so. Discrepancies between the ideal and ought selves can be especially stressful. For example, many professional women who are also mothers have an ideal view of self that includes professional success and advancement. They may also have an ought self that includes a sense of duty and obligation to be a full-time mother. The actual self may be someone who does fairly well at both but doesn't quite live up to the expectations of either. These discrepancies do not just create cognitive unease—they also lead to emotional, behavioural, and communicative changes.

The following is a summary of the four potential discrepancies among the selves:

- **Actual vs. own ideals:** We have an overall feeling that we are not achieving our desires and hopes, which leads to feelings of disappointment, dissatisfaction, and frustration.
- **Actual vs. others' ideals:** We have an overall feeling that we are not achieving significant others' desires and hopes for ourselves, which leads to feelings of shame and embarrassment.
- **Actual vs. own ought:** We have an overall feeling that we are not meeting our duties and obligations, which can lead to feeling that we have fallen short of our own moral standards.
- **Actual vs. others' ought:** We have an overall feeling that we are not meeting what others see as our duties and obligations,

which leads to feelings of agitation, including fear of potential punishment.

Influences on Self-Perception

We have already learned that other people influence our self-concept and self-esteem. Although the interactions we have with individuals and groups are definitely important to consider, we must also note the influence that larger, more systemic forces have on our **self-perception**. Another term often used is our **perceived self,** which is our subjective appraisal of personal qualities that we ascribe to ourselves (American Psychological Association, 2023). Social and family influences, culture, and the media all play a role in shaping who we think we are and how we feel about ourselves. Although these are powerful socializing forces, there are ways to maintain some control over our self-perception.

Social and Family Influences

Various forces help socialize us into our respective social and cultural groups and play a powerful role in presenting us with options about who we can be. Although we may like to think that our self-perception starts with a blank canvas, our perceptions are limited by our experiences and various social and cultural contexts.

Image 2.7

Parents, as shown in Image 2.7, and peers shape our self-perception in both positive and negative ways. Feedback that we get from significant others, which includes close family, can lead to positive or negative views of our self (Hargie, 2021). In the past few years, however, there has been a public discussion and debate about how much positive reinforcement people should give others, especially children. The following questions have been raised: Has our current generation been overpraised? Is the praise given warranted? What are the positive and negative effects of praise? What is the end goal of the praise? Let's briefly look at this discussion and its connection to self-perception.

Whether or not praise is warranted is very subjective and is specific to each person and context, but in general, questions have been raised about the potential negative effects of too much praise. **Motivation** is the underlying force that drives us to do things. Sometimes we are **intrinsically motivated**, meaning that we want to do something for the love of doing it or for the resulting internal satisfaction. At other times, we are **extrinsically motivated**, meaning that we do something to receive a reward or avoid punishment. If you put effort into completing a short documentary film for a class because you love filmmaking and editing, you have been largely motivated by intrinsic forces. If you complete the documentary because you want an "A" and know that if you fail, your parents will not give you money for your spring break trip, then you are motivated by extrinsic factors. Both can, of course, effectively motivate us. Praise is a form of extrinsic reward, and if there is an actual reward associated with the praise, like money or special recognition, some people speculate that intrinsic motivation will suffer. But what's so good about intrinsic motivation? Intrinsic motivation is more substantial and long-lasting than extrinsic motivation and can lead to the development of a work ethic and a sense of pride in one's abilities. Intrinsic motivation can move people to accomplish great things over long periods of time and be happy despite the effort and sacrifices made; extrinsic motivation dies when the reward stops. Additionally, too much praise can lead people to have a misguided sense of their abilities. Instructors who are reluctant to fail students who produce poor-quality work may be setting those students up to be shocked when their supervisor at work criticizes their abilities or output when they are in a professional situation (Hargie, 2021).

Communication patterns develop between parents and children that are common to many verbally and physically abusive relationships. Many children may also receive comparison based motivation from parents that may be discouraging but is not necessary abusive, however, this communication style can result in similar consequences. Such patterns can have negative effects on a child's self-efficacy and self-esteem. **Attributions** are links we make to identify the cause of a behaviour. In the case of aggressive, or abusive, parents, they are not able to distinguish between mistakes and intentional behaviours, often seeing honest mistakes as intentional misbehaviours and reacting negatively to the child. Such parents also communicate generally negative evaluations to their child by saying, for example, "You can't do anything right!" or "You're a bad child." When children exhibit positive behaviours, these parents are more likely to use external attributions that diminish the achievement of the child by saying something like, "You only won because the other team was off their game." In general, this form of parents have unpredictable reactions to their children's positive and negative behaviour, which creates an uncertain and often scary climate for a child that can lead to lower self-esteem and erratic or aggressive behaviour. The cycles of praise and blame are just two examples of how the family as a socializing force can influence our self-perceptions.

Culture

How people perceive themselves varies across cultures. For example, many cultures exhibit a phenomenon known as the **self-enhancement bias**, meaning that they tend to emphasize an individual's desirable qualities relative to other people (Loughnan et al., 2011). But the degree to which people engage in self-enhancement varies. A review of many studies in this area found that people in Western countries such as Canada and the United States were significantly more likely to self-enhance than people in countries such as Japan. Many scholars explain this variation using a common measure of cultural variation that claims people in **individualistic cultures** are more likely to engage in competition and openly praise accomplishments than people in **collectivistic cultures**. The difference in self-enhancement has also been tied to economics, with scholars arguing that people in countries with greater income inequality are more likely to view themselves as superior to others or want to be perceived as superior to others (even if they don't have economic wealth) in order to conform to the country's values and norms. This holds true because countries with high levels of economic inequality, such as the United States, typically value competition and the right to boast about winning or succeeding, whereas countries with more economic equality, like

Japan, have a cultural norm of modesty (Loughnan et al., 2011). The video below discusses individualistic and collectivistic cultures and how complex communication between these different cultures can be.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=278#oembed-1

(Rockson, 2016)

There are some general differences in terms of gender and self-perception that relate to self-concept, self-efficacy, and envisioning ideal selves. As with any cultural differences, these are generalizations that have been supported by research, but they do not represent all individuals within a group. Regarding self-concept, men are more likely to describe themselves in terms of their group membership, and women are more likely to include references to relationships in their self-descriptions. For example, a man may note that he is a fan of the Edmonton Oilers hockey team, an enthusiastic skier, or a member of a philanthropic organization, and a woman may note that she is a mother of two, a marathon runner, or a loyal friend. Socialization and the internalization of societal norms for gender differences accounts for much more of our perceived differences than do innate or natural differences between genders.

Media

The representations we see in the media also affect our self-perception. The vast majority of media images include idealized representations of attractiveness. Despite the fact that the images of people we see in glossy magazines and on movie screens are not typically what we see when we look at the people around us in a classroom, at work, or at the grocery store, many of us continue to hold ourselves to unrealistic standards of beauty and attractiveness. Movies, magazines, and television shows are filled with beautiful people, and less-attractive actors, when they are present in the media, are typically portrayed as the butt of jokes, villains, or only as background extras (Patzer, 2008). Aside from overall attractiveness, the media also offers narrow representations of acceptable body weight or shape.

In terms of self-concept, media representations offer us guidance on what is acceptable or unacceptable and valued or not valued in our society. Media messages, in general, reinforce cultural stereotypes related to race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, and class. People from historically marginalized groups must look much harder than those in dominant groups to find positive representations of their identities in media. As a critical thinker, it is important for you to question media messages and to examine who is included and who is excluded.

Advertising, in particular, encourages people to engage in social comparison, regularly communicating to us that we are inferior because we lack a certain product or that we need to change some aspect of our life to keep up with and be similar to others. For example, for many years, advertising targeted at women instilled in them a fear of having a dirty house, selling them products that promised to keep their house clean, make their family happy, and impress their friends and neighbours. Now messages tell us to fear becoming old or unattractive, selling products to keep our skin smooth and clear, which will in turn make us happy and popular.

Self-Presentation

How we perceive ourselves manifests in how we present ourselves to others and how we communicate with others on a daily basis. **Self-presentation**, also referred to as **presenting self**, is the process of strategically concealing or revealing personal information to influence others' perceptions (Human et al., 2012). We engage in this process daily and for different reasons. Although people occasionally intentionally deceive others in the process of self-presentation, in general, we try to make a good impression while still remaining authentic. Since self-presentation helps us meet our instrumental, relational, and identity needs, we stand to lose quite a bit if we are caught intentionally misrepresenting ourselves. As communicators, we sometimes engage in more subtle forms of inauthentic self-presentation. For example, a person may state or imply that they know more about a subject or situation than they actually do in order to seem intelligent or "in the loop." During a speech, a speaker may rely on a polished and competent delivery to distract from a lack of substantive content. These cases of strategic self-presentation may not ever be found out, but communicators should still avoid them because they do not live up to the standards of ethical communication.

Consciously and competently engaging in self-presentation can have benefits because we can provide others with a more positive and accurate picture of who we are. People who are skilled at impression management are typically more engaging and confident, which allows others to pick up on more cues from which to form impressions (Human et al., 2012). Being a skilled self-presenter draws on many of the practices used by competent communicators, including becoming a higher self-monitor. When self-presentation skills and self-monitoring skills combine, communicators can simultaneously monitor their own expressions, the reactions of others, and the situational and social context (Sosik et al., 2002).

There are two main types of self-presentation: prosocial and self-serving (Sosik et al., 2002). **Prosocial self-presentation** entails behaviours that present a person as a role model and make the person more likeable and attractive. For example, a supervisor may call on her employees to uphold high standards for business ethics, model that behaviour in her own actions, and compliment others when they exemplify those standards. **Self-serving self-presentation** entails behaviours that present a person as highly skilled, willing to challenge others, and someone not to be messed with. For example, a supervisor may publicly take credit for the accomplishments of others or publicly critique an employee who failed to meet a particular standard. In summary, prosocial strategies are aimed at benefiting others, whereas self-serving strategies benefit oneself at the expense of others.

In general, we strive to present a public image that matches our self-concept, but we can also use self-presentation strategies to enhance our self-concept (Hargie, 2021). When we present ourselves in order to evoke a positive evaluative response, we are engaging in **self-enhancement**. In the pursuit of self-enhancement, a person might try to be as appealing as possible in a particular area or with a particular person to gain feedback that will enhance their self-esteem. For example, a singer might train and practise for weeks before singing in front of a well-respected vocal coach but not invest as much effort in preparing to sing in front of friends. Although positive feedback from friends is beneficial, positive feedback from an experienced singer could enhance a person's self-concept. Self-enhancement can be productive and achieved competently, or it can be used inappropriately. Using self-enhancement behaviours just to gain the approval of others or out of self-centredness may lead people to communicate in ways that are perceived as phony or overbearing and end up making an unfavourable impression (Sosik et al., 2002).

Impression Management

Impression management is a communication strategy that we use to influence how others view us. Basically, it's the idea that we all have multiple ways that we could show up, and we show up differently depending on the situation.

For example, a doctor who coaches their child's basketball team, volunteers at a small clinic, and also goes to a weekly book club is not likely to use the same communication strategies in all of these situations. Factors such as language, non-verbal communication, and self-disclosure that we bring to certain situations is all part of our impression management and will vary depending on the situation we find ourselves in.

Characteristics of Impression Management

- **We construct different identities:** These identities can vary depending on those around us, the situation, and our role at the time.
- **Impression management can be deliberate or unconscious:** We are not always aware of changes in communication strategies.
- **Impression management varies by situation:** This variation can be subtle or extreme, depending on the situation.

Watch the video below that discusses impression management and self-monitoring:

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online *here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=278#oembed-2*

(Study Hall, 2023)

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Discuss at least one time when you had a discrepancy or tension between two of the three selves described by self-discrepancy theory (the actual, ideal, and ought selves). What effect did this discrepancy have on your self-concept and/or self-esteem?
2. Take one of the socializing forces discussed above (family, culture, or media) and identify at least one positive and one negative influence that it has had on your self-concept and/or self-esteem.
3. Discuss some ways that you might strategically engage in self-presentation to influence the impressions of others in an academic, professional, personal, and civic context.

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San Jose State University Marching Band Pit Percussionist by Pmlydon, CC BY-SA 4.0

Figure 1.3 self-concept, self-efficacy, self-esteem by Stevy.Scarbrough, CC BY-SA 4.0

Parents and their baby by sheldonl, CC0 1.0

2.4 Perceiving Others

Are you a good judge of character? How quickly can you "size someone up"? Interestingly, research shows that many people are surprisingly accurate at predicting how an interaction with someone will unfold based on initial impressions. Fascinating research has also been done on the ability of people to make a judgement about a person's competence after as little as 100 milliseconds of exposure to politicians' faces. Even more surprising is that people's judgements of competence, after exposure to two candidates for political elections, accurately predicted election outcomes (Ballew & Todoroy, 2007). In short, after only minimal exposure to a candidate's facial expressions, people made judgements about the person's competence, and those candidates judged more competent were people who actually won elections. As you read this section, keep in mind that these principles apply to how you perceive others and to how others perceive you. Just as others make impressions on us, we make impressions on others. We have already learned how the perception process works in terms of selecting, organizing, and interpreting. In this section, we will focus on how we perceive others, with specific attention to how we interpret our perceptions of others. These concepts are important because how we perceive others, and factors such as attribution, bias, and personality, can greatly effect how we communicate with others.

Attribution and Interpretation

I'm sure you have a family member, friend, or co-worker with whom you have ideological or political differences. When conversations and inevitable disagreements occur, you may view this person as "pushing your buttons" if you are invested in the issue being debated, or you may view the person as "on their soapbox" if you aren't invested. In either case, your existing perceptions of the other person are probably reinforced after your conversation, and you may leave the conversation thinking, "They are never going to wake up and see how ignorant they are! I don't know why I even bother trying to talk to them!" Similar situations occur regularly, and there are some key psychological processes that play into how we perceive the behaviour of others. By examining these processes, attribution in particular, we can see how our communication with others is affected by the explanations we create for others' behaviour. In addition, we will learn some common errors that we make in the attribution process that regularly lead to conflict and misunderstanding.

Attribution

In most interactions, we are constantly running an **attribution** script in our minds, which essentially tries to come up with an explanation for what is happening. Why did my neighbour slam the door when they saw me walking down the hall? Why is my partner being extra nice to me today? Why did my officemate miss our project team meeting this morning? In general, we seek to attribute the cause of others' behaviours to internal or external factors. **Internal attributions** connect the cause of behaviours to personal aspects such as personality traits. **External attributions** connect the cause of behaviours to situational factors. This process of attribution is ongoing, and, as with many aspects of perception, we are sometimes aware of the attributions we make, and sometimes they are automatic and unconscious. Attribution has received much scholarly attention because it is in this part of the perception process that some of the most common **perceptual errors** or **biases** occur. **Biases** are types of prejudice in favor, or against, a person, thing or group. Attributions are also important to consider because our reactions to others' behaviours are strongly influenced by the explanations we reach and ultimately our communication with others.

Perceptional Errors and Bias

One of the most common perceptual errors is the **fundamental attribution error**, which refers to our tendency to explain others' behaviours using internal rather than external attributions (Sillars, 1980). For example, if you google some clips from the reality television show *Parking Wars*, which focuses on parking enforcement, you will see the fact that people often direct anger at parking enforcement officers. In this case, people who have parked illegally attribute the cause of their situation to the malevolence of the enforcement officer, essentially saying they got a ticket (Image 2.8), because the officer was a bad person, which is an internal attribution. They were much less likely to acknowledge that the officer was just doing their job (an external attribution) and the ticket was the result of the person's decision to park illegally.


Image 2.8

Perceptual errors can also be biased, and in the case of **self-serving bias**, the error works out in our favour. Just as we tend to attribute others' behaviours to internal rather than external causes, we do the same for ourselves, especially when our behaviour leads to something successful or positive. When our behaviour results in failure or something negative, we tend to attribute the cause to external factors. Thus the self-serving bias is a perceptual error through which we attribute the cause of our successes to internal personal factors while attributing our failures to external factors beyond our control. When we look at the fundamental attribution error and the self-serving bias together, we can see that we are likely to judge ourselves more favourably, or at least less personally, than another person.

Another form of bias to be aware of is **confirmation bias**, which results from finding evidence and support for already-held beliefs, even if that evidence doesn't actually exist. This can result in misunderstandings and an increase in stereotyping as more false evidence is found to support already incorrect assumptions.

Impressions and Interpretation

As we perceive others, we make impressions about their personality, likeability, attractiveness, and other characteristics. Although many of our impressions are personal, what forms them is sometimes based more on circumstances than on personal characteristics. Not all the information we take in is treated equally. How important are first impressions? Does the last thing you notice about a person stick with you longer because it's more recent? Do we remember the positive or the negative things we notice about a person? This section will help answer these questions as we explore how the timing of information and the content of the messages we receive can influence our perception.

First and Last Impressions

The old saying "You never get a second chance to make a first impression" points to the fact that first impressions matter. The brain is a predictive organ in that it wants to know, based on previous experiences and patterns, what to expect next, and first impressions function to fill this need. This allows us to determine how we will proceed with an interaction after only a quick assessment of the person with whom we are interacting (Hargie, 2021). Research shows that people are surprisingly good at making accurate first impressions about how an interaction will unfold and at identifying personality characteristics of people they do not know. Studies show that people are generally able to predict how another person will behave towards them based on an initial interaction. People's accuracy and ability to predict interactions based on first impressions varies, but people with high accuracy are typically, but not always, socially skilled and popular and have less loneliness, anxiety, and depression, more satisfying relationships, and more senior work positions and higher salaries (Hargie, 2021). So not only do first impressions matter, but having the ability to form accurate first impressions seems to correlate to many other positive characteristics.

First impressions are enduring because of the **primacy effect**, which leads us to place more value on the first information we receive about a person. So, if we interpret the first information we receive from or about a person as positive, then a positive first impression will form and influence how we respond to that person as the interaction continues. Likewise, negative interpretations of information can lead us to form negative first impressions. If you sit down at a restaurant and servers walk by for several minutes without greeting you, then you will likely interpret that negatively and not have a good impression of your server when they finally show up. This may lead you to be short with the server, which may result in them not being as attentive as they normally would. At this point, a series of negative interactions has set into motion a cycle that will be very difficult to reverse and make positive.

The **recency effect** leads us to put more weight on the most recent impression we have of a person's communication over earlier impressions. Even a positive first impression can be tarnished by a negative final impression. Imagine that an instructor has maintained a relatively high level of credibility with you over the course of the semester. The instructor made a good first impression by being organized, approachable, and interesting during the first days of class, and the rest of the semester went fairly well with no major conflicts. However, during the last week of the term, the instructor didn't have final papers graded and ready to return by the time they said they would, which left you with some uncertainty about how well you needed to do on the final exam to earn a good grade in the class. When you finally got your paper back on the last day of class, you saw that your grade was much lower than you expected. If this happened to you, what would you write on the instructor evaluation? Because of the recency effect, many students would likely give a disproportionate amount of value to the Instructor's actions in the final week of the semester, negatively skewing the evaluation, which is supposed to reflect the instructor's performance over the entire semester. Even though the instructor only returned one assignment late, that fact is very recent in students' minds and can overshadow the positive impression formed many weeks earlier.

Physical and Environmental Influences on Perception

We make first impressions based on a variety of factors, including physical and environmental characteristics. In terms of **physical characteristics**, style of dress and grooming are important, especially in professional contexts. We have general schemata regarding how to dress and groom for various situations ranging from formal to business casual to casual to lounging around the house.

You would likely be able to offer some descriptors of how a person would look and act from the following categories: a goth person, a prep, a jock, a fashionista, and a hipster. The schemata associated with these various groups or styles are formed through personal experience and through exposure to media representations of these groups. Different professions also have schemata for appearance and dress. Imagine a doctor, mechanic, politician, exotic dancer, or mail carrier. Each group has clothing and personal styles that create and fit into general patterns. Of course, the mental picture we have of any of the examples above is not going to be representative of the whole group, meaning that stereotypical thinking often exists within our own schemata.

Think about the harm that has been done when people pose as police officers or doctors to commit crimes or other acts of malice. Seeing someone in a white lab coat, as shown in Image 2.9, automatically leads us to see that person as an authority figure, and we fall into a scripted pattern of deferring to the "doctor" and not asking too many questions. The Milgram experiment offers a startling example of how powerful these influences are. In the experiment, participants followed instructions from a man in a white lab coat (who was actually an actor), who prompted them to deliver electric shocks to a person in another room every time the other person answered a memory question incorrectly. The experiment was actually about how people defer to authority figures instead of acting independently. Although no one was actually being shocked in the other room, many participants continued to shock the person being questioned at very high voltages, even after that person supposedly being shocked complained of chest pains and became unresponsive (Encina, 2014).

Image 2.9

Just as clothing and personal style help us form impressions of others, so do physical body features. The degree to which we perceive people to be attractive influences our attitudes about and communication with them. Facial attractiveness and body weight tend to be common features used in the perception of physical attractiveness. In general, people find symmetrical faces and nonoverweight bodies attractive. People perceived as attractive are generally evaluated more positively and seen as more kind and competent than people evaluated as less attractive. Additionally, people rated as attractive receive more eye contact and more smiles, and people stand closer to them. Unlike clothing and personal style, these physical features are more difficult, if not impossible, to change.

Finally, the material objects and people that surround a person influence our perception. In the MTV show *Room Raiders*, contestants go into the bedrooms of three potential dates and choose the one they want to go on a date with based on the impressions made while examining each potential date's cleanliness, decorations, clothes, trophies and awards, books, music, and so on. Research supports the reliability of such impressions, as people have been shown to make reasonably accurate judgements about a person's personality after viewing their office or bedroom (Hargie, 2021). Although the artificial scenario set up in *Room Raiders* doesn't exactly match up with typical encounters, the link between environmental cues and perception is important enough for many companies to create policies about what can and can't be displayed in personal office spaces.

Although some physical and environmental features are easier to change than others, it is useful to become aware of how these factors, which aren't necessarily related to personality or verbal and nonverbal communication, shape our perceptions. These early impressions also affect how we interpret and perceive later encounters, which can be further explained through the halo and horn effects.

The Halo and Horn Effects

We have a tendency to adapt information that conflicts with our earlier impressions to make it fit within the framework we have established. This is known as **selective distortion**, and it manifests in the **halo and horn effects**. The angelic halo and the devilish horn are useful metaphors for the lasting effects of positive and negative impressions.

The **halo effect** occurs when initial positive perceptions lead us to view later interactions as positive. The **horn effect** occurs when initial negative perceptions lead us to view later interactions as negative (Hargie, 2021). Since impressions are especially important when a person is navigating the job market, let's imagine how the horn and halo effects could play out for a recent college graduate looking to land their first real job. Kelly has recently graduated with a degree in communication studies and is looking to start their career as a corporate trainer. If one of Kelly's instructors has a relationship with an executive at an area business, the instructor's positive verbal recommendation will likely result in a halo effect for Kelly. Since the executive thinks highly of their friend the instructor, and the instructor thinks highly of Kelly, then the executive will start their interaction with Kelly with a positive impression and interpret their behaviours more positively than they would otherwise. The halo effect initiated by the instructor's recommendation may even lead the executive to dismiss or overlook some negative behaviours. Let's say Kelly doesn't have a third party to help make a connection and arrives late for their interview. That negative impression may create a horn effect that carries through the interview. Even if Kelly presents as competent and friendly, the negative first impression could lead the executive to minimize or ignore those positive characteristics, and the company may not hire them.

Personality and Perception

Personality refers to a person's general way of thinking, feeling, and behaving based on underlying motivations and impulses (McCornack, 2007). These underlying motivations and impulses form our personality traits. Personality traits are "underlying," but they are fairly enduring once a person reaches adulthood. That is not to say that people's personalities do not change, but major changes in personality are not common unless they result from some form of trauma. Although personality scholars believe there are thousands of personalities, they all comprise some combination of the same few traits. Much research has been done on personality traits, and the "Big Five" that are most commonly discussed are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness; these traits are shown in Image 2.10 (McCrae, 2002). These five traits appear to be representative of personalities across cultures, and you can read more about what each of these traits entails below.

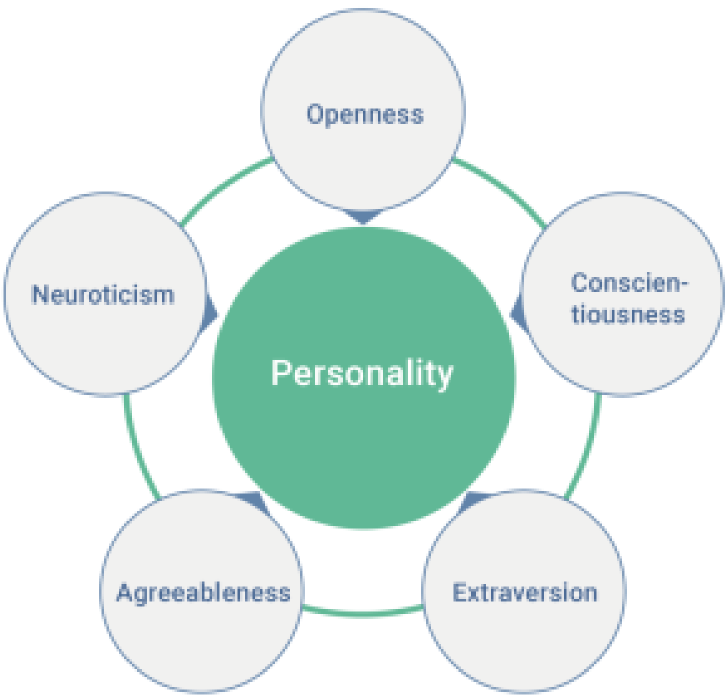

Image 2.10

The Big Five Personality Traits:

- **Extraversion:** This refers to a person's interest in interacting with others. People with high extraversion are sociable and are often called "extroverts." People with low extraversion are less sociable and are often called "introverts."
- **Agreeableness:** This refers to a person's level of trustworthiness and friendliness. People with high agreeableness are cooperative and likeable. People with low agreeableness are suspicious of others and sometimes aggressive, which makes it more difficult for people to find them pleasant to be around.
- **Conscientiousness:** This refers to a person's level of self-organization and motivation. People with a high level of conscientiousness are methodical, motivated, and dependable. People with a low level of conscientiousness are less focused, less careful, and less dependable.
- **Neuroticism:** This refers to a person's level of negative thoughts about themself. People high in neuroticism are insecure, experience emotional distress, and may be perceived as unstable. People low in neuroticism are more relaxed, have fewer emotional swings, and are perceived as more stable.
- **Openness:** This refers to a person's willingness to consider new ideas and perspectives. People high in openness are creative and are perceived as open-minded. People low in openness are more rigid and less flexible in their thinking and are perceived as "set in their ways."

A simple search on Google will provide a long list of online personality tests that can be taken to reveal more about your personality. One very common test is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) personality inventory. This test was developed in the 1940s by Katharine Cook Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers and is based on the early theories of Carl Jung (Myers and Briggs Foundation, 2023). This test has continued to evolve over the years, and millions of people worldwide have taken it each year since it was first published in 1962 (Myers & Briggs Foundation, 2023). Once the test is completed, you are designated as being one of the 16 possible distinctive personality types listed in Image 2.11 below. More information about this test can be found here.

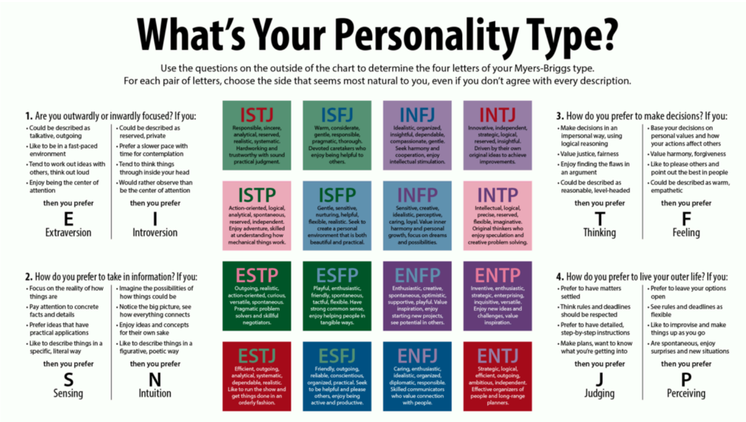

Image 2.11

Ongoing study related to personality serves many purposes, and some of them tie directly to perception. Corporations spend millions of dollars developing personality profiles and personality testing. They make hiring and promotion decisions based on personality test results, which can save them money and time if they can weed out those who don't "fit" the position before they get through the door and drain resources. Potential employers may ask a few questions about intellectual ability or academic performance, but increasingly, they ask questions to try to create a personality profile of the applicant. They basically want to know what kind of leader, co-worker, and person the applicant is. This is a smart move on their part because our personalities greatly influence how we see ourselves in the world and how we perceive and interact with others.

The concept of **assumed similarity** refers to our tendency to perceive others as being similar to us. When we don't have enough information about a person to know their key personality traits, we fill in the gaps—usually assuming that they possess traits similar to those we see in ourselves. We also tend to assume that people have similar attitudes, or likes and dislikes, as we do. If you set your friend up with a person you think they'll really like only to find out there was no chemistry when they met, you may be surprised to realize your friend doesn't have the same taste as you. Even though we may assume more trait and taste similarities between our significant others and ourselves than there actually is, research generally finds that although people do group interpersonally based on many characteristics including race, class, and intelligence, the findings don't show that people with similar personalities group together (Beer & Watson, 2008).

In summary, personality affects our perception, and we all tend to be amateur personality scholars given the amount of effort we put into assuming and evaluating others' personality traits. The bank of knowledge we accumulate based on previous interactions with people is used to help us predict how interactions will unfold and help us manage our interpersonal relationships. When we size up a person based on their personality, we are, in a way, auditioning or interviewing them to see if we think there is compatibility. We use these implicit personality theories to generalize a person's overall personality from the traits we can perceive. The theories are "implicit" because they are not of academic but of experience-based origin, and the information we use to theorize about people's personalities isn't explicitly known or observed but is instead implied. In other words, we use previous experience to guess other people's personality traits, then we make assumptions about a person based on the personality traits we assign to them.

Culture and Perception

Our cultural identities affect our perceptions. Sometimes we are conscious of the effects, and sometimes we are not. In either case, we have a tendency to favour those who exhibit cultural traits that match up with our own. This tendency is so strong that it often leads us to assume that people we like are more similar to us than they actually are. Knowing more about how these forces influence our perceptions can help us become more aware of and competent in regard to the impressions we form of others. The following video provides an overview of how culture and identity can affect communication and our perception of others.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=276#oembed-1

(Study Hall, 2022)

Race or ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, nationality, and age all affect the perceptions that we make. The schemata through which we interpret what we perceive are influenced by our cultural identities. As we are socialized into various cultural identities, we internalize the beliefs, attitudes, and values shared by others in our cultural group. Schemata held by members of a cultural-identity group have similarities, but schemata held by different cultural groups may vary greatly. Unless we are exposed to various cultural groups and learn how others perceive us and the world around them, we will likely have a narrow or naïve view of the world and assume that others see things the way we do. Exposing yourself to and experiencing cultural differences in perspective doesn't mean that you have to change your schemata to match those of another cultural group. Instead, it may offer you a chance to better understand why and how your schemata were constructed the way they were.

As we have learned, perception starts with information that comes in through our senses. How we perceive even basic sensory information is influenced by our culture, as is illustrated in the following list of examples:

- **Sight:** People in different cultures "read" art in different ways, differing in terms of where they start to look at an image and the types of information they perceive and process.
- **Sound:** The tonalities of music in some cultures may be unpleasing to people who aren't taught that these combinations of sounds are pleasing.
- **Touch:** In some cultures, it would be very offensive for a man to touch—even tap on the shoulder—a woman who isn't a relative.
- **Taste:** Tastes for foods vary greatly around the world. A type of strong-smelling fermented tofu, which is a favourite snack in Taipei, Taiwan, would likely be very offputting in terms of taste and smell to many foreign tourists.
- **Smell:** While North Americans spend considerable effort to mask natural body odour with soaps, sprays, and lotions, some other cultures would not find such odours unpleasant or even notice them. Those same cultures may find a North American's soapy, perfumed, and deodorized smell unpleasant.

Aside from differences in reactions to the basic information we take in through our senses, there is also cultural variation in how we perceive more complicated constructs such as marriage, politics, and privacy. In May 2012, French citizens elected a new president. François Hollande moved into the presidential palace with his partner of five years, Valérie Trierweiler. They were the first unmarried couple in the country's history to occupy the presidential palace (de la Baume, 2012). Even though new census statistics show that more unmarried couples are living together than ever before in the United States, many still disapprove of the practice, and it is hard to imagine a Canadian or American national leader in a similar circumstance as France's Hollande.

As we've already learned, our brain processes information by putting it into categories and looking for predictability and patterns. The previous examples have covered how we do this with sensory information and with more abstract concepts like marriage and politics, but we also do this with people. When we categorize people, we generally view them as "like us" or "not like us." This simple us/them split affects subsequent interactions, including impressions and attributions. For example, we tend to view people who we perceive to be like us as being more trustworthy, friendly, and honest than people we perceive to be not like us (Brewer, 1999). We are also more likely to use internal attribution to explain the negative behaviour of people who we perceive to be different from us. Having such inflexible categories can have negative consequences, and later, we will discuss how forcing people into rigid categories leads to stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. Of course, race isn't the only marker of difference that influences our perceptions, and the problem with our rough categorization of people into "like us" and "not like us" categories is that these differences aren't as easy to perceive as we think. We cannot always tell whether or not someone is culturally like us through visual cues.

You no doubt frequently hear people talking and writing about the differences between men and women. Whether it's communication, athletic ability, expressing emotions, or perception, people will line up to say that women are one way and men are another way. Although it is true that gender affects our perception, the reason for this difference stems more from social norms than genetic, physical, or psychological differences between men and women. We are socialized to perceive differences between men and women, which leads us to exaggerate and amplify what those differences actually are (McCornack, 2007). We basically see the stereotypes and differences we are told to see, which helps to create a reality in which gender differences are "obvious." However, numerous research studies have found that, especially in relation to multiple aspects of communication, men and women communicate much more similarly than differently. In summary, various cultural identities shape how we perceive others because the beliefs, attitudes, and values of the cultural groups to which we belong are incorporated into our schema.

How we perceive others is an integral part of communication. The concepts discussed in this section are important to be aware of and considered when communicating with others and are necessary if we are to become **competent communicators** ourselves. In the next section of this chapter, we will examine what we can do to improve our perception of ourselves and others.

Relating Theory to Real Life

Take the Myers-Briggs personality inventory found **here**.

1. Explore what the results say about your personality and how you communicate with others in different situations.
2. From the personality test you've completed, reflect on the following:
    - Considering your type, what are your communication strengths?
    - Considering your type, what are your communication weaknesses?
    - What is one thing your type should stop, start, and continue doing to promote effective

communication with others?

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2.5 Improving Perception

So far, we have learned about the perception process and how we perceive others and ourselves. Now we will turn to a discussion of how to improve our perception. We can develop our self-perception by becoming aware of how schemata, socializing forces, self-fulfilling prophecies, and negative patterns of thinking can distort our ability to describe and evaluate ourselves. How we perceive others can be improved by developing better listening and empathetic skills, becoming aware of stereotypes and prejudice, developing self-awareness through self-reflection, and engaging in perception checking.

Improving Self-Perception

Our self-perceptions can and do change. Recall that we have an overall self-concept and self-esteem that are relatively stable, and we also have **context-specific self-perceptions**. Context-specific self-perceptions vary depending on the person with whom we are interacting, our emotional state, and the subject matter being discussed. Becoming aware of the process of self-perception and the various components of our self-concept will help you understand and improve your self-perceptions.

Since self-concept and self-esteem are so subjective and personal, it would be inaccurate to say that someone's self-concept is "right" or "wrong." Instead, we can identify negative and positive aspects of self-perceptions as well as discuss common barriers to forming accurate and positive self-perceptions. We can also identify common patterns that people experience that interfere with their ability to monitor, understand, and change their self-perceptions.

Changing your overall self-concept or self-esteem is not an easy task given that these are overall reflections on who we are and how we judge ourselves that are constructed over many interactions. A variety of life-changing events can alter our self-perceptions relatively quickly. Think of how your view of yourself changed when you moved from high school to college. Similarly, other people's self-perceptions likely change when they enter into a committed relationship, have a child, move to a new city, or start a new job.

Aside from experiencing life-changing events, we can make slower changes to our self-perceptions with concerted efforts aimed at becoming more competent communicators through self-monitoring and reflection. As you actively try to change your self-perceptions, do not be surprised if you encounter some resistance from significant others. When you alter or improve your self-concept, your communication will also change, which may prompt other people to respond to you differently. Although you may have good reasons for changing certain aspects of your self-perception, others may become unsettled or confused by the alterations in your behaviours and communication. Remember, people try to increase predictability and decrease uncertainty within personal relationships. For example, many students begin to take their post-secondary education more seriously as they progress through their diploma or degree programs. As these students begin to change their self-concept to include the role of "serious student preparing to graduate and enter the professional world," they likely have friends who want to maintain the "semi-serious student who doesn't exert a consistent effort and prefers partying to studying" role that used to be a shared characteristic of both students' self-concepts. As the first student's behaviour changes to accommodate this new aspect of their self-concept, it may upset the friend who was used to weeknights spent hanging out rather than studying. Let's now discuss some suggestions to help avoid common barriers to accurate and positive self-perceptions and patterns of behaviour that perpetuate negative self-perception cycles.

Avoid Reliance on Rigid Schemata

As we learned earlier, **schemata** are sets of information based on cognitive and experiential knowledge that guide our interactions. We rely on schemata almost constantly to help us make sense of the world around us. Sometimes schemata become so familiar that we use them as scripts, which prompts mindless communication and can lead us to overlook new information that may need to be incorporated into a particular schema. So it's important to remain mindful of new, or contradictory, information that may warrant revision of a schema. Being mindful is difficult, however, especially since we often unconsciously rely on schemata. Think about how when you're driving a familiar route, you sometimes fall into "highway hypnosis" (Image 2.12) and travel to your destination without really thinking about where you're going. Despite all the advanced psychomotor skills we need to drive, such as braking, turning, and adjusting to other drivers, we can pull into a familiar driveway or parking lot having driven the whole way on autopilot.

Image 2.12

Again, this is not necessarily a bad thing, but have you ever slipped into autopilot on a familiar route only to remember that you are actually going somewhere else and you've already missed your turn? This example illustrates the importance of keeping our schemata flexible and avoiding mindless communication.

Be Critical of Socializing Forces

We learned earlier that family, friends, sociocultural norms, and the media are just some of the socializing forces that influence our thinking and therefore influence our self-perception. These powerful forces serve positive functions, but they can also set negative patterns of self-perception into motion. Two examples can illustrate the possibility for people to critique and resist socializing forces in order to improve their self-perception. The first example deals with physical appearance and notions of health, and the second deals with cultural identities and discrimination.

Media presents us with narrow and often unrealistic standards for attractiveness. Even though most of us know that these standards don't represent what is normal or natural for the human body, we internalize these ideals, which results in various problems ranging from eating disorders to depression to poor self-esteem. A relatively overlooked but controversial and interesting movement that has emerged partially in response to these narrow representations of the body is "Health at Every Size" and the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance. They have challenged the narrative put out by the $30-billion-a-year weight-loss industry that fat equals lazy, unattractive, and unhealthy. Conflicting scientific studies make it difficult to say conclusively how strong the correlation is between weight and health, but it seems clear that a view promoting healthy living and positive self-esteem over unconditional dieting and a cult of thinness is worth exploring further given the potential public health implications of distorted body image and obesity.

Cultural influences related to identities and difference can also lead to distorted self-perceptions, especially for people who occupy marginalized or oppressed identities. Although perception research has often been used to support the notion that individuals who are subjected to discrimination, such as those belonging to racial and ethnic minorities, are likely to have low self-esteem because they internalize negative societal views, this is not always the case (Armenta & Hunt, 2009). In fact, even some early perception research showed that minorities do not just passively accept the negative views that society places on them. Instead, they actively try to maintain favourable self-perceptions in the face of discriminatory attitudes. Numerous studies have shown that people in groups that are the targets of discrimination may identify with their in-group more because of this threat, which may actually help them maintain psychological well-being. In short, they reject the negative evaluations of the out-group and find refuge and support in their identification with others who share their marginalized status.

Beware of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Self-fulfilling prophecies are thoughts and action patterns in which a person's false belief triggers a behaviour that makes the initial false belief actually or seemingly come true (Schaedig, 2020). For example, let's say a student's biology lab instructor speaks English as a second language. The student falsely believes that the instructor will not be a good teacher because they speak English with an accent. Because of this belief, the student doesn't attend class regularly and doesn't listen actively when they do attend. Because of these behaviours, the student fails the biology lab, which then reinforces their original false belief that the instructor isn't a good teacher.

Image 2.13

There are two subtypes of self-fulfilling prophecies. **Self-imposed prophecies**, which occur when your own expectations influence your actions, and **other-imposed prophecies**, which occur when others' expectations influence your behaviour (Schaedig, 2020). Being aware of self-fulfilling prophecies can also help increase self-perception.

Create and Maintain Supporting Interpersonal Relationships

Giving yourself affirming messages can help with self-perception, but it is also important to find interpersonal support. Although most people have at least some supportive relationships, many people also have individuals in their lives who are negative or even toxic. When people find themselves in negative relational cycles, whether it is with friends, family, or romantic partners, it is difficult to break out of those cycles. But we can all make choices to be around people who will help us be who we want to be and not spend time with people who hinder our self-progress. This notion can also be taken to the extreme, however. It would not be wise to surround yourself with people who only validate you and do not constructively challenge you because this, too, could lead to distorted self-perception.

Beware of Distorted Patterns of Thinking and Acting

You already know from our discussion of **attribution errors** that we all have perceptual biases that distort our thinking. Many of these are common, and we often engage in distorted thinking without being conscious of it. Learning about some of the typical negative patterns of thinking and acting may help us acknowledge them and intervene. One such pattern involves self-esteem and overcompensation.

People with low self-esteem may act in ways that overcompensate for their feelings of low self-worth and other insecurities. Whether it's the businessman buying his midlife crisis Corvette, the "country boy" adding monster tires to his truck, or the community leader who wears several carats of diamonds everywhere she goes, people often turn to material possessions to try to boost self-esteem. Although these purchases may make people feel better in the short term, they may have negative financial effects that can exacerbate negative self-perception and lead to interpersonal conflict. People also compensate for self-esteem with their relational choices. People who are anxious about their career success may surround themselves with individuals who they deem less successful than themselves. In this case, being a big fish in a small pond helps some people feel better about themselves when they engage in social comparison.

People can also get into a negative thought-and-action cycle by setting unrealistic goals and consistently not meeting them. Similar to a self-fulfilling prophecy, people who set unrealistic goals can end up with negative feelings of self-efficacy, which we learned earlier can negatively affect self-esteem and self-concept. The goals we set should be challenging but progressive, meaning that we should work to meet a realistic goal, then increase our expectations and set another goal, and so on.

Some people develop low self-esteem because they lack accurate information about themselves, which can be either intentional or unintentional. A person may intentionally try to maintain high self-esteem by ignoring or downplaying negative comments and beliefs and focusing on positive evaluations. Although this can be a good thing, it can also lead to a distorted self-concept. There is a middle ground between beating yourself up or dwelling on the negative and ignoring potentially constructive feedback about weaknesses and missing opportunities to grow as a person. Conversely, people who have low self-esteem or negative self-concepts may discount or ignore positive feedback.

Overcoming Barriers to Perceiving Others

There are many barriers that prevent us from competently perceiving others. Although some are more difficult to overcome than others, they can all be addressed by raising our awareness of the influences around us and committing to monitoring, reflecting on, and changing some of our communication habits. Whether it is our lazy listening skills, our lack of empathy, or our stereotypes and prejudice, various filters and blinders influence how we perceive and respond to others.

Develop Empathetic Listening Skills

Effective listening is not easy, and most of us do not make a concerted effort to overcome common barriers to listening. This is a skill we will discuss more in a later chapter of this book. Our fast-paced lives and cultural values that emphasize speaking over listening sometimes make listening feel like a chore. But we shouldn't underestimate the power of listening to make someone else feel better and to open our perceptual field to new sources of information.

Empathetic listening can help us expand our self- and social awareness by helping us learn from other people's experiences and taking on different perspectives. Empathetic listening is challenging because it requires a cognitive and emotional investment that goes beyond the learning of a skillset.

For example, to be a good teacher, a person must become a better listener. As a result, the individual will also gain more empathy skills and become a lot more patient. A valuable lesson you might learn during the process might be best stated as "Everyone's biggest problem is *their* biggest problem." If one person's biggest problem is getting enough money together to buy a new smartphone, and another person's biggest problem is saving enough money to purchase much needed medication, each of these people is likely experiencing a similar amount of stress. As an outsider, we might look at this example and think about how a smartphone isn't necessary to live, but the medication is. But everyone's reality is their own, and when you can concede that someone's reality isn't like yours and you are okay with that, then you have overcome a significant barrier to becoming more aware of the perception process.

Empathy versus Sympathy

Empathy and sympathy are concepts that are often confused, but the difference between the two is very important. **Empathy** is the ability to share someone else's feelings, experiences, or emotions (Psychiatric Medical Care Communications Team, 2023). Empathy is not easy and involves a high level of vulnerability to listen without judging others (Psychiatric Medical Care Communications Team, 2023).

Sympathy is different in that it separates you from the other person. Sympathy involves the feeling that you are sorry and care about the trouble and misfortune of another person, but it places the person struggling in a place of judgement more than understanding (Psychiatric Medical Care Communications Team, 2023). The video below by Brené Brown helps to explains the difference between these two important concepts.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=281#oembed-1

(Brown, 2013)

Beware of Stereotypes and Prejudice

Stereotypes are sets of beliefs that we develop about groups, which we then apply to individuals from that group. They are schemata that are taken too far because they reduce and ignore a person's individuality and the diversity present within a larger group of people. Stereotypes can be based on cultural identities, physical appearance, behaviour, speech, beliefs, and values, among other things, and are often caused by a lack of information about the target person or group (Schaedig, 2020). Stereotypes can be positive, negative, or neutral, but they all run the risk of lowering the quality of our communication.

While the negative effects of stereotypes are pretty straightforward in that they devalue people and prevent us from adapting and revising our schemata, positive stereotypes can also have negative consequences. For example, the "model minority" stereotype has been applied to some Asian cultures in the United States. Seemingly positive stereotypes of Asian Americans as hardworking, intelligent, and willing to adapt to "mainstream" culture are not always received as positive and can lead some people within these communities to feel objectified, ignored, or overlooked.

Stereotypes can also lead to double standards that point to larger cultural and social inequalities. There are many more words to describe a sexually active female than a male, and the words used for females are disproportionately negative, while those used for males are more positive. Since stereotypes are generally based on a lack of information, we must take it upon ourselves to gain exposure to new kinds of information and people, which will likely require us to move out of our comfort zones. When we do meet people, we should base the impressions we make on describable behaviour rather than inferred or second-hand information. When stereotypes negatively influence our overall feelings and attitudes about a person or group, prejudiced thinking results.

Prejudice is negative feelings or attitudes toward people based on their identity or identities. Prejudice can have individual or widespread negative effects. At the individual level, a hiring manager may not hire a young person with a physical disability (even though that would be illegal if it were the only reason), which negatively affects that one individual. However, if pervasive cultural thinking that people with physical disabilities are unsuitable to be employees leads hiring managers all over the country to make similar decisions, then the prejudice has become a social injustice.

Engage in Self-Reflection

A good way to improve your perceptions and increase your communication competence in general is to engage in **self-**

reflection. If a communication encounter doesn't go well and you want to know why, your self-reflection will be much more useful if you are aware of and can recount your thoughts and actions.

Self-reflection can also help us increase our cultural awareness. Our thought process regarding culture is often "other focused," meaning that the culture of the other person or group is what stands out in our perception. However, the old adage "Know thyself" is appropriate, as we become more aware of our own culture by better understanding other cultures and perspectives. Developing cultural self-awareness can take us out of our comfort zones, and listening to people who are different from us is a key component in developing self-knowledge. This may be uncomfortable because our taken-for-granted or deeply held beliefs and values may become less certain when we see the multiple perspectives that exist.

We can also become more aware of how our self-concepts influence how we perceive others. We often hold other people to the same standards we hold ourselves to, or we assume that their self-concept should be consistent with our own. For example, if you consider yourself a neat, well-groomed person and think that sloppiness in your personal appearance would show that you are unmotivated, rude, and lazy, then you are likely to judge a person who doesn't have a tidy appearance the same way. So asking questions like "Is my impression based on how this person wants to be, or how I think this person should want to be?" can lead to enlightening moments of self-reflection.

Being able to see situations from a variety of perspectives increases your cognitive complexity. **Cognitive complexity** involves being able to construct different frameworks and perspectives for seeing an issue (Medvene et al., 2006). This will also help improve our empathy for others because it increases our understanding of others' actions (Medvene et al., 2006). Asking questions about the perceptions you are making is an integral part of perception checking, which we will discuss next.

Checking Perception

Perception checking is a strategy to help us monitor our reactions to and perceptions about people and communication. There are some internal and external strategies we can use to engage in perception checking. In terms of internal strategies, review the various influences on perception that we have learned about in this chapter and always be willing to ask yourself "What is influencing the perceptions I am making right now?" Even being aware of what influences are acting on our perceptions makes us more aware of what is happening in the perception process. In terms of external strategies, we can use other people to help verify our perceptions.

Perception checking helps us slow down the perception and communication processes and allows us to have more control over both (*Interpersonal communication*, 2012). Perception checking involves being able to describe what is happening in a given situation, providing multiple interpretations of events or behaviours, and asking yourself and others questions for clarification (*Interpersonal communication*, 2012). Some of this process happens inside our heads, and some happens through interaction. The video below summarizes the process of perception checking and provides real-world examples of its use.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=281#oembed-2

(Barton Blueprint for Emotional Intelligence, 2021)

The steps of perception checking:

- **Step 1:** Describe the behaviour or situation without evaluating or judging it.
- **Step 2:** Think of two possible interpretations of the behaviour, being aware of attributions and other influences on the perception process.
- **Step 3:** Verify what happened and ask for clarification from the other person's perspective. Be aware of punctuation, since the other person likely experienced the event differently than you.

(*Interpersonal communication*, 2012)

Pillow Method

The **pillow method** was initially developed by a group of Japanese school children and was discussed by Alders et al. (2021) in their book *Look: Looking Out, Looking In*. This method is beneficial when the situation is too complex for perception checking and also works to increase cognitive complexity. This tool is used to help build empathy and understanding of others and their point of view. It involves viewing a situation from five positions (four sides and a middle), similar to a pillow, and enables you to gain understanding of an issue from various perspectives:

Position 1: "I'm right, you're wrong" – This involves seeing the benefits of your position and the faults in the other position.

Position 2: "You're right, I'm wrong" – You find the best possible arguments for the other side's point of view and the faults in your own position.

Position 3: "Both right, both wrong" – From this position, you find the merits and issues with both sides of the argument.

Position 4: "The issue isn't as important as it seems" – Many issues are not as important as we feel they are. Although it may be difficult, consider how time will change how you feel about the issue and that you have possibly made the issue larger than it is.

Position 5: "There is truth in all four perspectives" – Consider the situation and the other four positions we have discussed above. At this point, it is common for people to realize that each position has some merit.

After viewing the issue or situation from all positions and perspectives, you will likely gain some insight and empathy into the situation.

(Adler et al., 2021)

As we have learned in this chapter, the perceptions that we make of others and ourselves and that others make of us affects how we communicate and act. We have had a chance to learn about the perception process, how we perceive others, and how we perceive and present ourselves. The strategies discussed above are ways we can improve our perceptions and ultimately make ourselves more competent communicators.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Which barrier(s) to self-perception do you think present the most challenge to you and why? What can you do to overcome these barriers?
2. Which barrier(s) to perceiving others do you think present the most challenge to you and why? What

can you do to overcome these barriers?

3. Recount a recent communication encounter in which perception checking or the pillow method could have led to a more positive result.
    - As you consider the encounter, go through the steps of either perception checking or the pillow method.
    - What could you have done differently? What could have been done the same?
    - Would the results have been the same?

Attribution

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2.6 Review

Use the following review activities to assess your knowledge of the material in this chapter. These activities, along with the questions found throughout the chapter, should provide a thorough assessment of your understanding of the role of perception in communication.

Matching Review

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=283#h5p-3

Review Quiz

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=283#h5p-4

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CHAPTER III

VERBAL COMMUNICATION AND LISTENING

3.1 Introduction to Verbal Communication and Listening

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to

1. Articulate how language develops and affects meaning
2. Discuss strategies for improving verbal communication and word choice
3. Describe the listening process and barriers to effective listening
4. Identifying effective listening strategies
5. Describe active listening and its benefits
6. Discuss how language, listening, and culture affect one another

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, we will learn about the relationship between language and meaning, how we come to know the content and rules of verbal communication, the functions of language, how to use words well, and the relationship between language and culture. Along with language, we will also discuss listening, which is the primary means through which we learn new information. The act of listening is important to our relationships with others, and listening to what others say about us helps us develop an accurate self-concept. This can help us more strategically communicate our identity needs in order to project to others our desired self. Overall, improving our language and listening skills can help us be better students, better relational partners, and more successful professionals.

3.2 Language Basics

The relationship between language and meaning is not a straightforward one. One reason for this complicated relationship is the limitlessness of modern language systems like English (Crystal, 2006). Language is productive in the sense that there are an infinite number of utterances we can make by connecting existing words in new ways. In addition, there is no limit to a language's vocabulary because new words are coined daily. Of course, words aren't the only things we need to communicate, and although verbal and nonverbal communication are closely related in terms of how we make meaning, nonverbal communication is not productive and limitless. Although we can only make a few hundred physical signs, we have about a million words in the English language. So with all this possibility, how does communication generate meaning?

Generating meaning is a central part of the definition of communication. We arrive at meaning through the interaction between our nervous and sensory systems and some stimulus outside them. It is here, between what the communication models we discussed earlier labelled as encoding and decoding, that meaning is generated as sensory information is interpreted. The indirect and sometimes complicated relationship between language and meaning can lead to confusion, frustration, or even humour. We may even experience a little of all three, when we stop to think about how there are some 25 definitions available to tell us the meaning of the word "meaning"! (Crystal, 2006). Because language and symbols are the primary vehicle for our communication, it is important that we not take the components of our verbal communication for granted.

The following video will provide an overview of the topic of language and will introduce many of the concepts discussed in this chapter.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=480#oembed-1

(Study Hall, 2022)

Language Is Symbolic

Our language system is primarily made up of symbols. A **symbol** is something that stands in for or represents something else. Symbols can be communicated verbally (speaking the word *hello*), in writing (putting the letters *H-E-L-L-O* together), or nonverbally (waving your hand back and forth). In any case, the symbols we use stand in for something else, like a physical object or an idea—they do not actually correspond to the thing being referenced in any direct way. Unlike hieroglyphics in ancient Egypt, where there was often a literal relationship between the written symbol and the object being referenced, the symbols used in modern languages look nothing like the object or idea to which they refer.

Image 3.1

The symbols we use combine to form language systems or codes. **Codes** are culturally agreed on and ever-changing systems of symbols that help us organize, understand, and generate meaning (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). There are about 6,000 language codes used in the world, and about 40% of those (approximately 2,400) are only spoken and do not have a written version (Crystal, 2006). Remember that for most of human history, the spoken word and nonverbal communication were the primary means of communication. Even languages with a written component didn't see widespread literacy, or the ability to read and write, until a little over 100 years ago.

The symbolic nature of our communication is a quality unique to humans. Since the words we use do not have to correspond directly to anything in our "reality," we can communicate in abstractions. This property of language is called **displacement** and specifically refers to being able to talk about events that are removed in space or time from a speaker and a situation (Crystal, 2006). Animals communicate but do so in a much simpler way that is only a reaction to stimulus. Further, animal communication is very limited and lacks the productive quality of language that we discussed earlier.

The Triangle of Meaning

The **triangle of meaning** is a model of communication that indicates the relationship among a thought, a symbol, and a referent, and highlights the indirect relationship between the symbol and the referent (Richards & Ogden, 1923). The **thought** is the concept or idea a person references. The **symbol** is the word that represents the thought, and the **referent** is the object or idea to which the symbol refers. This model is useful for us as communicators because when we are aware of the indirect relationship between symbols and referents, we are aware of how common misunderstandings occur. Consider this example: Jasper and Priya have been thinking about getting a dog, so each of them is having a similar thought. They are each using the same symbol, the word *dog*, to communicate about their thought. Their referents, however, are different. Jasper is thinking about a small dog like a dachshund, and Priya is thinking about a larger dog such as a Labrador retriever. Since the word *dog* doesn't refer to one specific object in our reality, it is possible for them to have the same thought and use the same symbol but end up in an awkward moment when they get to the animal shelter and fall in love with their respective referents only to find out that the other person didn't have the same thing (the kind of dog) in mind.

Being aware of this indirect relationship between symbol and referent, we can try to compensate for it by getting clarification. Priya might ask Jasper, "What kind of dog do you have in mind?" This question would allow Jasper to describe his referent, which would allow for more shared understanding. If Jasper responds, "Well, I like short-haired dogs, and we need a dog that will work well in an apartment," then there's still quite a range of referents. Priya could ask questions for clarification, like "Sounds like you're saying that a smaller dog might be better. Is that right?" Getting to a place of shared understanding can be difficult, even when we define our symbols and describe our referents.

Definitions

Definitions help us narrow the meaning of particular symbols, which also narrows a symbol's possible referents. They also provide more words (symbols) for which we must determine a referent. If a concept is abstract and the words used to define it are also abstract, then a definition may be useless. Have you ever been caught in a verbal maze as you look up an unfamiliar word, only to find that the definition contains more unfamiliar words? Although this can be frustrating, definitions do serve a purpose.

Words have denotative and connotative meanings. A **denotative meaning** refers to definitions that are accepted by the language group as a whole; that is, the dictionary definition of a word. For example, the denotative meaning, or **denotation**, of the word *hot* is "to give off or possess heat." Another denotation of *hot* is in reference to someone's attractiveness. A more abstract word like *change* might be more difficult to understand because of the multiple denotations. Since both *hot* and *change* have multiple meanings, they are considered **polysemic words**. **Equivocal language** is similar to polysemic words in that they are words, expressions, or phrases that can have more than one accepted definition (Merriam-Webster, 2023)

Monosemic words have only one use in a language, which makes their denotation straightforward. Specialized academic or scientific words, like *monosemic*, are often monosemic, but there are fewer commonly used monosemic words, for example, *handkerchief*. As you might guess based on our discussion of the complexity of language so far, monosemic words are far outnumbered by polysemic words.

Connotation refers to definitions that are based on emotion- or experience-based associations people have with a word. To go back to our previous words, *change* can have positive or negative connotations depending on a person's experiences. A person who just ended a long-term relationship may think of change as good or bad depending on what they thought about their former partner. Even monosemic words like *handkerchief* that only have one denotation can have multiple connotations. A handkerchief can conjure up thoughts of dainty British women or disgusting snot rags.

The Rules of Language

Grammar refers to the rules that govern how words are used to make phrases and sentences. Someone would likely know what you mean by the question "Where's the remote control?" but "The control remote where's?" is likely to be unintelligible or at least confusing (Crystal, 2006). Knowing the rules of grammar is important to be able to write and speak to be understood, but knowing these rules isn't enough to make you an effective communicator. Even though teachers have long enforced the idea that there are right and wrong ways to write and say words, there really isn't anything inherently right or wrong about the individual choices we make in our language use. Rather, it is our collective agreement that gives power to the rules that govern language.

There are also certain specific rules that fall within the realm of grammar (Ramoo, 2021). These rules were discussed in the video at the top of the page and include the following:

- **Phonetic rules:** Rules governing the way words or phrases are said; for example, how to pronounce words and where to place the emphasis (Ramoo, 2021).
- **Syntactic rules:** Rules that govern the way symbols can be arranged as opposed to the meanings of those symbols; for

example, how words are organized in a sentence (Ramoo, 2021).

- **Semantic rules:** Rules that govern the meaning of language as opposed to its structure (Ramoo, 2021); for example, what a given word means within a society rather than where it is placed in a sentence.
- **Pragmatic rules:** Rules that help communicators understand how messages can be used and interpreted in a given context (Ramoo, 2021); for example, what a promise is and when to use it.

Looking back to our discussion of connotation, we can see how individuals play a role in how meaning and language are related, since when we communicate, we each bring our own emotional and experiential associations with a word; these associations are often more meaningful than a dictionary definition. In addition, we have quite a bit of room for creativity, play, and resistance with the symbols we use. Have you ever had a secret code with a friend that only the two of you knew? This can allow you to use a code word in a public place to get meaning across to the other person who is "in the know" without anyone else understanding the message. The fact that you can take a word, give it another meaning, have someone else agree on that meaning, and then use the word in your own fashion clearly shows that meaning is in people rather than in words.

The Functions of Language

What utterances make up our daily verbal communication? Some of our words convey meaning, some convey emotions, and some actually produce actions. Language also provides endless opportunities for fun because of its limitless, sometimes nonsensical, and always changing nature. In this section, we will learn about the different functions of language.

Language Is Expressive

Verbal communication helps us meet various needs through our ability to express ourselves. In terms of **instrumental needs**, we use verbal communication to ask questions that provide us with specific information. We also use verbal communication to describe things, people, and ideas. Verbal communication helps us inform, persuade, and entertain others. It is also through our verbal expressions that our personal relationships are formed. Verbal expressions help us communicate our observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs (McKay et al., 1995).

- **Expressing observations:** When we express observations, we report on the sensory information we are taking or have taken in. Eyewitness testimony is a good example of communicating observations. Witnesses are not supposed to make judgements or offer conclusions; they should only communicate factual knowledge as they experienced it. For example, a witness could say, "I saw a white Ford Explorer leaving my neighbour's house at 10:30 p.m." When you are trying to make sense of an experience, expressing observations in a **descriptive** rather than an **evaluative** way can lessen defensiveness, which facilitates competent communication.
- **Expressing thoughts:** When we express thoughts, we draw conclusions based on what we have experienced. In the perception process, this is similar to the **interpretation** step. We take various observations and evaluate and interpret them to assign them meaning (a conclusion). Whereas our observations are based on sensory information (what we saw, what we read, what we heard), thoughts are connected to our beliefs (what we think is true or false), our attitudes (what we

like and dislike), and our values (what we think is right or wrong or good or bad). Jury members (Image 3.2) are expected to express thoughts based on reported observations to help reach a conclusion about someone's guilt or innocence. A juror might express the following thought: "The neighbour who saw the car leaving the night of the crime seemed credible. And the defendant seemed to have a shady past—I think he's trying to hide something." Sometimes people intentionally or unintentionally express thoughts as if they were feelings.

Image 3.2

- **Expressing feelings:** When we express feelings, we communicate our emotions. Expressing feelings is a difficult part of verbal communication because there are many **social norms** about how, why, when, where, and to whom we express our emotions. Norms for emotional expression also vary based on nationality and other cultural identities and even characteristics such as age and gender. In terms of age, young children are typically freer to express positive and negative emotions in public.

- **Expressing needs:** When we express needs, we are communicating in an instrumental way to help us get things done or to acquire something. Since we almost always know our needs better than others do, it's important for us to be able to convey those needs to others. Expressing needs can help us get a project done at work or help us navigate the changes of a long-term romantic partnership. Not expressing needs can lead to feelings of abandonment, frustration, or resentment. For example, if one romantic partner expresses the thought "I think we're moving too quickly in our relationship" but doesn't also express a need, the other person in the relationship doesn't have a guide for what to do in response to the expressed thought. Stating "I need to spend some time with my friends this weekend. Would you mind if I went out with them?" would likely make the expression more effective. Be cautious of letting evaluations or judgements sneak into your expressions of need. Saying "I need you to stop suffocating me!" really expresses a thought-feeling mixture more than a need.

Language Expresses Our Identities

Words and phrases express who we are and contribute to the impressions that others make of us. We've already learned about identity needs and identity management and how we all use verbal communication strategically to create a desired impression. For example, consider the label *nerd.* A person might identify as a *nerd* and be happy to apply the label to themselves, but would that person be affected differently if someone else called them a *nerd*?

The power of language to express our identities varies depending on the origin of the label (self-chosen or imposed by others) and the context. People are usually comfortable with the language they use to describe their own identities, but they may have issues with the labels others place on them. In terms of context, many people express their Irish identity on St. Patrick's Day (Image 3.3), but they may not think much about it over the rest of the year. There are many examples of people who have taken a label that was imposed on them, one that may have negative connotations, and intentionally used it in ways that counter previous meanings.

Image 3.3

Language Affects Our Credibility

One of the goals of this chapter is to help you be more competent with your verbal communication. People make assumptions about your credibility based on how you speak and what you say. We've learned that meaning is in people rather than words and that the rules that govern verbal communication, like the rules of grammar, are arbitrary, but these norms still mean something. You don't have to be a perfect grammarian to be perceived as credible. In fact, if you followed the grammar rules for written communication to the letter, you would actually sound pretty strange, since our typical way of speaking isn't as formal and structured as writing. But you still have to support your ideas and explain the conclusions you make in order to be seen as competent, and you have to use language clearly and be accountable for what you say in order to be seen as trustworthy. Using informal language and breaking social norms wouldn't enhance your credibility during a professional job interview, but it might with your friends at a party. Politicians know that the way they speak affects their credibility, but they also know that using words that are too scientific or academic can lead people to perceive them as overly intellectual, which would hurt their credibility. People in leadership positions need to be able to use language to put people at ease, relate to others, and still appear confident and competent.

Language Is Performative

Some language is actually more like an action than a packet of information. Saying, "I promise," "I guarantee," or "I pledge" does more than convey meaning—it communicates intent. Such utterances are called **commissives** because they mean a speaker is committed to a certain course of action (Crystal, 2006). Of course, promises can be broken, and there can be consequences, but other verbal communication is granted official power that can guarantee action. The two simple words "*I do*" can mean that a person has agreed to an oath before taking the witness stand in court or assuming a political position. In a wedding ceremony, it can also mean that two people are now bound in a relationship recognized by the government and/or a religious community (Image 3.4). These two words, if said in the right context and in front of the right person, such as a judge or a religious official, bring with them obligations that cannot be undone without additional steps and potential negative repercussions. In that sense, language is much more than mere words.

Image 3.4

Performative language can also be a means of control, especially in legal contexts. In some cases, the language that makes our laws is intentionally vague. In courts all over the nation, the written language intersects with spoken language as lawyers advocate for particular interpretations of written laws. The utterances of judges and juries set precedents for reasonable interpretations that will then help decide future cases. Imagine how powerful, to a defendant awaiting their verdict, the words "*We the jury find the defendant …*" seem. The sentences handed down by judges following a verdict are also performative because those words impose fines and penalties such as jail time. Some language is deemed so powerful that it is regulated. Hate speech, slander, libel, and defamation are considered powerful enough to actually do damage to a person and have therefore been criminalized.

Language Is Dynamic

As we have already learned, language is essentially limitless. We may create a one-of-a-kind sentence combining words in new ways and never know it. Aside from the endless structural possibilities, the meaning of words changes over time, and new words are created daily.

- **Neologisms** are newly coined or newly used words. Newly coined words are those that were just brought into linguistic existence. Newly used words make their way into languages in several ways, including borrowing and changing structure. *Taking* is actually a more fitting descriptor than *borrowing*, since we take words but don't really give them back. In any case, borrowing words is the primary means through which languages expand. English is a good case in point because most of its vocabulary is borrowed from other languages and doesn't reflect the language's Germanic origins—English has been called the "vacuum cleaner of languages" (Crystal, 2006). Its borrowed words include *chic* from French, *karaoke* from Japanese, and *caravan* from Arabic, among many others. Other languages also borrow from English—*weekend* is a popular English word now used in a number of other languages.
- **Slang** is a great example of the dynamic nature of language. Slang refers to new or adapted words that are specific to a group, context, and/or time period. It is regarded as less formal and more representative of people's creative play with language. Research has shown that only about 10% of the slang terms that emerge over a 15-year period survive. Many more take their place, though, as new slang words are created using inversion, reduction, or old-fashioned creativity (Allan &

Burridge, 2006). **Inversion** is a form of word play that produces slang words like *sick*, *wicked*, and *bad* that actually refer to the opposite of their typical, more formal meaning. **Reduction** creates slang words such as *pic*, *sec*, and *later* from *picture*, *second*, and *see you later*. New slang words often represent what is edgy, current, or simply relevant to the daily lives of a group of people.

Language Is Relational

We use verbal communication to initiate, maintain, and terminate our interpersonal relationships. The first few exchanges with a potential romantic partner or friend help us size the other person up and decide whether or not we want to pursue a relationship or not. We then use verbal communication to remind others how we feel about them and to check in with them, engaging in relationship maintenance through language use. When negative feelings arrive and persist, or for many other reasons, we often use verbal communication to end a relationship.

Interpersonally, verbal communication is key to bringing people together and maintaining relationships. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, our use of words like I, *you*, *we*, *our*, and *us* affects our relationships. **"We" language** includes the words *we*, *our*, and *us* and can be used to promote a feeling of inclusiveness. "**I" language** can be useful when expressing thoughts, needs, and feelings because it leads us to "own" our expressions and avoid the tendency to mistakenly attribute the cause of our thoughts, needs, and feelings to others. Communicating emotions using "I" language may also facilitate emotion sharing by not making our conversational partner feel at fault or defensive. For example, instead of saying, "You're making me mad!" you could say, "I'm starting to feel really angry because we can't agree on this." Conversely, "**you" language** can lead people to become defensive and feel attacked, which can be divisive and result in feelings of interpersonal separation. **"But"**

statements are also to be avoided because they negate everything that was said before, even if it was positive or intentional (Schafler, 2018). For example, "I'm sorry but …" ends up saying that you possibly are not really sorry, and this may result in others becoming defensive. Replacing "but" with "and" helps a person to clearly communicate that two ideas exist, which invites further communication as opposed to negating, which draws a line in the sand for defensiveness; for example, saying, "I'm sorry, and I don't see things the same way, can we talk about this?'"

Moving from the interpersonal to the sociocultural level, we can see that speaking the same language can bring people together. When a person is surrounded by people who do not speak the same language, it can be very comforting to run into another person who does. Even if the two people are strangers, the ease of linguistic compatibility is comforting and can quickly facilitate a social bond. Language helps shape our social reality, so a common language leads to some similar perspectives. Of course, there are individual differences within a language community, but there is power in shared language to unite people.

Language Can Separate Us

Whether it's criticism, teasing, or language differences, verbal communication can also lead to feelings of separation. Language differences alone do not present insurmountable barriers. We can learn other languages with time and effort, there are other people who can translate and serve as bridges across languages, and we can also communicate nonverbally in the absence of linguistic compatibility. People who speak the same language can intentionally use language to separate. The words *us* and *them* can be a powerful start to separation.

At the interpersonal level, unsupportive messages can make others respond defensively, which can lead to feelings of separation and the actual separation or dissolution of a relationship. It is impossible to be supportive in our communication all the time, but consistently unsupportive messages can hurt others' self-esteem, escalate conflict, and lead to defensiveness. People who regularly use unsupportive messages may create a toxic win-lose dynamic in a relationship.

Common Types of Unsupportive Messages

- **Global labels:** "*You're a liar.*" Labelling someone irresponsible, untrustworthy, selfish, or lazy calls their whole identity as a person into question. Such sweeping judgements and generalizations are sure to only escalate a negative situation.
- **Sarcasm:** "*No, you didn't miss anything in class on Wednesday. We just sat here and looked at each other.*" Even though sarcasm is often disguised as humour, it usually represents passive-aggressive behaviour and indirectly communicates negative feelings.
- **Dragging up the past:** "*I should have known not to trust you when you never paid me back that $100 I let you borrow.*" Bringing up negative past experiences is a tactic used by people when they don't want to discuss a current situation. Sometimes people have built up negative feelings that are suddenly released by a seemingly small thing in the moment.
- **Negative comparisons:** "*Jade graduated from college without any credit card debt. I guess you're just not as responsible as she is.*" Holding a person up to the supposed standards or characteristics of another person can lead to feelings of inferiority and resentment. Parents and teachers may unfairly compare children to their siblings.
- **Judgmental "you" messages:** "*You're never going to be able to hold down a job.*" Accusatory messages are usually generalized overstatements about a person that go beyond labelling but still do not describe specific behaviour in a productive way.
- **Threats:** "*If you don't stop texting back and forth, both of you are going to regret it.*" Threatening someone with violence or some other negative consequence usually signals the end of

productive communication. Aside from the potential legal consequences, threats usually overcompensate for a person's insecurity.

Now that we have had a chance to look at some of the concepts, rules, meaning, and functions of language, in the next section, we will look at ways we can competently use language to communicate with others.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Trace the history of a word (its etymology) like we did with *calculate* earlier in the chapter. Discuss how the meaning of the word (the symbol) has changed as it has gotten further from its original meaning. Two interesting words to trace are *hazard* and *phony*.
2. Think of some words that have strong connotations for you. How does your connotation differ from the denotation? How might your connotation differ from another person's?
3. A key function of verbal communication is to express our identities. Identify labels or other words that are important for your identity in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic. For example, you might choose *honours student* for the academic context, *trainee* for the professional context, *girlfriend* for the personal context, and *independent* for the civic context.
4. Review the types of unsupportive messages

discussed earlier. Which of them do you think has the potential to separate people the most? Why? Which one do you have the most difficulty avoiding (directing towards others)? Why?

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3.3 Improving Word Use

Have you ever gotten lost because someone gave you directions that didn't make sense to you? Have you ever puzzled over the instructions for how to put something like a bookshelf or a barbecue together? When people don't use words well, there are consequences that range from mild annoyance to legal action. When people do use words well, they can be inspiring and make us better people. In this section, we will learn how to use words well by using them clearly, affectively, and ethically.

Using Words Clearly

The level of clarity with which we speak varies depending on whom we are talking to, the situation we're in, and our own intentions and motives. We sometimes make a deliberate effort to speak as clearly as possible. We can indicate this concern for clarity nonverbally by slowing our rate of speech and increasing our volume, or verbally by saying, "Frankly, …" or "Let me be clear, … ." Sometimes it can be difficult to speak clearly; for example, when we are speaking about something with which we are unfamiliar. Emotions and distractions can also interfere with clarity. Being aware of the varying levels of abstraction within language can help us create clearer and more complete messages.

Ladder of Abstraction

The **Ladder of Abstraction** refers to the continuum of language from **concrete** to **abstract**. Another way to view this is that concrete words are more specific and clear and abstract words are more vague. As we follow a concept up the Ladder of Abstraction, more and more of the "essence" of the original object is lost or left out, which leaves more room for interpretation, which can then lead to misunderstanding. This process of abstracting—of leaving things out—allows us to communicate more effectively because it serves as a shorthand that keeps us from having a completely unmanageable language filled with millions of words, each referring to one specific thing (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990). However, abstracting requires us to use context and often other words to generate shared meaning. Some words are more directly related to a concept or idea than others. If I asked you to take a photo of a book, you could do that. If I asked you to take a photo of "work," you couldn't because *work* is an abstract word that was developed to refer to any number of possibilities from the act of writing a book, to repairing an air conditioner, to fertilizing an organic garden. You could take a photo of any of those things—that is, of people doing work—but you can't take a picture of "work."

Image 3.5

At the lowest level of the Ladder of Abstraction, we have something that is very concrete (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990). At this level we are actually in the moment of experiencing the stimuli that is coming in through our senses. We perceive the actual thing, for example, the concept of a "cow" in front of us, either the actual animal or as an image. It is concrete because it is unmediated, meaning that it is actually the moment of experience. As we move up a level on the ladder, we give the experience a name—we are looking at "Bessie." So now, instead of the direct experience with the "thing" in front of us, we have given the thing a name, which takes us one step away from the direct experience to the use of a more abstract symbol. Now we can talk and think about Bessie even when we aren't directly experiencing her. At the next level, the word "cow" now lumps Bessie in with other bovine creatures that share similar characteristics. As we go on up the ladder, "cow" becomes "livestock," the "livestock" becomes an "asset," and then an "asset" becomes "wealth." Note that it becomes increasingly difficult to define the meaning of the symbol as we go up the ladder, and with each step we lose more of the characteristics of the original concrete experience. Table 3.1 below provides an illustration of the example provided above of the Ladder of Abstraction.

Table 3.1. Example of the Ladder of Abstraction

More Abstract (vague)	Wealth
|	Asset
|	Livestock
|	Bessie
More Concrete (specific)	Cow (direct sensory experience)

When shared referents are important, we should try to use language that is lower on the ladder of abstraction, which means the language is more concrete and specific. Being intentionally concrete is useful when giving directions, for example, and can help prevent misunderstandings. But we sometimes intentionally use abstract language. Because abstract language is often unclear or vague, we can use it as a means of testing out a potential topic (like asking a favour), offering negative feedback indirectly (to avoid hurting someone's feelings or to hint), or avoiding the specifics of a topic.

Definitions and Clarity

Knowing more about the role that **abstraction** plays in the generation of meaning can help us better describe and define the words we use. As we learned earlier, **denotative definitions** are those found in the dictionary—the official or agreed-on definitions. Since definitions are composed of other words, people who compile dictionaries take for granted that there is a certain amount of familiarity with the words they use to define another word, otherwise we would just be going in circles. One challenge we face when defining words is our tendency to go up the ladder of abstraction rather than down (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990). For example, if you are asked to define the word *blue*, you'd likely say it's a colour. If you were then asked what a colour is, you'd say it's a tint or characteristic of the appearance of a particular thing. To define it more clearly by going down the Ladder of Abstraction, you could say, "It's the colour of Frank Sinatra's eyes," or "It's the colour of the sky on a clear day." People often come to understanding more quickly when a definition is descriptive and/or ties into their personal experiences. Definitions aren't useless, but they are usually best when paired with examples.

Jargon refers to specialized words used by a certain group or profession. Since jargon is specialized, it is often difficult to relate to a diverse audience and should therefore be limited when speaking to people from outside the group, or at least be clearly defined when it is used.

Creating Whole Messages

There are four types of **expressions**—observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs. Whole messages include all the relevant types of expressions needed to most effectively communicate in a given situation, including what you see, what you think, what you feel, and what you need (McKay et al., 1995). **Partial messages** are missing a relevant type of expression and can lead to misunderstandings and conflict. **Whole messages** help keep lines of communication open, which can help build solid relationships. People can often figure out a partial message even if they can't readily identify what has been left out. For example, if Omar says to Ivana, "I don't trust Ranjeet any more," Ivana may be turned off or angered by Omar's conclusion (an expression of thought) about their mutual friend. However, if Omar recounts his observation of Ranjeet's behaviour, how that behaviour made him feel, and what he needs from Ivana in this situation, she will be better able to respond.

While partial messages lack the relevant expressions needed to clearly communicate, **contaminated messages** include mixed or misleading expressions (McKay et al., 1995). For example, if Alyssa says to her college-aged daughter, "It looks like you wasted another semester," she has contaminated observations, feelings, and thoughts. Although her statement appears to be an observation, there are underlying messages that would be better brought to the surface. To decontaminate her message and make it more whole and less alienating, Alyssa could more clearly express herself by saying, "Your dad and I talked, and he said you told him you failed your sociology class and are thinking about changing your major" (observation). "I think you're hurting your chances of graduating on time and getting started on your career" (thought). "I feel anxious because you and I are both taking out loans to pay for your education" (feeling).

Messages in which needs are contaminated with observations or feelings can be confusing. For example, if Sanjay says to Cheng, "You're so lucky—you don't have to worry about losing your scholarship over this stupid biology final," it seems like he's expressing an observation, but it's really a thought with an underlying feeling and need. To make the message more whole, Sanjay could bring the need and feeling to the surface by saying "I noticed you did really well on the last exam in our biology class" (observation). "I'm really stressed about the exam next week and the possibility of losing my scholarship if I fail it" (feeling). "Would you be willing to put together a study group with me?" (need). More clarity in language is important, but as we already know, communication isn't just about exchanging information—the words we use also influence our emotions and relationships.

Using Words Affectively

Affective language refers to language used to express a person's feelings and create similar feelings in another person (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990). Affective language can be used intentionally in relational contexts to create or enhance interpersonal bonds and can also be effectively employed in public speaking to engage an audience and motivate them in particular ways. We also use affective language spontaneously and less intentionally. People who "speak from the heart" connect well with others because of the affective nature of their words. Sometimes people become so filled with emotion that they have to express it, and these exclamations usually arouse emotions in others. Hearing someone exclaim, "I'm so happy!" can evoke similar feelings of joy, while hearing someone exclaim, "Why me?!" while sobbing conjures up similar feelings of sadness and frustration. There are also specific linguistic devices that facilitate affective communication.

Image 3.6

Figurative Language

When people say something is a "figure of speech," they are referring to a word or phrase that deviates from expectations in some way in either meaning or usage (Yaguello, 1998). **Figurative language** is the result of breaking **semantic rules**, but in a way that typically enhances meaning or understanding rather than diminishes it. To understand figurative language, a person has to be familiar with the semantic rules of a language and also with social norms and patterns within a cultural or language group, which makes it difficult for non-native speakers to grasp. Figurative language has the ability to convey much meaning in just a few words because some of the meaning lies in the context of usage (what a listener can imply by the deviation from semantic norms) and in the listener (how the listener makes meaning by connecting the figurative language to their personal experience). Some examples of figurative speech include simile, metaphor, and personification.

A **simile** is a direct comparison of two things using the words *like* or *as*. Similes can be very explicit for the purpose of conveying a specific meaning and can help increase clarity and lead people to personally connect to a meaning because they have to visualize the comparison in their mind. For example, Forrest Gump's famous simile, "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get," conjures up feelings of uncertainty and excitement. More direct similes such as "I slept like a baby" and "That bread was as hard as a rock" do not necessarily stir the imagination but still offer an alternative way of expressing something.

A **metaphor** is an implicit comparison of two things that are not alike or are not typically associated—the speaker says something *is* something else. For example, "She has a heart of gold" means that the person is generous and kind, not that that she literally has a heart made of gold. Or "He is a night owl," meaning that the person likes to stay up late at night. Metaphors become meaningful because people realize the speaker's purpose for relating two seemingly disparate ideas. They are figurative devices that can make our writing and speaking richer, but they require a person to balance creative associations among ideas with the common rules of the language if people are expected to figure out the meaning behind the association. A speaker must have the linguistic knowledge and insight to realize when a non-literal use of words or ideas will be more meaningful than a literal and conventional use of those words. Metaphors challenge the imagination, which can cause each person to make sense of the metaphor in their own way (Olbricht, 1968).

Many metaphors come from our everyday experiences. For example, many objects are implicitly compared to human body parts; for example, we say a clock has hands and a face.

Personification means attributing human qualities or the characteristics of other living things to non-human objects or abstract concepts; for example, "The smiled down on the world." This can be useful when trying to make something abstract more concrete and can create a sense of urgency or "realness" out of a concept that is hard for people to understand. Personification has been used successfully in public awareness campaigns because it allows people to identify with something they think might not be relevant to them, as you can see in the following example: "Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a sleeping enemy that lives in many people and will one day wake up and demand your attention if you do not address it now."

Powerless Language

Powerless language is marked by hesitancy and distracts from the certainty of a statement (Johnson, 1987). All the types of powerless language shown below suggest a level of uncertainty and should be avoided because this type of language is not seen as strong communication (Johnson, 1987). There will be situations where it might be appropriate, but over all, phrases like those in the examples below should be avoided if possible.

Examples of types of powerless language (Johnson, 1987):

- **Hedges:** "kinda", "I think", "I'm kinda angry"
- **Hesitations:** "uh," "ah," "um," "Uh, can I talk to you about this?"
- **Tag questions:** "It sure is hot today, *isn't it*?" "You're coming with me, *aren't you*?"
- **Polite forms:** "please," "sir," "ma'am," "Excuse me, sir"
- **Intensifiers:** "so," "very," "I'm not very tired"
- **Disclaimers:** "I know this sounds ridiculous, but …"

Evocative Language

Vivid language captures people's attention and their imagination by conveying emotions and action. Think of the array of mental images that a poem or a well-told story from a friend can conjure up. **Evocative language** can also lead us to have physical reactions. Words like *shiver* and *heartbroken* can bring up previous physical sensations related to the words. As a speaker, there may be times when creating a positive or negative reaction could be beneficial. Evoking a sense of calm could help you talk a friend through troubling health news. Evoking a sense of agitation and anger could help you motivate an audience to action. When we are conversing with a friend or speaking to an audience, we are primarily engaging others' visual and auditory senses. Evocative language can help your conversational partner or audience members feel, smell, or taste something as well as hear it and see it. Good writers know how to use words effectively and affectively. A well-written story, whether it is a book or screenplay, will contain all the previous elements.

Using Words Ethically

We have learned that communication is irreversible. We have also learned that, among other things, the National Communication Association's "Credo for Ethical Communication" states that we should be accountable for the long- and short-term effects of our communication (NCA, 1999). The way we talk, the words we choose to use, and the actions we take after we are finished speaking are all important aspects of communication ethics. Knowing that language can have real effects for people increases our need to be aware of the ethical implications of what we say. In this section, we will focus on **civility** and **accountability**.

Civility

Civility means being polite and courteous in our behaviour and speech. However, strong emotions regarding our own beliefs, attitudes, and values can sometimes lead to incivility in our verbal communication. **Incivility** occurs when a person deviates from established social norms and can take many forms, including insults, bragging, bullying, gossiping, swearing, deception, and defensiveness, among others (Miller, 2001). Some people lament that we live in a time when civility is diminishing, but because standards and expectations for what is considered civil communication have changed over time, this isn't the only time such claims have been made (Miller, 2001). As individualism and affluence have increased in many societies, so have the number of idiosyncratic identities that people feel they have the right to express. These increases may contribute to the impression that society is becoming less civil, when in fact it is just becoming different. We tend to assume other people are like us, and we may be disappointed or offended when we realize they are not. Cultural changes have probably contributed to making people less willing to engage in self-restraint, which again would be seen as uncivil by people who prefer more restrained and self-controlled expression (Miller, 2001).

Image 3.7

Some journalists, media commentators, and scholars have argued that the "flaming" that happens on comment sections of websites and blogs is a type of verbal incivility that presents a threat to our democracy (Brooks & Geer, 2007). Researchers have identified several aspects of online language use that are typically viewed as negative: name calling, character assassination, and the use of obscene language

(Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). So what contributes to such uncivil behaviour both online and offline? The following are some common individual and situational influences that may lead to breaches of civility (Miller, 2001).

- **Individual differences:** Some people differ in their interpretations of civility in various settings, and some people have personality traits that may lead to actions deemed uncivil on a more regular basis.
- **Ignorance:** In some cases, especially in novel situations involving uncertainty, people may not know what the social norms and expectations are.
- **Lack of skill:** Even when we know how to behave, we may not be able to do it. Frustration may lead a person to revert to undesirable behaviour such as engaging in personal attacks during a conflict because they don't know what else to do.
- **Lapse of control:** Self-control is not an unlimited resource. Even when people know how to behave and have the skill to respond to a situation appropriately, they may not do so. People who are careful to monitor their behaviour can have occasional slip-ups.
- **Negative intent:** Some people, in an attempt to break with conformity or challenge societal norms, or for self-benefit (publicly embarrassing someone in order to look cool or edgy), are openly uncivil. Such behaviour can also result from mental or psychological stress or illness.

One feature of communicative incivility is **polarizing language**—language that presents people, ideas, or situations as polar opposites. Such language exaggerates differences and overgeneralizes. Situations are rarely black or white, right or wrong, or good or bad. Only seeing two values and clearly accepting one and rejecting another indicates a lack of sophisticated or critical thinking. We don't have to accept every viewpoint as right and valid, and we can hold strongly to our own beliefs and defend them without ignoring other possibilities or rejecting or alienating others. A person who says, “All police are corrupt,” is just as wrong as the police officer who says, “All drug users are scum.” By avoiding polarizing language, we keep a more open mind, which may lead us to learn something new. A citizen may have a personal story about a negative encounter with a police officer that could enlighten us on their perspective, but the statement that all police are corrupt falsely overgeneralizes that experience. Avoiding polarizing language can help us avoid polarized thinking, and the new information we learn may help us to better understand and advocate for our position. Avoiding sweeping generalizations allows us to speak more clearly and hopefully avoid defensive reactions from others that result from such blanket statements.

Image 3.8

Accountability

The complexity of our verbal language system allows us to present inferences as facts and mask judgements within seemingly objective or oblique language. As an ethical speaker and a critical listener, you must be able to distinguish between facts, inferences, and judgements (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990). **Inferences** are conclusions based on thoughts or speculation but not direct observation. **Facts** are conclusions based on direct observation or group consensus. **Judgements** are expressions of approval or disapproval that are subjective and not verifiable.

Linguists have noted that a frequent source of miscommunication is **inference-observation confusion**, or the misperception of an inference (a conclusion based on limited information) as an observation (an observed or agreed-on fact) (Haney, 1992). We can see the possibility for such confusion in the following example: If a student posts on a instructor-rating site the statement "This instructor grades unfairly and plays favourites," then they are presenting an inference and a judgement that could easily be interpreted as a fact. By using some of the strategies discussed earlier for speaking clearly, the information can be presented in a more ethical way, for example, by using concrete and descriptive language and owning emotions and thoughts through the use of **"I" language**. To help clarify the message and be more accountable, the student could say, "I worked for three days straight on my final paper and only got a C," which we will assume is a statement of fact. This could then be followed up with "But my friend told me she only worked on hers the day before it was due, and she got an A. I think that's unfair and I feel like my efforts weren't recognized by the instructor." Of the last two statements, the first states what may be a fact (note, however, that the information is secondhand rather than directly observed), and the second states an inferred conclusion and expresses an owned thought and feeling. Sometimes people don't want to mark their statements as inferences because they want to believe them as facts. In this case, the student may have attributed their grade to the instructor's "unfairness" to cover up or avoid thoughts that the friend may be a better student in this subject area, a better writer, or a better student in general.

Distinguishing between facts, inferences, and judgements, however, allows your listeners to better understand your message and judge the merits of it, which makes you more accountable and therefore a more ethical speaker.

The video below provides a overview of "I" and "you" statements and how to use them to communicate with others effectively.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=485#oembed-1

(Drexel University Counseling Center, 2020)

In this section, we have provided some methods that can be used to improve language use and verbal communication. Because an integral component of verbal communication is also listening, we will now discuss the act of listening and how to become better listeners.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Following the example in the Ladder of Abstraction, take a common word that refers to an object (for example, *bicycle* or *smartphone*) and write its meaning, in your own words, at each step from most concrete to most abstract. Discuss how the meaning

changes as the word or idea becomes more abstract and how the word becomes more difficult to define.

2. Identify a situation in which language could be used unethically in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic. Specifically tie your example to civility, polarizing language, swearing, or accountability.
3. Think about a discussion or disagreement that you have had in the past that would have benefited from the use of "I" statements. Consider ways that "I" statements could have been used then and how they could be used in similar future conversations.

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3.4 The Listening Process

Listening is the learned process of receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages. We begin to engage with the listening process long before we engage in any recognizable verbal or nonverbal communication. It is only after listening for months as infants that we begin to consciously practise our own forms of expression. In this section, we will learn more about each stage of the listening process, the main types of listening, and the main listening styles.

The Listening Process

Image 3.9

Listening is a process, and as such, doesn't have a defined start and finish. Like the communication process, listening has cognitive, behavioural, and relational elements and doesn't unfold in a linear, step-by-step fashion. The stages of the listening process are **receiving**, **interpreting**, **recalling**, **evaluating**, and **responding**.

The video below is an introduction to the topic of listening and to much of the content that will be discussed in this section.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded

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from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=489#oembed-1

(Study Hall, 2022)

Receiving

Before we can engage other steps in the listening process, we must take in stimuli through our senses. In any given communication encounter, it is likely that we will return to the **receiving stage**, sometimes referred to as **attending**, many times as we process incoming feedback and new messages. This part of the listening process is more physiological than other parts, which include cognitive and relational elements. We primarily take in information needed for listening through auditory and visual channels. Although we don't often think about visual cues as a part of listening, they influence how we interpret messages. For example, seeing a person's face when we hear their voice allows us to take in nonverbal cues from facial expressions and eye contact. The fact that these visual cues are missing in email, text, and phone interactions presents some difficulties for reading contextual clues into meaning received only through auditory channels.

The chapter on perception discusses some of the ways in which incoming stimuli are filtered. These **perceptual filters** also play a role in listening. Some stimuli never make it in, some are filtered into our subconscious, and others are filtered into various levels of consciousness based on their salience. Recall that **salience** is the degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context and that we tend to find salience in things that are visually or audibly stimulating and that meet our needs or interests. Think about how it's much easier to listen to a lecture on a subject that you find interesting.

It is important to consider **noise** as a factor that influences how we receive messages. Some noise interferes primarily with hearing, which is the physical process of receiving stimuli through internal and external components of the ears and eyes, and some interferes with listening, which is the cognitive process of processing the stimuli taken in during hearing. While hearing leads to listening, hearing and listening are not the same thing. **Environmental noise**, such as other people talking, the sounds of traffic, and music, interferes with the physiological aspects of hearing. **Psychological noise**, like stress and anger, interferes primarily with the cognitive processes of listening. We can enhance our ability to receive, and in turn listen, by trying to minimize noise.

Interpreting

During the **interpreting stage**, sometime referred to as **understanding**, we combine the visual and auditory information we receive and try to make meaning out of that information using **schemata**. The interpreting stage engages cognitive and relational processing as we take in informational, contextual, and relational cues and try to connect them to previous experiences in meaningful ways. It is through the interpreting stage that we begin to understand the stimuli we have received. When we understand something, we are able to attach meaning by connecting information to previous experiences. Through the process of comparing new information with old information, we may also update or revise particular schemata if we find the new information relevant and credible.

If we have difficulty interpreting information, meaning we don't have previous experience or information in our existing schemata to make sense of it, then it is difficult to transfer the information into our long-term memory for later recall. In situations where understanding the information we receive isn't important or isn't a goal, this stage may be fairly short or even skipped. After all, we can move something to our long-term memory by repetition, and then later recall it without ever having understood it. It is possible to earn perfect scores on an exam in an anatomy class in college because you can memorize and recall, for example, all the organs in the digestive system. In fact, you might still be able to do that a decade after the exam. But you might not be able to tell the significance or function of most of those organs, meaning you didn't really get to a level of understanding but simply stored the information for later recall.

Recalling

Our ability to **recall information**, or **remember**, is dependent on some of the physiological limits of how memory works. Overall, our memories are known to be fallible. We forget about half of what we hear immediately after hearing it, recall 35% after eight hours, and recall 20% after a day (Hargie, 2016). Our memory consists of multiple "storage units," including sensory storage, short-term memory, working memory, and long-term memory (Hargie, 2016).

Our sensory storage is very large in terms of capacity but limited in terms of length of storage. We can hold large amounts of unsorted visual information but only for about a tenth of a second. By comparison, we can hold large amounts of unsorted auditory information for longer—up to four seconds. This initial memory storage unit doesn't provide much use for our study of communication because these large but quickly expiring chunks of sensory data are primarily used in reactionary and instinctual ways.

As stimuli are organized and interpreted, they make their way to short-term memory, where they either expire and are forgotten or are transferred to long-term memory. **Short-term memory** is a mental storage capability that can retain stimuli for 20 seconds to one minute. **Long-term memory** is a mental storage capability to which stimuli in short-term memory can be transferred if they are connected to existing schema and in which information can be stored indefinitely (Hargie, 2016). **Working memory** is a temporarily accessed memory storage space that is activated during times of high cognitive demand. When using working memory, we can temporarily store information and process and use it at the same time. This is different from our typical memory function in that information usually has to make it to long-term memory before we can call it back to apply to a current situation. People with good working memories are able to keep recent information in mind, process it, and apply it to other incoming information. This can be very useful during high-stress situations.

Evaluating

When we **evaluate** something, we make judgements about its credibility, completeness, and worth. In terms of **credibility**, we try to determine the degree to which we believe a speaker's statements are correct and/or true. In terms of **completeness**, we try to "read between the lines" and evaluate the message in relation to what we know about the topic or situation being discussed. We evaluate the **worth** of a message by making a value judgement about whether we think the message or idea is good or bad, right or wrong, or desirable or undesirable. All these aspects of evaluating require critical-thinking skills, which we aren't born with but must develop over time through our own personal and intellectual development.

Studying communication is a great way to build your critical-thinking skills because you learn much more about the taken-for-granted aspects of how communication works, which gives you tools to analyze and critique messages, senders, and contexts. Critical-thinking and listening skills also help you take a more proactive role in the communication process rather than being a **passive receiver** of messages that may not be credible, complete, or worthwhile. One danger in the evaluation stage of listening is to focus your evaluative lenses more on the speaker than the message. This can quickly become a barrier to effective listening if we begin to prejudge a speaker based on their identity or characteristics rather than on the content of their message.

Responding

Responding entails sending verbal and nonverbal messages that indicate attentiveness and understanding or a lack thereof. From our earlier discussion of the communication model, you may be able to connect this part of the listening process to **feedback**.

Image 3.10

We send verbal and nonverbal feedback while another person is talking and after they are finished. **Back-channel cues** are the verbal and nonverbal signals we send while someone is talking and can consist of verbal cues like “uh-huh,” “oh,” and “right,” or nonverbal cues like direct eye contact, head nods, and leaning forward. Back-channel cues are generally a form of positive feedback that indicates others are actively listening. People also send cues intentionally and unintentionally that indicate they aren't listening. If another person is looking away, fidgeting, texting, or turned away, we will likely interpret those responses negatively.

The Importance of Listening

Understanding how listening works provides the foundation we need to explore why we listen, including the various types and styles of listening. In general, listening helps us achieve all the communication goals (physical, instrumental, relational, and identity) that we learned about in Chapter 1 and is also important in academic, professional, and personal contexts.

Image 3.11

In terms of academics, poor listening skills were shown to contribute significantly to failure in a person's first year of college (Zabava & Wolvin, 1993). In general, students with high scores for listening ability have greater academic achievement. Poor listening skills, lack of conciseness, and inability to give constructive feedback have been identified as potential communication challenges in professional contexts. Even though listening education is lacking in our society, research has shown that introductory communication courses provide important skills necessary for functioning in entry-level jobs, including listening, writing, motivating and persuading, interpersonal skills, informational interviewing, and small-group problem solving (Di Salvo, 1980). Listening also has implications for our personal lives and relationships. We shouldn't underestimate the power of listening to make someone else feel better and to open our perceptual field to new sources of information.

The main purposes of listening are the following (Hargie, 2016):

- To focus on messages sent by other people or noises coming from our surroundings
- To better understand other people's communication
- To critically evaluate other people's messages
- To monitor nonverbal signals
- To indicate that we are interested or paying attention
- To empathize with others and show we care for them (relational maintenance)
- To engage in negotiation, dialogue, or other exchanges that result in shared understanding of or agreement on an issue

Listening Types

Listening serves many purposes, and different situations require different types of listening. The type of listening we engage in affects our communication and how others respond to us. For example, when we listen to empathize with others, our communication will likely be supportive and open, which will then allow the other person to feel "heard" and supported and hopefully view the interaction positively (Bodie & Villaume, 2003). The main types of listening we will discuss are discriminative, informational, critical, and empathetic (Watson et al., 1995).

Discriminative listening is a focused type of listening that is primarily physiological and occurs mostly at the receiving stage of the listening process. Here we engage in listening to scan and monitor our surroundings in order to isolate particular auditory or visual stimuli. For example, we may focus our listening on a dark part of the yard while walking the dog at night to determine whether the noise we just heard presents any danger. Or we may look for a particular nonverbal cue to let us know our conversational partner received our message (Hargie, 2016).

Informational listening entails listening with the goal of comprehending and retaining information. This type of listening is not evaluative and is common in teaching and learning contexts ranging from a student listening to an informative speech to an out-of-towner listening to directions to the nearest gas station. We also use informational listening when we listen to news reports, voicemail, and briefings at work.

Critical listening entails listening with the goal of analyzing or evaluating a message based on information presented verbally and information that can be inferred from context. A critical listener evaluates a message and accepts it, rejects it, or decides to withhold judgement and seek more information. As constant consumers of messages, we need to be able to assess the credibility of speakers and their messages and identify various persuasive appeals and faulty logic (known as fallacies).

Image 3.12

Empathetic listening is the most challenging form of listening and occurs when we try to understand or experience what a speaker is thinking or feeling. Empathetic listening is distinct from sympathetic listening. **Sympathy** is generally more self-oriented and distant than empathy (Bruneau, 1993). Empathetic listening is oriented on others and should be genuine. Because of our own centrality in our perceptual world, empathetic listening can be difficult. It's often much easier to tell our own story or to give advice than it is to really listen to and empathize with someone else. We should keep in mind that sometimes others just need to be heard and our feedback isn't actually desired.

Listening Styles

Just as there are different types of listening, there are also different styles of listening. People may be categorized as one or more of the following types listeners: people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, and time-oriented listeners. Research finds that 40% of people have more than one preferred listening style, and that they choose a style based on the listening situation (Bodie & Villaume, 2003). Other research finds that people often still revert back to a single preferred style in times of emotional or cognitive stress, even if they know a different style of listening would be better (Worthington, 2003).

- **People-oriented listeners** are concerned about the needs and feelings of others and may get distracted from a specific task or the content of a message in order to address feelings.
- **Action-oriented listeners** prefer well-organized, precise, and accurate information. They can become frustrated if they perceive communication to be unorganized or inconsistent, or a speaker to be "long-winded."
- **Content-oriented listeners** are analytic and enjoy processing complex messages. They like in-depth information and like to learn about multiple sides of a topic or hear multiple perspectives on an issue. Their thoroughness can be difficult to manage if there are time constraints.
- **Time-oriented listeners** are concerned with completing tasks and achieving goals. They do not like information they perceive as irrelevant and like to stick to a timeline. They may cut people off and make quick decisions (taking shortcuts or cutting corners) when they think they have enough information.

Types of Listening Responses

Silent listening occurs when a person says nothing. It is ideal in certain situations and awful in others. However, when used correctly, silent listening can be very powerful. If misused, the listener could give the wrong impression to someone. It is appropriate to use this type of listening to discourage more talking. It also shows that the listener is open to the speaker's ideas (Wrench et al., 2020).


Image 3.13

Sometimes people get angry when someone doesn't respond. They might think that this person is not listening or is trying to avoid the situation (Wrench et al., 2020). But the lack of response might be because the listener is just trying to gather their thoughts or perhaps feels that it would be inappropriate to respond. There are certain situations, such as in counselling, where silent listening can be beneficial because it can help the speaker figure out their feelings and emotions. Minor **prompting** might also be done in combination with silence (Wrench et al., 2020).

In situations where you want to get answers, it might be beneficial to use **questioning**. You can do this in a variety of ways (Wrench et al., 2020). You can pose open-ended or close-ended questions as a means of eliciting answers. **Close-ended questions** are very specific and do not allow elaboration. They are direct and often result in a "yes" or "no" response or a list of possible responses that are provided. **Open-ended questions** allow for more elaboration by the person responding, and specific response options are not provided. These forms of questions generally result in more discussion.

There are also different types of questions. **Sincere questions** are posed to find a genuine answer (Wrench et al., 2020). **Counterfeit questions** are disguised attempts to send a message, not to receive one. Sometimes, counterfeit questions can cause the listener to be defensive. For instance, if someone asks you, "Tell me how often you have cheated on an exam," the speaker is implying that you have cheated on an exam, even though that has not been established

(Wrench et al., 2020). A speaker can use questions that make statements by emphasizing specific words or phrases, stating an opinion or feeling on the subject. They can ask questions that carry hidden agendas, such as “Do you have five dollars?” because the person would like to borrow that money (Wrench et al., 2020). Some questions seek “correct” answers. For instance, when a friend asks, “Do I look fat?” you probably have a correct or ideal answer. There are also questions that are based on unchecked assumptions. An example would be “Why aren’t you listening?” This question implies that the person wasn’t listening, when in fact they are listening (Wrench et al., 2020).

Paraphrasing is defined as restating in your own words the message you think the speaker just sent (Wrench et al., 2020). It represents mindful listening in that you are trying to analyze and understand the speaker’s information. Paraphrasing can be used to summarize facts and to gain consensus in essential discussions. It could be used in a business meeting to make sure all details were discussed and agreed upon. Paraphrasing can also be used to understand personal information more accurately. Think about being in a counsellor’s office. Counsellors often paraphrase information to better understand exactly how you are feeling and to be able to analyze the information better (Wrench et al., 2020).

Empathizing is used to show that the listener identifies with the speaker’s information (Wrench et al., 2020). However, you are not empathizing when you deny others the rights to their feelings. Examples of this are statements such as “It’s really not a big deal” or “Who cares?” These response indicates that the listener is trying to make the speaker feel a different way. In minimizing the significance of the situation, the listener is interpreting the situation according to their perspective and passing judgement (Wrench et al., 2020).

Image 3.14

Take the time to watch William Ury's Ted Talk on the power of listening. He talks about how important listening is and what a difference it can make to others and to society as a whole.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=489#oembed-2

(TEDx Talks, 2012)

Barriers to Effective Listening

Barriers to effective listening are present at every stage of the listening process (Hargie, 2016). At the receiving stage, noise can block or distort incoming stimuli. At the interpreting stage, complex or abstract information may be difficult to relate to previous experiences, making it difficult to reach understanding. At the recalling stage, natural limits to our memory and challenges to concentration can interfere with remembering. At the evaluating stage, personal biases and prejudices can lead us to block people out or assume we know what they are going to say. At the responding stage, a lack of paraphrasing and questioning skills can lead to misunderstanding.

Environmental and Physical Barriers to Listening

Environmental factors such as lighting, temperature, and furniture affect our ability to listen. A room that is too dark can make us sleepy, just as a room that is too warm or too cool can raise awareness of our physical discomfort to a point that it is distracting. Some seating arrangements facilitate listening, whereas others separate people. In general, listening is easier when listeners can make direct eye contact with and are in close physical proximity to the speaker. When group members are allowed to choose a leader, they often choose the person who is sitting at the centre or head of the table (Andersen, 1999). Even though the person may not have demonstrated any leadership abilities, people subconsciously gravitate towards speakers who are nonverbally accessible. The ability to effectively see and hear a person increases people's confidence in their abilities to receive and process information. Eye contact and physical proximity can still be affected by noise. Environmental noises such as a whirring air conditioner, a barking dog, or a ringing fire alarm can obviously interfere with listening despite direct lines of sight and well-placed furniture.

Physiological noise, like environmental noise, can interfere with our ability to process incoming information. It is noise stemming from a physical illness, injury, or bodily stress. Physiological noise is considered a physical barrier to effective listening because it emanates from our physical body. Ailments such as a cold, a broken leg, a headache, or an itchy rash can range from annoying to unbearably painful and impact our listening relative to their intensity. Another type of noise, psychological noise, bridges physical and cognitive barriers to effective listening.

Psychological noise, or noise stemming from our psychological state, including moods and level of arousal, can facilitate or impede listening. Any mood or state of arousal, positive or negative, that is too far above or below our regular baseline creates a barrier to message reception and processing. The generally positive emotional state of being in love can be just as much of a barrier as feeling hatred. Excited arousal can also distract as much as anxious arousal. Stress about an upcoming event ranging from losing a job, to having surgery, to wondering about what to eat for lunch can overshadow incoming messages. Although we will explore cognitive barriers to effective listening more in the next section, psychological noise is relevant here given that the body and mind are not completely separate. In fact, they can interact in ways that further interfere with listening. Fatigue, for example, is usually a combination of psychological and physiological stresses that manifests as stress (psychological noise) and weakness, sleepiness, and tiredness (physiological noise). Additionally, mental anxiety (psychological noise) can also manifest itself in our bodies through trembling, sweating, blushing, or even breaking out in a rash (physiological noise).

Cognitive and Personal Barriers to Listening

Aside from the barriers to effective listening that may be present in the environment or from our bodies, cognitive limits, a lack of listening preparation, difficult or disorganized messages, and prejudices can interfere with listening. Whether you call it multitasking, daydreaming, glazing over, or drifting off, we all cognitively process other things while receiving messages. If you think of your listening mind as a wall of televisions, you may notice that in some situations some of the televisions are tuned to one channel. If that one channel is a lecture being given by your professor, then you are exerting about half of your cognitive-processing abilities on one message. In another situation, all the televisions may be on different channels. The fact that we have the capability to process more than one thing at a time offers both advantages and disadvantages, but unless we can better understand how our cognitive capacities and personal preferences affect our listening, we are likely to experience more barriers than benefits.

Lack of Listening Preparation

Another barrier to effective listening is a general lack of **listening preparation**. Unfortunately, most people have never received any formal training or instruction related to listening. Although some people think listening skills just develop over time, competent listening is difficult, and improving listening skills takes concerted effort. Even when listening education is available, people do not embrace it as readily as they do opportunities to enhance their speaking skills. Listening is often viewed as an annoyance or a chore, or else it is just ignored or minimized as part of the communication process. In addition, our individualistic society values speaking more than listening because it's the speakers who are sometimes literally in the spotlight. Although listening competence is a crucial part of social interaction, and many of us value people we perceive to be "good listeners," listening just doesn't get the same kind of praise, attention, instruction, or credibility as speaking does.

Bad Messages and/or Speakers

Bad messages and/or speakers also present a barrier to effective listening. Sometimes our trouble listening originates in the sender. In terms of message construction, poorly structured messages or messages that are too vague, too jargon filled, or too simple can present listening difficulties. In terms of a speaker's delivery, verbal fillers, a monotone voice, distracting movements, or a dishevelled appearance can inhibit our ability to cognitively process a message (Hargie, 2016). Speakers can employ particular strategies to create listenable messages that take some of the burden off the listener by tailoring a message to be easily heard and processed. Strategies for creating messages tailored for oral delivery include elements such as preview and review statements, transitions, and parallel wording. Listening also becomes difficult when a speaker tries to present too much information. Information overload is a common barrier to effective listening that good speakers can mitigate by building redundancy into their speeches and providing concrete examples of new information to help audience members interpret and understand the key ideas.

Prejudiced Listening

Unfortunately, some of our default ways of processing information and perceiving others lead us to rigid ways of thinking. When we engage in **prejudiced listening**, we are usually trying to preserve our way of thinking and avoid being convinced of something different. This type of prejudice is a barrier to effective listening because when we prejudge a person based on their identity or ideas, we usually stop listening in an active and/or ethical way.

We exhibit prejudice in our listening in several ways, some of which are more obvious than others. For example, we may claim to be in a hurry and only selectively address the parts of a message that we agree with or that aren't controversial. We can also operate from a state of denial where we avoid a subject or person altogether so that our views are not challenged. Prejudices that are based on a person's identity, such as race or ethnicity, age, occupation, or appearance, may lead us to assume that we know what the person will say, essentially closing down the listening process. Keeping an open mind and engaging in perception checking can help us identify prejudiced listening and hopefully shift into more competent listening practices.

Ineffective Listening Behaviours

At times, the barriers to effective listening cause us to engage in ineffective listening behaviours. When our goal is to create shared meaning with others, these behaviours interrupt this process.

- **Pseudo-listening** is pretending to listen and appear attentive but not listening to understand or interpret the information. Listeners may respond with a smile, head nod, or even a minimal verbal acknowledgment, but they are ignoring or not attending (Indiana State University, n.d.).
- **Selective listening** involves the listener selecting only the information they identify as relevant to their own needs or interests. Listeners may have their own agenda and disregard topics if they do not align with their current attitudes or beliefs (Indiana State University, n.d.).
- **Insulated listening** involves ignoring or avoiding information and certain topics of conversation. It can be seen as the

opposite of selective listening.

- **Defensive listening** can be seen as interpreting innocent comments as personal attacks. Listeners misinterpret or project feelings of insecurity, jealousy, guilt, or lack of confidence in the other person (Indiana State University, n.d.).
- **Insensitive listening** involves focusing on information for its literal meaning and disregarding the other person's feeling and emotions. Listeners rarely pick up on hidden meanings or subtle nonverbal cues and have difficulty expressing sympathy and empathy (Indiana State University, n.d.).
- **Stage hogging** involves listening to express one's own ideas or interests and being the centre of attention. Listeners often plan what they are going to say or interrupt while the other person is talking (Indiana State University, n.d.).
- **Ambushing** is careful and attentive listening to collect information that can be used against the other person as an attack. Listeners question, contradict, or oppose the other person to trap them or use their own words against them (Indiana State University, n.d.).
- **Multitasking** involves listening without full attention while attempting to complete more than one task at a time. Listeners are actually "switch tasking"—their brain is rapidly switching from one task to another—and the information is lost (Indiana State University, n.d.).

In this section, we had a chance to discuss the many aspects of the listening process, and since this such a valuable skill, the next section will focus on the skills needed to becoming more competent listeners.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Identify how critical listening might be useful for you in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic.
2. Listening scholars have noted that empathetic listening is the most difficult type of listening. Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. Which style of listening best describes you and why? Which style do you have the most difficulty with or like the least and why?
4. Bad speakers and messages are a common barrier to effective listening. Describe a time recently when your ability to listen was impaired by the poor delivery and/or content of another person.
5. Of the bad listening practices listed, which do you use the most? Why do you think you use this one more than the others? What can you do to help prevent or lessen this barrier?

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3.5 Becoming a More Competent Listener

Many people admit that they could stand to improve their listening skills. This section will help us do that. In this section, we will learn strategies for developing and improving competence at each stage of the listening process. We will also define active listening and the behaviours that go along with it.

Listening Competence at Each Stage of the Listening Process

We can develop competence in each stage of the listening process, as the following list indicates (Ridge, 1993):

1. **To improve listening at the receiving stage:**
    - Prepare yourself to listen.
    - Discern between intentional messages and noise.
    - Concentrate on stimuli most relevant to your listening purpose(s) or goal(s).
    - Be mindful of the selection and attention process as much as possible.
    - Pay attention to turn-taking signals so you can follow the conversational flow.
    - Avoid interrupting someone while they are speaking in order to maintain your ability to receive stimuli and listen.
2. **To improve listening at the interpreting stage**:

- Identify main points and supporting points.
- Use contextual clues from the person or environment to discern additional meaning.
- Be aware of how the relational, cultural, and situational context can influence meaning.
- Be aware of the different meanings of silence.
- Note differences in tone of voice and other paralinguistic cues that influence meaning.

3. **To improve listening at the recalling stage:**

    - Use multiple sensory channels to decode messages and make more complete memories.
    - Repeat, rephrase, and reorganize information to fit your cognitive preferences.
    - Use mnemonic devices as a tool to help with recall.

4. **To improve listening at the evaluating stage:**

    - Separate facts, inferences, and judgements.
    - Be familiar with and able to identify persuasive strategies and fallacies of reasoning.
    - Assess the credibility of the speaker and the message.
    - Be aware of your own biases and how your perceptual filters can create barriers to effective listening.

5. **To improve listening at the responding stage:**

    - Ask appropriate clarifying and follow-up questions and paraphrase information to check understanding.
    - Give feedback that is relevant to the speaker's purpose or motivation for speaking.
    - Adapt your response to the speaker and the context.
    - Do not let the preparation and rehearsal of your response diminish earlier stages of listening.

Active Listening

Active listening refers to the process of pairing outwardly visible positive listening behaviours with positive cognitive listening practices. Active listening can help address many of the environmental, physical, cognitive, and personal barriers to effective listening that we discussed earlier. The behaviours associated with active listening can also enhance informational, critical, and empathetic listening.

Image 3.15

Being an active listener starts before you actually start receiving a message. Active listeners make strategic choices and take action in order to set up ideal listening conditions. Physical and environmental noises can often be managed by moving locations or by manipulating the lighting, temperature, or furniture. When possible, avoid important listening activities during times of distracting psychological or physiological noise. For example, we often know when we're going to be hungry or full, more or less awake, or more or less anxious, and advance planning can alleviate the presence of these barriers. For college students, who often have some flexibility in their class schedules, knowing when you best listen can help you make strategic choices regarding what class to take and when.

In terms of cognitive barriers to effective listening, we can prime ourselves to listen by analyzing a listening situation before it begins.

For example, you could ask yourself the following questions:

1. "What are my goals for listening to this message?"
2. "How does this message relate to me or affect my life?"
3. "What listening type and style are most appropriate for this message?"

Effective listeners must work to maintain focus as much as possible and refocus when attention shifts or fades (Wolvin & Coakley, 1993). One way to do this is to find the motivation to listen. If you can identify intrinsic and or extrinsic motivations for listening to a particular message, then you will be more likely to remember the information presented. Ask yourself how a message could impact your life, your career, your intellect, or your relationships. This can help overcome our tendency toward selective attention. As senders of messages, we can help listeners by making the relevance of what we're saying clear and offering well-organized messages that are tailored for our listeners.

Given that we can process more words per minute than people can speak, we can engage in internal dialogue, making good use of our intrapersonal communication, to become a better listener. Three possibilities for internal dialogue include covert coaching, self-reinforcement, and covert questioning (Hargie, 2016).

- **Covert coaching** involves sending yourself messages

containing advice about better listening, such as “You’re getting distracted by things you have to do after work. Just focus on what your supervisor is saying now.”
- **Self-reinforcement** involves sending yourself affirmative and positive messages, such as “You’re being a good active listener. This will help you do well on the next exam.”
- **Covert questioning** involves asking yourself questions about the content in ways that focus your attention and reinforce the material, such as “What is the main idea on that PowerPoint slide?” “Why is he talking about his brother in front of our neighbours?”

Internal dialogue is a more structured way to engage in active listening, but we can use more general approaches as well. It may be best to occupy the “extra” channels in your mind with thoughts that are related to the primary message being received instead of thoughts that are unrelated. We can use those channels to resort, rephrase, and repeat what a speaker says. When we **resort**, we can help mentally repair disorganized messages. When we **rephrase**, we can put messages into our own words in ways that better fit our cognitive preferences. When we **repeat**, we can help messages transfer from short-term to long-term memory.

Another tool that can be used is **mental bracketing**, which refers to the process of intentionally separating out intrusive or irrelevant thoughts that may distract you from listening (McCornack, 2007). This requires us to monitor our concentration and attention and be prepared to let thoughts that aren’t related to a speaker’s message pass through our minds without giving them much attention.

The video below provides some information and resources related to how we can actively listen to others.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=507#oembed-1

(TEDx Talks, 2019)

Active Listening Behaviours

From the suggestions discussed previously, you can see that we can prepare for active listening in advance and engage in certain cognitive strategies to help us listen better. We also engage in active listening behaviours as we receive and process messages.

Eye contact is a key sign of active listening. Speakers usually interpret a listener's eye contact as a signal of attentiveness. Although a lack of eye contact may indicate inattentiveness, it can also signal cognitive processing. When we look away to process new information, we usually do it unconsciously. Be aware, however, that your conversational partner may interpret this as not listening. If you really do need to take a moment to think about something, you could indicate that to the other person by saying, "That's new information to me. Give me just a second to think through it." We have already learned the role that back-channel cues play in listening—an occasional head nod and "uh-huh" signal that you are paying attention. However, when we give these cues as a form of "autopilot" listening, others can usually tell that we are pseudo-listening, and whether they call us on it or not, that impression could lead to negative judgements.

A more direct way to indicate active listening is to reference previous statements made by the speaker. Norms of politeness usually call on us to reference a past statement or connect to the speaker's current thought before starting a conversational turn. Being able to summarize what someone said to ensure that the topic has been satisfactorily covered and understood or being able to segue in a way that validates what the previous speaker said helps regulate conversational flow. Asking probing questions is another way to directly indicate listening and to keep a conversation going, since they encourage and invite a person to speak more. You can also ask questions that seek clarification and not just elaboration. Speakers should present complex information at a slower speaking rate than familiar information, but many will not. Remember that your nonverbal feedback can be useful for a speaker because it signals that you are listening but also indicates whether or not you understand. If a speaker fails to read your nonverbal feedback, you may need to follow up with verbal communication in the form of paraphrased messages and clarifying questions.

As active listeners, we want to be excited and engaged but not let our excitement manifest itself in interruptions. Being an active listener means knowing when to maintain our role as listener and resist the urge to take a conversational turn.

Image 3.16

Note-taking (Image 3.16) can also indicate active listening. Translating information through writing into our own cognitive structures and schemata allows us to better interpret and assimilate information. Of course, note-taking isn't always a viable option. It would be fairly awkward to take notes during a first date or a casual exchange between new co-workers. But in some situations where we wouldn't normally consider taking notes, a little awkwardness might be worth it for the sake of understanding and recalling the information. For example, many people don't think about taking notes when getting information from their doctor or banker, but many people would rather someone jot down notes instead of having to respond to follow-up questions on information that had already been clearly conveyed. To help facilitate your note-taking, you might say something like "Do you mind if I jot down some notes? This seems important."

In summary, active listening is exhibited through verbal and nonverbal cues, including steady eye contact with the speaker, smiling, slightly raised eyebrows, upright posture, leaning in toward the speaker, nonverbal back-channel cues such as head nods, verbal back-channel cues such as "okay," "mm-hmm," or "oh," and a lack of distracting mannerisms like doodling or fidgeting (Hargie, 2016).

Becoming a Better Critical Listener

Critical listening involves evaluating the credibility, completeness, and worth of a speaker's message. Some listening scholars note that critical listening represents the deepest level of listening (Floyd, 1985). Since people can say just about anything they want, we are surrounded by countless messages that vary tremendously in terms of their value, degree of ethics, accuracy, and quality. Therefore, it falls on us to responsibly and critically evaluate the messages we receive. Some messages are produced by people who are intentionally misleading, ill informed, or motivated by the potential for personal gain, but such messages can be received as honest, credible, or altruistic even though they aren't. Being able to critically evaluate messages helps us have more control over and awareness of the influence such people may have on us. In order to critically evaluate messages, we must enhance our critical-listening skills.

Some critical-listening skills include distinguishing between facts and inferences, evaluating supporting evidence, discovering your own biases, and listening beyond the message. Part of being an ethical communicator is being accountable for what we say by distinguishing between facts and inferences (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990). This ideal is not always met in practice, so a critical listener should also make these distinctions since the speaker may not. Because facts are widely agreed-on conclusions, they can be verified as such with some extra research. Take care in your research to note the context from which the fact emerged, as speakers may take a statistic or quote out of context, distorting its meaning. Inferences are not as easy to evaluate, because they are based on unverifiable thoughts of a speaker or on speculation. Inferences are usually based at least partially on something that is known, so it is possible to evaluate whether an inference was made carefully or not. In this sense, you may evaluate an inference based on several known facts as more credible than an inference based on one fact and more speculation. Asking a question like "What led you to think this?" is a good way to get information needed to evaluate the strength of an inference.

Distinguishing among facts and inferences and evaluating the credibility of supporting material are critical-listening skills that also require good informational-listening skills. In more formal speaking situations, speakers may cite published or publicly available sources to support their messages. When speakers verbally cite their sources, you can use the credibility of the source to help evaluate the credibility of the speaker's message. For example, information from a national newspaper would likely be more credible than that from a tabloid magazine or an anonymous blog. In regular interactions, people also have sources for their information but are not as likely to note them in their message. Asking questions like "Where did you hear that?" or "How do you know that?" can help get the information needed to make a critical evaluation.

Discovering your own biases can help you recognize when they interfere with your ability to fully process a message. Biases are also difficult to discover because we don't see them as biases—we see them as normal or "the way things are." Asking yourself "What led you to think this?" and "How do you know that?" can be a good start towards acknowledging your biases.

Lastly, to be a better critical listener, think beyond the message. A good critical listener asks the following questions: What is being said and what is not being said? In whose interests are these claims being made? Whose voices and ideas are included and excluded? These questions take into account that speakers intentionally and unintentionally slant, edit, or twist messages to make them fit a particular perspective or for personal gain. Also ask yourself questions like "What are the speaker's goals?" You can also rephrase that question and direct it toward the speaker, asking them, "What is your goal in this interaction?" When you feel yourself nearing an evaluation or conclusion, pause and ask yourself what influenced you. Although we like to think that we are most often persuaded through logical evidence and reasoning, we are susceptible to persuasive shortcuts that rely on the credibility or likability of a speaker or on our emotions rather than the strength of their evidence (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). So, to be critical listener, keep a check on your emotional involvement and be aware of how it may be influencing your evaluation.

Becoming a Better Empathetic Listener

Empathetic listening involves caring and respecting the dignity of others (Bruneau, 1993). It is more philosophical than the other types of listening because it requires that we be open to subjectivity and that we engage in it because we genuinely see it as worthwhile.

Combining active and empathetic listening leads to **active-empathetic listening**. During active-empathetic listening, the listener becomes actively and emotionally involved in the interaction; the listening is conscious on the part of the listener and is perceived by the speaker (Bodie, 2016). To be a better empathetic listener, we need to suspend or at least attempt to suppress our judgement of the other person and their message so we can fully attend to both. **Paraphrasing** is an important part of empathetic listening because it helps us put the other person's words into our frame of experience without making it about us. In addition, speaking the words of someone else in our own way can help evoke within us the feelings that the other person felt while saying them (Bodie, 2016). Active-empathetic listening is more than echoing verbal messages. We can also engage in **mirroring**, which refers to a listener's replication of the nonverbal signals of a speaker (Bruneau, 1993). Therapists, for example, are often taught to adopt a posture and tone similar to their patients in order to build rapport and project empathy.

Image 3.17

Paraphrasing and **questioning** are useful techniques for empathetic listening because they allow us to respond to a speaker without "taking the floor" or the attention away for long. Specifically, questions that ask for elaboration act as "verbal door openers," inviting someone to speak more, and then validating their speech through active listening cues. This can help a person feel "listened to" (Hargie, 2016). Paraphrasing and asking questions are also useful when we feel tempted to share our own stories and experiences rather than maintaining our listening role. The questions aren't intended to solicit more information, so we can guide or direct the speaker toward a specific course of action. Although it is easier for us to slip into an advisory mode—saying things like "Well if I were you, I would …"—we have to resist the temptation to give unsolicited advice.

Empathetic listening can be worthwhile, but it also brings challenges. In terms of costs, empathetic listening can use up time and effort. Since this type of listening can't be contained within a prescribed timeframe, it may be especially difficult for time-oriented listeners (Bruneau, 1993). Empathetic listening can also be a test of our endurance, as its orientation towards and focus on supporting the other person requires processing and integrating a lot of verbal and nonverbal information. Because of this potential strain, it is important to know your limits as an empathetic listener. While listening can be therapeutic, it is not appropriate for people without training and preparation to try to serve as a therapist. Some people have chronic issues that necessitate professional listening for the purposes of evaluation, diagnosis, and therapy. Lending an ear is different from diagnosing and treating. If you have a friend who is exhibiting signs of a more serious issue that needs attention, listen to the extent that you feel comfortable, then be prepared to provide referrals to other resources that have the training to help. To face these challenges, good empathetic listeners typically have a generally positive self-concept and self-esteem, are nonverbally sensitive and expressive, and are comfortable with embracing another person's subjectivity and refraining from too much analytical thought.

Listening in Professional Contexts

Listening is one of the most neglected aspects of organizational-communication research (Flynn et al., 2008). This lack of a focus on listening persists, even though we know that more effective listening skills have been shown to enhance work performance in areas such as sales and that managers who exhibit good listening skills help create open communication climates that can lead to increased feelings of supportiveness, motivation, and productivity in the workplace (Flynn et al., 2008). Specifically, empathetic listening and active listening can play key roles in organizational communication. Managers are wise to enhance their empathetic listening skills because being able to empathize with employees contributes to a positive communication climate. Active listening among organizational members also promotes involvement and increases motivation, which leads to more cohesion and enhances the communication climate.

The **listening environment** refers to the characteristics and norms of an organization and its members that contribute to expectations for and perceptions about listening (Brownell, 1993). Positive listening environments are perceived to be more employee centred, which can improve job satisfaction and cohesion. As such, it is important to know how to create a positive listening environment in the workplace.

Positive listening environments are facilitated by the breaking down of barriers to concentration, the reduction of noise, the creation of a shared reality (through shared language, such as similar jargon or a shared vision statement), intentional spaces that promote listening, official opportunities that promote listening, training in listening for all employees, and leaders who model good listening practices and praise others who are successful listeners (Brownell, 1993). Policies and practices that support listening must go hand in hand. After all, what does an "open-door" policy mean if it is not coupled with actions that demonstrate the sincerity of the policy?

Listening in Relational Contexts

Listening plays a central role in establishing and maintaining our relationships (Nelson-Jones, 2006). Without some listening competence, we wouldn't be able to engage in the self-disclosure process, which is essential for establishing relationships. Newly acquainted people get to know each other through increasingly personal and reciprocal disclosures of personal information. In order to reciprocate a conversational partner's disclosure, we must process it through listening. Once relationships are formed, listening to others provides a psychological reward through the simple act of recognition, which helps maintain our relationships. Listening to our relational partners and being listened to in return is part of the give-and-take of any interpersonal relationship. Our thoughts and experiences "back up" inside us, and getting them out helps us maintain a positive balance (Nelson-Jones, 2006). So something as routine and seemingly pointless as listening to our romantic partner debrief the events of their day or our roommate recount their weekend back home shows that we are taking an interest in their lives and are willing to put our own needs and concerns aside for a moment to attend to their needs. Listening also closely ties to conflict because a lack of listening often plays a large role in creating conflict, whereas effective listening helps us resolve it.

Listening has relational implications throughout our lives, too. Parents who engage in competent listening behaviours with their children from a very young age make their children feel worthwhile and appreciated, which affects their development in terms of personality and character (Nichols, 1995). A lack of listening leads to feelings of loneliness, which results in lower self-esteem and higher degrees of anxiety. In fact, by the age of four or five years old, the empathy and recognition shown by the presence or lack of listening has moulded children's personalities in noticeable ways (Nichols, 1995). Children who have been listened to grow up expecting that others will be available and receptive to them. These children are therefore more likely to interact confidently with teachers, parents, and peers in ways that help develop communication competence that will be built on throughout their lives. Children who have not been listened to may come to expect that others will not want to listen to them, which leads to a lack of opportunities to practise, develop, and hone foundational communication skills. Fortunately for the more-listened-to children and unfortunately for the less-listened-to children, these early experiences become predispositions that don't change much as the children get older and may actually reinforce themselves and become stronger.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Keep a "listening log" for part of your day. Note times when you feel like you exhibited competent listening behaviours and note times when listening became challenging. Analyze the log based on what you have learned in this section. Which positive listening skills helped you listen? What strategies could you apply to your listening challenges to improve your listening competence?

2. Apply the strategies for effective critical listening to a political message (a search for “political speech” or “partisan speech” on YouTube should provide you with many options). As you analyze the speech, make sure to distinguish between facts and inferences, evaluate a speaker’s supporting evidence, discuss how your own biases may influence your evaluation, and think beyond the message.
3. Discuss and analyze the listening environment of a place you have worked or an organization with which you were involved. Overall, was it positive or negative? What were the norms and expectations for effective listening that contributed to the listening environment? Who helped set the tone for the listening environment?

Attribution

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3.6 Language, Listening, and Culture

Society and culture influence the words we speak, and the words we speak influence society and culture. One of the best ways to learn about society, culture, and language is to seek out opportunities to go beyond our typical comfort zones. Studying abroad or travelling, for example, brings many challenges that can turn into valuable lessons.

The video below provides an interesting discussion and examples of how language shapes the way we think.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=487#oembed-1

(TED, 2018)

Language and Social Context

We arrive at meaning through **conversational interaction**, which follows many social norms and rules. Rules are explicitly stated conventions, such as "Look at me when I'm talking to you," and norms are implicit, such as saying that you have to leave before you actually do to politely end a conversation. To help conversations function meaningfully, we learn social norms and internalize them to such an extent that we do not often consciously enact them. Instead, we rely on routines and roles, as determined by social forces, to help us proceed with verbal interaction, which also helps determine how a conversation will unfold. Our various social roles influence meaning and how we speak. For example, a person may say, "As a longtime member of this community …" or "As a first-generation college student …" Such statements cue others into the personal and social context from which we are speaking, which helps them better interpret our meaning.

One social norm that structures our communication is **turn-taking**. People need to feel like they are contributing something to an interaction, so turn-taking is a central part of how conversations play out (Crystal, 2005). Although we sometimes talk at the same time as others or interrupt them, there are numerous verbal and nonverbal cues, almost like a dance, that are exchanged among speakers that let people know when their turn will begin or end. Conversations do not always neatly progress from beginning to end with shared understanding along the way. There is a back and forth that is often verbally managed through rephrasing, such as "Let me try that again," and clarification like "Does that make sense?" (Crystal, 2005).

Some conversational elements are highly scripted or ritualized, especially the beginning and end of an exchange and topic changes (Crystal, 2005). Conversations often begin with a standard greeting and then proceed to "safe" exchanges about things in the immediate field of experience of the communicators such as a comment on the weather or noting something going on in the immediate environment. At this point, once the ice is broken, people can move on to other more content-specific exchanges. While conversing, before we can initiate a topic change, it is a social norm that we let the current topic being discussed play itself out or continue until the person who introduced the topic seems satisfied. We then usually try to find a relevant tie-in or segue that acknowledges the previous topic, in turn acknowledging the speaker, before moving on to a new topic. Changing the topic without following such social conventions might indicate to the other person that you were not listening or are simply rude.

Ending a conversation is similarly complex. I'm sure we've all been in a situation where we are "trapped" in a conversation that we need or want to get out of. Just walking away or ending a conversation without engaging in socially acceptable "leave-taking" behaviours would be considered a breach of social norms. Topic changes are often places where people can leave a conversation, but it is still routine for us to give a special reason for leaving, often in an apologetic tone, whether we mean it or not. Generally, though, conversations come to an end through the cooperation of the participants, as they offer and recognize typical signals that a topic area has been satisfactorily covered or that one or all the people need to leave. It is customary in North America for people to say they have to leave before they actually do, and for that statement to be dismissed or ignored by the others until additional leave-taking behaviours are enacted. When such cooperation is lacking, an awkward silence or abrupt ending can result, and as we've already learned, North Americans are not big fans of silence. Silence is not viewed the same way in other cultures, which leads us to our discussion of cultural context.

Language and Cultural Context

Culture isn't solely determined by a person's native language or nationality. It's true that languages vary by country and region and that the language we speak influences our reality, but even people who speak the same language experience cultural differences because of their various intersecting cultural identities and personal experiences. We have a tendency to view our own language more favourably than other languages. Although people may make persuasive arguments regarding which languages are more pleasing to the ear or difficult or easy to learn than others, no one language enables speakers to communicate more effectively than another (McCornack, 2007).

From birth, we are socialized into our various cultural identities. As with social context, this acculturation process is a combination of explicit and implicit lessons. A child in Colombia, which is considered a more collectivist country in which people value group membership and cohesion over individualism, may not be explicitly told, “You are a member of a collectivistic culture, so you should care more about the family and community than yourself.” This cultural value would be transmitted through daily actions and through language use. Just as babies acquire knowledge of language practices at an astonishing rate in their first two years of life, so do they acquire cultural knowledge and values that are embedded in those language practices. At nine months old, it is possible to distinguish babies based on their language. Even at this early stage of development, when most babies are babbling and just learning to recognize but not wholly reproduce verbal interaction patterns, a Colombian baby would sound different from a Brazilian baby, even though neither would actually be using words from their native languages of Spanish and Portuguese (Crystal, 2005).

Image 3.18

In general, **collectivistic cultures** tend to value listening more than **individualistic cultures**, which are more speaker oriented. The value placed on verbal and nonverbal meaning also varies by culture and influences how we communicate and listen. A **low-context communication style** is one in which much of the meaning generated within an interaction comes from the verbal communication used rather than nonverbal or contextual cues. Conversely, much of the meaning generated by a **high-context communication style** comes from nonverbal and contextual cues. For example, Americans of European descent generally use a low-context communication style, whereas people in East Asian and Latin American cultures use a high-context communication style.

Contextual communication styles affect listening in many ways. Cultures with a high-context orientation generally use less verbal communication and value silence as a form of communication, which requires listeners to pay close attention to nonverbal signals and consider contextual influences on a message. Cultures with a low-context orientation must use more verbal communication and provide explicit details because listeners aren't expected to derive meaning from the context. Note that people from low-context cultures may feel frustrated by the ambiguity of speakers from high-context cultures, while speakers from high-context cultures may feel overwhelmed or even insulted by the level of detail used by low-context communicators. Cultures with a low-context communication style also tend to have a monochronic orientation towards time, whereas high-context cultures have a polychronic time orientation, which also affects listening.

Cultures that favour a structured and commodified orientation towards time are said to be **monochronic**, while cultures that favour a more flexible orientation towards time are **polychronic**. Monochronic cultures like Canada and the United States value time and action-oriented listening styles, especially in professional contexts, because time is seen as a commodity that is scarce and must be managed. This is evidenced by leaders in businesses and organizations who often request "executive summaries" that only focus on the most relevant information and who use statements like "Get to the point!" Polychronic cultures value people and content-oriented listening styles, which makes sense when we consider that polychronic cultures also tend to be more collectivistic and use a high-context communication style. In collectivistic cultures, indirect communication is preferred in cases where direct communication would be considered a threat to the other person's "face" (desired public image). For example, flatly turning down a business offer would be too direct, so a person might reply with a "maybe" instead of a "no." The person making the proposal, however, would be able to draw on contextual clues that they implicitly learned through socialization to interpret the "maybe" as a "no."

The actual language we speak plays an important role in shaping our reality. Comparing languages, we can see differences in how we are able to talk about the world. In English, we have the words *grandfather* and *grandmother*, but no single word that distinguishes between a maternal grandfather and a paternal grandfather. But in Swedish, there's a specific word for each grandparent: *morfar* is mother's father, *farfar* is father's father, *farmor* is father's mother, and *mormor* is mother's mother (Crystal, 2005). In this example, we can see that the words available to us, based on the language we speak, influence how we talk about the world because of differences in and limitations of vocabulary. The notion that language shapes our view of reality and our cultural patterns is best represented by the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**. Although some scholars argue that our reality is determined by our language, we will take a more qualified view and presume that language plays a central role in influencing our realities but doesn't determine them (Martin & Nakayama, 2010).

Customs and Norms

Social norms are culturally relative. The words used in politeness rituals in one culture can mean something completely different in another. For example, *thank you* in North American English acknowledges receiving something (a gift, a favour, a compliment), but in British English, it can mean "yes" similar to North American English's *yes, please*, and in French, *merci* can mean "no" as in "no, thank you" (Crystal, 2005). Additionally, what is considered a powerful language style varies from culture to culture. Confrontational language, such as swearing, can be seen as powerful in Western cultures, even though it violates some language taboos, but would be seen as immature and weak in Japan (Wetzel, 1988).

Gender also affects how we use language, but not to the extent that most people think. Although there is a widespread belief that men are more likely to communicate in a clear and straightforward way and women are more likely to communicate in an emotional and indirect way, a meta-analysis of research findings from more than two hundred studies found only small differences in the personal disclosures of men and women (Dindia & Allen, 1992). Men and women's levels of disclosure are even more similar when engaging in cross-gender communication, meaning that men and woman are more similar when speaking to each other than when men speak to men or women speak to women. This could be because of the internalized pressure to speak about the other gender in socially sanctioned ways, in essence reinforcing the stereotypes when speaking to the same gender but challenging them in cross-gender encounters. Researchers also dispelled the belief that men interrupt more than women do, finding that men and women interrupt each other with similar frequency in cross-gender encounters (Dindia, 1987). These findings, which state that men and women communicate more similarly during cross-gender encounters and then communicate in more stereotypical ways in same-gender encounters, can be explained with communication accommodation theory.

Communication Accommodation and Code-Switching

Communication accommodation theory explores why and how people modify their communication to fit situational, social, cultural, and relational contexts (Giles et al., 1973). In communication accommodation, conversational partners may use **convergence**, meaning that a person makes their communication more like another person's. People who are accommodating in their communication style are seen as more competent, which illustrates the benefits of communicative flexibility. In order to be flexible, of course, people have to be aware of and monitor their own and others' communication patterns. Conversely, conversational partners may use **divergence**, meaning that a person uses communication to emphasize the differences between them and their conversational partner.

Convergence and divergence can take place within the same conversation and may be used by one or both conversational partners. **Convergence** makes others feel at ease, increases understanding, and enhances social bonds. **Divergence** may be used to intentionally make another person feel unwelcome or perhaps to highlight a personal, group, or cultural identity. While communication accommodation might involve anything from adjusting how fast or slow you talk to how long you speak during each turn, **code-switching** refers to changes in accent, dialect, or language (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). There are many reasons that people might code-switch. Regarding accents, some people hire vocal coaches or speech-language pathologists to help them alter their accent. If a person thinks their accent leads others to form unfavourable impressions, they can consciously change their accent with much practise and effort. Once their ability to speak without their accent is honed, they may be able to switch very quickly between their native accent when speaking with friends and family and their modified accent when speaking in professional settings. Additionally, people who work or live in multilingual settings may code-switch many times throughout the day, or even within a single conversation. Increasing outsourcing and globalization have produced heightened pressures for code-switching.

Language and Cultural Bias

Cultural bias is a skewed way of viewing or talking about a group that is typically negative. Bias has a way of creeping into our daily language use, often without our awareness. Culturally biased language can make reference to one or more cultural identities, including race or ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, and ability. There are other sociocultural identities that can be the subject of biased language. Much biased language is based on stereotypes and myths that influence the words we use. Bias is both **intentional** and **unintentional**, but as we've already discussed, we have to be accountable for what we say even if we didn't "intend" a particular meaning. Remember that meaning is generated—it doesn't exist inside our thoughts or words. We will discuss specific ways in which cultural bias manifests in our language and ways to become more aware of bias. The following few examples focus on bias rather than preferred terminology or outright discriminatory language.

Race

People sometimes use euphemisms for race that illustrate bias because the terms are usually implicitly compared to the dominant group (APA, 2020). For example, referring to a person as “urban” or a neighbourhood as “inner city” can be an accurate descriptor, but when such words are used as a substitute for racial identity, they illustrate cultural biases that equate certain races or groups with cities and poverty.

Gender

Language has a tendency to exaggerate perceived and stereotypical differences between men and women. The use of the term *opposite sex* presumes that men and women are opposites, like the positive and negative poles of a magnet, which is obviously not true or men and women wouldn’t be able to have successful interactions or relationships. One key to avoiding gender bias in language is to avoid the generic use of *he or her* when referring to something relevant to everyone. Instead, you can use a gender-neutral pronoun like *they* or *their*, or you can use *his or her* if appropriate (APA, 2020). We have lasting gendered associations with certain occupations that have tended to be male or female dominated. For example, certain words reflect the general masculine bias present in English. The following word pairs show the gender-biased term followed by an unbiased term: waitress/server, chairman/chair or chairperson, mankind/people, cameraman/camera operator, mailman/postal worker, sportsmanship/fair play.

Age

Language that includes age bias can be directed toward older or younger people. Descriptions of younger people often presume recklessness or inexperience, whereas those of older people presume frailty or disconnection. The term *elderly* generally refers to people over 65 years of age, but it has connotations of weakness, which isn't accurate because there are plenty of older people who are stronger and more athletic than people in their twenties and thirties. Even though it's generic, *older people* doesn't really have negative implications. More specific words that describe groups of older people include *grandmothers/grandfathers* (even though they can be fairly young, too), *retirees*, or *people over* 65 (APA, 2020).

Image 3.19

We have discussed a number of ways that culture and society can affect language and listening. Some examples are provided, but there are also many other groups and cultures that are important as well. This page, and the overall chapter, are meant to provide a foundational knowledge of these complex concepts, and from there, growth can continue. Listening itself is a complex and integral skill that will continue to develop over time, and our listening skills can vary from day to day. Intentional and continual focus on these skills is necessary for becoming competent communicators.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Recall a conversation that became awkward when you or the other person deviated from the social norms that manage conversation flow. Was the awkwardness at the beginning, end, or during a topic change?
2. After reviewing some of the common norms discussed in the chapter, what do you think was the source of the awkwardness?

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3.7 Review

Matching Review

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=509#h5p-5

Review Quiz

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=509#h5p-6

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CHAPTER IV

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

4.1 Introduction to Nonverbal Communication

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to

1. Describe the function, types, and methods of nonverbal communication
2. Identify nonverbal communication methods
3. Describe how nonverbal communication methods interact to create meaning
4. Outline ways to increase nonverbal communication competence
5. Describe nonverbal communication methods in a variety of contexts
6. Discuss cultural variations in nonverbal communication

Chapter Overview

When we think about communication, we most often focus on how we exchange information using words. Although verbal communication is important, humans relied on nonverbal communication for thousands of years before we developed the ability to communicate with words. **Nonverbal communication** is a process of generating meaning using behaviour other than words.

Rather than thinking of nonverbal communication as the opposite of or as separate from verbal communication, it is more accurate to view them as operating side by side, as part of the same system. However, they still have important differences. For example, the content and composition of verbal and nonverbal communication differs. In terms of content, nonverbal communication tends to do more of the work of communicating emotions than verbal communication. In terms of composition, although there are rules of grammar that structure our verbal communication, no such official guides govern our use of nonverbal signals. These are just some of the characteristics that differentiate verbal communication from nonverbal, and in this chapter, we will discuss in more detail the principles, functions, and types of nonverbal communication and conclude with some guidance on how to improve our nonverbal communication competence.

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4.2 Basics of Nonverbal Communication

As you may recall, a **channel** is the sensory route on which a message travels. Oral communication only relies on one channel because spoken language is transmitted through sound and picked up by our ears. Nonverbal communication, on the other hand, can be taken in by all five of our senses. Since most of our communication relies on visual and auditory channels, those will be the focus of this chapter. But we can also receive messages and generate meaning through touch, taste, and smell. Touch is an especially powerful form of nonverbal communication that we will discuss in this chapter.

To further define nonverbal communication, we need to distinguish between vocal and verbal aspects of communication. Verbal and nonverbal communication include both vocal and nonvocal elements. A **vocal element** of verbal communication is spoken words; for example, "Come back here." A vocal element of nonverbal communication is **paralanguage**, which is the vocalized but not verbal part of a spoken message, such as speaking rate, volume, and pitch. **Nonvocal elements** of verbal communication include the use of unspoken symbols to convey meaning. Writing and American Sign Language (ASL) are nonvocal examples of verbal communication and are not considered nonverbal communication. Nonvocal elements of nonverbal communication include body language such as gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact. **Gestures** are nonvocal and nonverbal since most of them do not refer to a specific word like a written or signed symbol does.

The video below provides a great overview of nonverbal communication and lays the foundation for this chapter.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=783#oembed-1

(Study Hall, 2022)

Principles of Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication has a distinct history and serves separate evolutionary functions from verbal communication. For example, nonverbal communication is primarily biologically based, whereas verbal communication is primarily culturally based. This is evidenced by the fact that some nonverbal communication has the same meaning across cultures, while no verbal communication systems share that same universal recognizability (Andersen, 1999). Nonverbal communication also evolved earlier than verbal communication and served an early and important survival function that helped humans later develop verbal communication. Although some of our nonverbal communication abilities, like our sense of smell, lost strength as our verbal capacities increased, other abilities such as paralanguage and movement have grown alongside verbal complexity. The fact that nonverbal communication is processed by an older part of our brain also makes it more instinctual and involuntary than verbal communication.

Interpersonal and Emotional Messages

You've probably heard that more meaning is generated from nonverbal communication than from verbal. Some studies have claimed that 90% of our meaning is derived from nonverbal signals, but more recent and reliable findings claim that it is closer to 65% (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006). We may rely more on nonverbal signals in situations where verbal and nonverbal messages conflict, and in situations where emotional or relational communication is taking place (Hargie, 2011). For example, when someone asks a question and we're not sure about the "angle" they are taking, we may hone in on nonverbal cues to fill in the meaning. For example, the question "What are you doing tonight?" could mean any number of things, but we can rely on posture, tone of voice, and eye contact to see if the person is just curious, suspicious, or hinting that they would like company for the evening. We also put more weight on nonverbal communication when determining a person's credibility. For example, if a classmate delivers a speech in class and their verbal content seems well-researched and unbiased, but their nonverbal communication is poor (their voice is monotone and they avoid eye contact and fidget, they will likely not be viewed as credible. Conversely, in some situations, verbal communication might carry more meaning than nonverbal. In interactions where information exchange is the focus, at a meeting at work, for example, verbal communication likely accounts for much more of the meaning generated. Despite this exception, a key principle of nonverbal communication is that it often takes on more meaning in interpersonal and emotional exchanges.

More Involuntary than Verbal

In some instances, we communicate verbally involuntarily. Exclamations are often verbal responses to a surprising stimulus; for example, we say "Ow!" when we stub a toe or shout "Stop!" when we see someone heading towards danger. Involuntary nonverbal signals are much more common, and though most nonverbal communication isn't completely involuntary, it is more below our consciousness than verbal communication and therefore more difficult to control.

The involuntary nature of much nonverbal communication makes it more difficult to control or "fake." For example, although you can consciously smile a little and shake hands with someone when you first see them, it's difficult to fake that you're "happy" to meet someone. Nonverbal communication leaks out in ways that expose our underlying thoughts or feelings. Spokespeople, lawyers, and other public representatives who are the "face" of a politician, celebrity, corporation, or organization must learn to control their facial expressions and other nonverbal communication so they can effectively convey the message of their employer or client without revealing their own personal thoughts and feelings. Poker players, therapists, police officers, doctors, teachers, and actors are also in professions that often require them to have more awareness of and control over their nonverbal communication.

Have you ever tried to conceal your surprise, suppress your anger, or act joyful when you weren't? Most people whose careers don't involve conscious manipulation of nonverbal signals find it difficult to control or suppress them. Although we can consciously decide to stop sending verbal messages, our nonverbal communication always has the potential to generate meaning for another person. The teenager who decides to shut out their father and not communicate with him still sends a message with his "blank" stare (a facial expression) and lack of movement (a gesture). In this sense, nonverbal communication is "irrepressible" (Andersen, 1999).

More Ambiguous

The symbolic and abstract nature of language can lead to misunderstandings, but nonverbal communication is even more ambiguous. As with verbal communication, most of our nonverbal signals can be linked to multiple meanings, but unlike words, many nonverbal signals do not have one specific meaning. If you've ever had someone wink at you and didn't know why, you've probably experienced this uncertainty. Did they wink to express their affection for you, their pleasure with something you just did, or because the two of you share some inside knowledge or a joke?

Just as we look at context clues in a sentence or paragraph to derive meaning from a particular word, we can look for context clues in various sources of information like the physical environment, other nonverbal signals, or verbal communication to make sense of a particular nonverbal cue. Unlike verbal communication, however, nonverbal communication doesn't have explicit rules of grammar that provide structure, order, and agreed-on patterns of usage. Instead, we implicitly learn norms of nonverbal communication, which leads to greater differences. In general, we exhibit more individual changes in our use of nonverbal communication than we do with verbal communication, which also increases the ambiguity of nonverbal communication.

More Credible

Although we can rely on verbal communication to fill in the blanks sometimes left by nonverbal expressions, we often put more trust in what people do over what they say. This is especially true in times of stress or danger, when our behaviours become more instinctual and we rely on older systems of thinking and acting that evolved before our ability to speak and write (Andersen, 1999). This innateness creates intuitive feelings about the genuineness of nonverbal communication, and this genuineness relates back to our earlier discussion about the sometimes involuntary and often subconscious nature of nonverbal communication. An example of the innateness of nonverbal signals can be found in children who have been blind since birth but still exhibit the same facial expressions as other children. In short, the involuntary or subconscious nature of nonverbal communication makes it less easy to fake, which makes it seem more honest and credible.

Functions of Nonverbal Communication

A primary function of nonverbal communication is to convey meaning by reinforcing, substituting for, or contradicting verbal communication. It is also used to influence others and regulate conversational flow. Perhaps even more important are the ways in which nonverbal communication functions as a central part of relational communication and identity expression.

Conveys Meaning

Nonverbal communication conveys meaning in a variety of ways. As we've already learned, verbal and nonverbal communication are two parts of the same system that often work side by side, helping us generate meaning. In terms of reinforcing verbal communication, gestures can help describe a space or shape that another person is unfamiliar with in ways that words alone cannot. Gestures also reinforce basic meaning—for example, pointing to the door when you tell someone to leave. Facial expressions reinforce the emotional states we convey through verbal communication; for example, smiling while telling a funny story better conveys your emotions (Hargie, 2011). Vocal variation can help us emphasize a particular part of a message, which helps reinforce a word or a sentence's meaning. For example, saying "How was *your* weekend?" conveys a different meaning than "How was your *weekend*?"

Image 4.1

Nonverbal communication can also substitute for verbal communication. It can convey much meaning when verbal communication isn't effective because of a language barrier. A language barrier is present when a person hasn't yet learned to speak or loses the ability to speak. For example, babies who have not yet developed language skills make facial expressions at a few months old that are similar to those of adults and therefore can generate meaning (Oster et al., 1992). People who have developed language skills but can't use them because they have temporarily or permanently lost them or because they are using incompatible language codes, as in some cross-cultural encounters, can still communicate nonverbally. Although it's always a good idea to learn some of the local language when you travel, gestures such as pointing or demonstrating the size or shape of something may suffice in basic interactions.

Last, nonverbal communication can convey meaning by contradicting verbal communication. As we learned earlier, we often perceive nonverbal communication to be more credible than verbal communication. This is especially true when we receive **mixed messages**, or messages in which verbal and nonverbal signals contradict each other. For example, a person may say, “You can’t do anything right!” in a mean tone but follow that up with a wink, which could indicate the person is teasing or joking. Mixed messages lead to uncertainty and confusion on the part of receiver, which leads us to look for more information to try to determine which message is more credible. If we are unable to resolve the discrepancy, we are likely to react negatively and potentially withdraw from the interaction (Hargie, 2011). Persistent mixed messages can also lead to relational distress and hurt a person’s credibility in professional settings.

Influences Others

Nonverbal communication can be used to influence people in a variety of ways, but the most common way is through deception. **Deception** is typically thought of as the intentional act of altering information to influence another person, which means that it extends beyond lying to include concealing, omitting, or exaggerating information. Although verbal communication is to blame for the content of the deception, nonverbal communication partnered with language makes the deceptive act more convincing. Since most of us intuitively believe that nonverbal communication is more credible than verbal communication, we often intentionally try to control our nonverbal communication when we are engaging in deception. Likewise, we try to evaluate other people’s nonverbal communication to determine the truthfulness of their messages. Deception is very common, but not all deception is malevolent, mean, or hurtful. Deception obviously has negative connotations, but people engage in deception for many reasons, including to excuse our own mistakes, to be polite to others, or to influence others’ behaviours or perceptions.

Regulates Conversational Flow

Conversational interaction has been likened to a dance, where each person has to make moves and take turns without stepping on the other's toes. Nonverbal communication helps us regulate our conversations so we don't end up constantly interrupting each other or waiting in awkward silence between speaker turns. Pitch, which is a part of vocalics, helps us cue others into our conversational intentions. A rising pitch typically indicates a question, and a falling pitch indicates the end of a thought or the end of a conversational turn. We can also use a falling pitch to indicate closure, which can be very useful at the end of a speech to signal to the audience that you are finished, which cues the applause and prevents an awkward silence that the speaker ends up filling with "That's it" or "Thank you." We also signal that our turn is coming to an end by stopping hand gestures and shifting our eye contact to the person who we think will speak next (Hargie, 2011). Conversely, we can "hold the floor" with nonverbal signals even when we're not exactly sure what we're going to say next. Repeating a hand gesture or using one or more verbal fillers can extend our turn even though we are not verbally communicating at the moment.

Image 4.2

Affects Relationships

To successfully relate to other people, we must possess some skill at encoding and decoding nonverbal communication. The nonverbal messages we send and receive influence our relationships in positive and negative ways and can work to bring people together or push them apart. Nonverbal communication in the form of tie signs, immediacy behaviours, and expressions of emotion are just three of many examples that illustrate how nonverbal communication affects our relationships.

Tie signs are nonverbal cues that communicate intimacy and signal the connection between two people. These relational indicators can be objects such as wedding rings or tattoos that are symbolic of another person or the relationship, actions such as sharing the same drinking glass, or touch behaviours such as hand-holding (Afifi & Johnson, 2005). **Touch behaviours** are the most frequently studied tie signs and can communicate much about a relationship based on the area being touched, the length of time the touch lasts, and the intensity of the touch. Kisses and hugs, for example, are considered tie signs, but a kiss on the cheek is different from a kiss on the mouth, and a full embrace is different from a half embrace. If you consider yourself a "people watcher," take note of the various tie signs you see people use and what they might say about the relationship.

Immediacy behaviours play a central role in bringing people together and have been identified by some scholars as the most important function of nonverbal communication (Andersen & Andersen, 2005). They are verbal and nonverbal behaviours that lessen the real or perceived physical and psychological distance between communicators and include things like smiling, nodding, making eye contact, and occasionally engaging in social, polite, or professional touch (Comadena et al., 2007). Immediacy behaviours are a good way of creating rapport—a friendly and positive connection between people. Skilled nonverbal communicators are more likely to be able to create rapport with others by using attention-getting expressiveness, warm initial greetings, and an ability to get "in tune" with others, which conveys empathy (Riggio, 1992). These skills are important to help initiate and maintain relationships.

Although verbal communication is our primary tool for solving problems and providing detailed instructions, nonverbal communication is our primary tool for communicating emotions. This makes sense when we remember that nonverbal communication emerged before verbal communication and was the channel through which we expressed anger, fear, and love for thousands of years of human history (Andersen, 1999). Touch and facial expressions are two primary ways we express emotions nonverbally. Love is a primary emotion that we express nonverbally and that forms the basis of our close relationships. Although no single facial expression for love has been identified, it is expressed through prolonged eye contact, close interpersonal distances, increased touch, and increased time spent together, among other things. Given many people's limited emotional vocabulary, nonverbal expressions of emotion are central to our relationships.

Expresses Our Identities

Nonverbal communication expresses who we are. Our identities (the groups to which we belong, our cultures, our hobbies and interests) are conveyed nonverbally through the way we set up our living and working spaces, the clothes we wear, the way we carry ourselves, and the accents and tones of our voices. Our physical bodies give others clues about who we are, and some of these features are more under our control than others. Height, for example, has been shown to influence how people are treated and perceived in various contexts. Our level of attractiveness also influences our identities and how people perceive us. Although we can temporarily alter our height or looks—for example, with different shoes or different colour contact lenses—we can only permanently alter these features using more invasive and costly measures such as cosmetic surgery. We have more control over some other aspects of nonverbal communication in terms of how we communicate our identities. For example, the way we carry and present ourselves through posture, eye contact, and tone of voice can be altered to present ourselves as warm or distant depending on the context.

Aside from our physical body, **artifacts**—the objects and possessions that surround us—also communicate our identities. Examples of artifacts include our clothes, jewellery, and living space decorations. We can also use nonverbal communication to express identity characteristics that do not match up with who we actually think we are. Through changes to nonverbal signals, a capable person can try to appear helpless, a guilty person can try to appear innocent, or an uninformed person can try to appear credible.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. To better understand nonverbal communication, try to think of an example to illustrate each of the four principles discussed in the chapter. Be integrative in your approach by including at least one example from an academic, professional, civic, and personal context.
2. When someone sends you a mixed message in which the verbal and nonverbal messages contradict each other, which one do you place more meaning on? Why?
3. Our personal presentation, style of dress, and surroundings such as a dorm room, apartment, car, or office send nonverbal messages about our identities. Analyze some of the nonverbal signals that your personal presentation or environment send. What do they say about who you are? Do they create the impression that you desire?

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4.3 Types of Nonverbal Communication

Just as verbal language is broken up into various categories, there are also different types of nonverbal communication. As we learn about each type of nonverbal signal, keep in mind that these signals often work in concert with each other, combining to repeat, modify, or contradict the verbal message being sent.

Kinesics

The word **kinesics** comes from the root word *kinesis*, which means "movement" and refers to the study of hand, arm, body, and face movements. Specifically, this section will outline the use of gestures, head movements and posture, eye contact, and facial expressions as nonverbal communication.

Gestures

There are three main types of **gestures**: adaptors, emblems, and illustrators (Andersen, 1999). **Adaptors** are touching behaviours and movements that indicate internal states typically related to arousal or anxiety. They can be targeted towards the self, objects, or others. In regular social situations, adaptors result from uneasiness, anxiety, or a general sense that we are not in control of our surroundings. Many of us subconsciously click pens, shake our legs, or engage in other adaptors during classes or meetings, or while waiting as a way to do something with our excess energy. Public speaking students who watch video recordings of their speeches often notice nonverbal adaptors that they weren't aware they used. In public speaking situations, people most commonly use self- or object-focused adaptors. Common self-touching behaviours such as scratching, twirling hair, or fidgeting with fingers or hands are considered **self-adaptors**. Some self-adaptors manifest internally as coughs or throat-clearing sounds. **Object adaptors** include metallic objects like paper clips or the staples holding notes together, and speakers often fidget with them while speaking. Other people play with dry-erase markers, their note cards, the change in their pockets, or the lectern while speaking. The use of object adaptors can also signal boredom, and people may play with the straw in their drink or peel the label off a bottle of beer. Smartphones have become common object adaptors, as people can fiddle with their phones to help ease anxiety. Finally, as noted, other adaptors are more common in social situations than during public speaking given the speaker's distance from audience members. Other adaptors involve adjusting or grooming others, similar to how primates such as chimpanzees pick things off each other. However, it would definitely be strange for a speaker to approach an audience member and pick lint off a sweater, fix a crooked tie, tuck a tag in, or pat down flyaway hair in the middle of a speech.

Image 4.3

Emblems are gestures that have a specific, agreed-on meaning. They are different from the signs used by hearing-impaired people or others who communicate using American Sign Language (ASL). Even though they have a generally agreed-on meaning, they are not part of a formal sign system like ASL, which is explicitly taught to a group of people. A hitchhiker's raised thumb and the "OK" sign with thumb and index finger connected in a circle with the other three fingers sticking up are all examples of emblems that have an agreed-on meaning or a meaning within a culture. Emblems can be still or in motion; for example, rolling your hands over and over in front of you says, "Move on."

Illustrators are the most common type of gesture and are used to illustrate the verbal message they accompany. For example, you might use hand gestures to indicate the size or shape of an object. Unlike emblems, illustrators do not typically have meaning on their own and are used more subconsciously than emblems. These largely involuntary and seemingly natural gestures flow from us as we speak but vary in terms of intensity and frequency based on context.

Although we are never explicitly taught how to use illustrative gestures, we do it automatically. Think about how you still gesture when having an animated conversation on the phone even though the other person can't see you.

Head Movements and Posture

Head movements and posture can be grouped together because they are often both used to acknowledge others and communicate interest or attentiveness. In terms of head movements, a head nod is a universal sign of acknowledgement in cultures where the formal bow is no longer used as a greeting. In these cases, the head nod essentially serves as an abbreviated bow. An innate and universal head movement is the head shake back and forth to signal "no." This nonverbal signal begins at birth, even before a baby has the ability to know that it has a corresponding meaning. Babies shake their head from side to side to reject their mother's breast and later shake their head to reject attempts to spoon-feed (Pease & Pease, 2004). This biologically based movement then sticks with us as a recognizable signal for "no." We also move our head to indicate interest. For example, when a person holds their head up, it typically indicates an engaged or neutral attitude, a head tilt indicates interest and is an innate submission gesture that exposes the neck and subconsciously makes people feel more trusting of us, and a head down signals a negative or aggressive attitude (Pease & Pease, 2004).

There are four general human **postures**: standing, sitting, squatting, and lying down (Hargie, 2011). Each of these postures has many variations, and when combined with particular gestures or other nonverbal cues, they can express a variety of different meanings. Most of our communication occurs while we are standing or sitting. One interesting standing posture involves putting our hands on our hips and is a nonverbal cue that we use subconsciously to make ourselves look bigger and show assertiveness. The elbows pointed out to the side prevents others from getting past us as easily and is a sign of attempted dominance or a gesture that says we're ready for action. In terms of sitting, leaning back shows informality and indifference, straddling a chair is a sign of dominance, but also some insecurity because the person is protecting the vulnerable front part of their body, and leaning forward shows interest and attentiveness (Pease & Pease, 2004).

Body language has a huge role in communication and is often misunderstood because it can be challenging to accurately read other people's body language. The video below is a TED Talk by Amy Cuddy focused on how your body language may shape who you are. As you are watching it, think about how your body language impacts you and the key role body language plays in communication.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=785#oembed-1

(Cuddy, 2012)

Eye Contact

We also communicate through eye behaviours, primarily **eye contact**. Although eye behaviours are often studied under the category of kinesics, they have their own branch of nonverbal studies called **oculesics**, which comes from the Latin word *oculus*, meaning "eye." The face and eyes are the main point of focus during communication, and along with our ears, our eyes take in most of the communicative information around us. The saying "The eyes are the windows to the soul" is actually accurate in terms of where people typically think others are "located," which is right behind the eyes (Andersen, 1999). Certain eye behaviours have become tied to personality traits or emotional states, as illustrated in phrases like "hungry eyes," "evil eyes," and "bedroom eyes."

Image 4.4

Eye contact serves several communicative functions ranging from regulating interaction to monitoring interaction, to conveying information, to establishing interpersonal connections. In terms of regulating communication, we use eye contact to signal to others that we are ready to speak, or we use it to cue others to speak. There is a good chance we've all been in that awkward situation where an teacher asks a question, no one else offers a response, and the teacher looks directly at us as if to say, "What do you think?" In that case, the teacher's eye contact is used to cue us to respond. During an interaction, eye contact also changes as we shift from speaker to listener. North Americans typically shift eye contact while speaking—looking away from the listener and then looking back at the listener's face every few seconds. Towards the end of our speaking turn, we make more direct eye contact with our listener to indicate that we are finishing up. While listening, we tend to make more sustained eye contact, not glancing away as regularly as we do while speaking (Martin & Nakayama, 2010).

Aside from regulating conversations, eye contact is also used to monitor interaction by taking in feedback and other nonverbal cues as well as to send information. Our eyes bring in the visual information we need to interpret people's movements, gestures, and eye contact. A speaker can use their eye contact to determine whether an audience is engaged, confused, or bored, and then adapt their message accordingly. Our eyes also send information to others. People know not to interrupt when we are in deep thought because we naturally look away from others when we are processing information. Making eye contact with others also communicates that we are paying attention and are interested in what another person is saying.

Eye contact can also be used to intimidate others. We have social norms about how much eye contact we should make with people, and those norms vary depending on the setting and the person. Staring at another person in some contexts could communicate intimidation, whereas in other contexts, it could communicate flirtation. As we have learned, eye contact is a key immediacy behaviour, and it signals to others that we are available for communication. Once communication begins, if it does, eye contact helps establish rapport or connection. We can also use our eye contact to signal that we do not want to make a connection with others. For example, in a public setting like an airport or a gym where people often make small talk, we can avoid making eye contact with others to indicate that we do not want to engage with strangers. Another person could use eye contact to try to coax you into speaking, though. For example, when one person continues to stare at another person who is not reciprocating eye contact, the person avoiding eye contact might eventually give in, become curious, or become irritated and say, “Can I help you with something?” As you can see, eye contact sends and receives important communicative messages that help us interpret others' behaviours, convey information about our thoughts and feelings, and facilitate or impede rapport or connection.

Facial Expressions

Our faces are the most expressive part of our bodies. Think of how photos are often intended to capture a particular expression "in a flash" to preserve for later viewing. Even though a photo is a snapshot in time, we can still interpret much meaning from a human face caught in a moment of expression, and basic facial expressions are recognizable by humans all over the world. Much research has supported the universality of a core group of facial expressions: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, and disgust. The first four are especially identifiable across cultures (Andersen, 1999). However, the triggers for these expressions and the cultural and social norms that influence their displays are still culturally diverse. If you've spent much time with babies you know that they're capable of expressing all these emotions. Getting to see the pure and innate expressions of joy and surprise on a baby's face is what makes playing peek-a-boo so entertaining for adults. As we get older, we learn and begin to follow display rules for facial expressions and other signals of emotion and also learn to better control our emotional expression based on the norms of our culture.

Smiles are powerful communicative signals. Although facial expressions are typically viewed as innate and several are universally recognizable, they are not always connected to an emotional or internal biological stimulus; they can actually serve a more social purpose. For example, most of the smiles we produce are primarily for others and are not just an involuntary reflection of an internal emotional state (Andersen, 1999). These social smiles, however, are slightly but perceptibly different from more genuine smiles. People generally perceive smiles as more sincere when the other person smiles "with their eyes." This particular type of smile is difficult if not impossible to fake because the muscles around the eye that are activated when we spontaneously or genuinely smile are not under our voluntary control. It is the involuntary and spontaneous contraction of these muscles that moves the skin around our cheeks, eyes, and nose to create a smile that's distinct from a fake or polite smile (Evans, 2001). People are able to distinguish the difference between these smiles, which is why photographers often engage in cheesy joking with adults or use props with children to induce a genuine smile before they snap a picture.

For example, when giving a speech, facial expressions can help set the emotional tone. In order to set a positive tone before you start speaking, briefly look at the audience and smile to communicate friendliness, openness, and confidence. Beyond your opening and welcoming facial expressions, facial expressions communicate a range of emotions and can be used to infer personality traits and make judgements about a speaker's credibility and competence. Facial expressions can communicate that a speaker is tired, excited, angry, confused, frustrated, sad, confident, smug, shy, or bored. For example, even if you aren't bored, a slack face with little animation may lead an audience to think that you are uninterested in your own speech, which isn't likely to motivate them to engage with what you are saying. So make sure your facial expressions are communicating an emotion, mood, or personality trait that you think your audience will view favourably and that will help you achieve your speech goals. Also make sure your facial expressions match the content of your speech. When delivering something lighthearted or humorous, a smile, bright eyes, and slightly raised eyebrows will nonverbally enhance your verbal message. When delivering something serious or sombre, a furrowed brow, a tighter mouth, and even a slight head nod can enhance that message. If your facial expressions and speech content are not consistent, your audience could become confused by the mixed messages, which could lead them to question your honesty and credibility.

Haptics

Think about how touch has the power to comfort someone in moment of sorrow when words alone cannot. The positive power of touch is countered by the potential for touch to be threatening because of its connection to sex and violence. To learn about the power of touch, we turn to **haptics**, which refers to the study of communication by touch. We probably get more explicit advice and instruction on how to use touch than any other form of nonverbal communication. A lack of nonverbal communication competence related to touch could have negative interpersonal consequences; for example, if we don't follow the advice we've been given about the importance of a firm handshake, a person might make negative judgements about our confidence or credibility. A lack of competence could have more dire negative consequences, including legal punishment, if we touch someone inappropriately (intentionally or unintentionally). Touch is necessary for human social development, and it can be welcoming, threatening, or persuasive. Research projects have found that students evaluated a library and its staff more favourably if the librarian briefly touched the patron while returning their library card, that female restaurant servers received larger tips when they touched patrons, and that people were more likely to sign a petition when the petitioner touched them during their interaction (Andersen, 1999).

There are several types of touch, including functional-professional, social-polite, friendship-warmth, love-intimacy, and sexual-arousal touch (Heslin & Apler, 1983). At the **functional-professional level**, touch is related to a goal or part of a routine professional interaction, which makes it less threatening and more expected. For example, we let hair stylists, doctors, nurses, tattoo artists, and security screeners touch us in ways that would otherwise be seen as intimate or inappropriate if not in a professional context. At the **social-polite level**, socially sanctioned touching behaviours help initiate interactions and show that others are included and respected. A handshake, a pat on the arm, and a pat on the shoulder are examples of social-polite touching. A handshake is actually an abbreviated hand-holding gesture, but we know that prolonged hand-holding would be considered too intimate and therefore inappropriate at the functional-professional or social-polite level. At the functional-professional and social-polite levels, touch still has interpersonal implications. Touch, although professional and not intimate, between hair stylist and client or between nurse and patient, has the potential to be therapeutic and comforting. In addition, a social-polite touch exchange plays into initial impression formation, which can have important implications for how an interaction and a relationship unfold.

Of course, touch is also important at more intimate levels. At the **friendship-warmth level**, touch is more important and more ambiguous than at the social-polite level. At this level, touch interactions are important because they serve a relational maintenance purpose and communicate closeness, liking, care, and concern. The types of touching at this level also vary greatly from more formal and ritualized to more intimate, which means friends must sometimes negotiate their own comfort level with various types of touch and may encounter some ambiguity if their preferences don't match up with their relational partner's. In a friendship, for example, too much touch can signal sexual or romantic interest, and too little touch can signal distance or unfriendliness. At the **love-intimacy level**, touch is more personal and is typically only exchanged between significant others, such as best friends, close family members, and romantic partners. Touching a person's face, holding hands, and full embraces are examples of touch at this level. Although this level of touch is not sexual, it does enhance feelings of closeness and intimacy and can lead to **sexual-arousal touch**, which is the most intimate form of touch.

Vocalics

We learned earlier that **paralanguage** refers to the vocalized but nonverbal parts of a message. **Vocalics** is the study of paralanguage, which includes the vocal qualities that go along with verbal messages, such as pitch, volume, rate, vocal quality, and verbal fillers (Andersen, 1999).

Pitch helps convey meaning, regulate conversational flow, and communicate the intensity of a message. Even babies recognize a sentence with a higher-pitched ending as a question. We also learn that greetings have a rising emphasis and farewells have a falling emphasis. Of course, no one ever tells us these things explicitly—we learn them through observation and practice. We do not pick up on some of the more subtle and/or complex patterns of paralanguage involving pitch until we are older. Children, for example, have a difficult time perceiving sarcasm, which is usually conveyed through paralinguistic characteristics like pitch and tone rather than the actual words being spoken (Andersen, 1999).

Paralanguage provides important context for the verbal content of speech. For example, **volume** helps communicate intensity. A louder voice is usually thought of as more intense, though a soft voice combined with a certain tone and facial expression can be just as intense. We typically adjust our volume based on our setting, the distance between people, and the relationship. In our age of computer-mediated communication, TYPING IN ALL CAPS is usually seen as offensive, as it is equated with shouting. A voice at a low volume or a whisper can be very appropriate when sending a covert message or flirting with a romantic partner, but it wouldn't enhance a person's credibility if used during a professional presentation.

Speaking rate refers to how fast or slow a person speaks and can lead others to form impressions about the speaker's emotional state, credibility, and intelligence. As with volume, variations in speaking rate can interfere with the ability of others to receive and understand verbal messages. A slow speaker could bore others and lead their audience's attention to wander. A fast speaker may be difficult to follow, and the rapid delivery can actually distract from the message. Speaking a little faster than the normal 120 to 150 words per minute, however, can be beneficial, as people tend to find speakers whose rate is above average more credible and intelligent (Buller & Burgoon, 1986). When speaking at a faster-than-normal rate, it is important that a speaker also clearly articulate and pronounce their words. A faster rate of speech combined with a pleasant tone of voice can also be beneficial for gaining compliance and can aid in persuasion.

Our **tone** of voice can be controlled somewhat with pitch, volume, and emphasis, but each voice has a distinct quality known as a vocal signature. Voices vary in terms of resonance, pitch, and tone, and some voices are more pleasing than others. People typically find that pleasing voices employ vocal variety and are not monotone, are lower pitched (particularly for males), and do not exhibit particular regional accents. Many people perceive nasal voices negatively and assign negative personality characteristics to them (Andersen, 1999).

Verbal fillers are sounds that fill gaps in our speech as we think about what to say next. They are considered a part of nonverbal communication because they are not like typical words that stand in for a specific meaning or meanings. Verbal fillers such as "um," "uh," "like," and "ah" are common in regular conversation and are not typically disruptive. The use of verbal fillers can help a person "keep the floor" during a conversation if they need to pause for a moment to think before continuing to communicate verbally. However, using verbal fillers in more formal settings, like in a public speech, can hurt a speaker's credibility.

The following is a review of the various communicative functions of vocalics:

- **Repetition:** Vocalic cues reinforce other verbal and nonverbal cues (e.g., saying "I'm not sure" with an uncertain tone)
- **Complementing:** Vocalic cues elaborate on or modify verbal and nonverbal meaning (e.g., the pitch and volume used to say "I love sweet potatoes" would add context to the meaning of the sentence, such as the degree to which the person loves sweet potatoes or the use of sarcasm)

- **Accenting:** Vocalic cues allow us to emphasize particular parts of a message, which helps determine meaning (e.g., "*She* is my friend," or "She is *my* friend," or "She is my *friend*")
- **Substituting:** Vocalic cues can take the place of other verbal or nonverbal cues (e.g., saying "uh-huh" instead of "I am listening and understand what you're saying")
- **Regulating:** Vocalic cues help regulate the flow of conversations (e.g., falling pitch and slowing rate of speaking usually indicate the end of a speaking turn)
- **Contradicting:** Vocalic cues may contradict other verbal or nonverbal signals (e.g., a person could say "I'm fine" in a quick, short tone that indicates otherwise)

Proxemics

Proxemics refers to the study of how space and distance influence communication. We only need look at the ways in which space shows up in common metaphors to see that space, communication, and relationships are closely related. For example, when we are content with and attracted to someone, we say we are "close" to that person. When we lose connection with someone, we may say that they are "distant." In general, space influences how people communicate and behave. Smaller spaces with a higher density of people often lead to breaches of our personal space bubbles. If this is a setting in which a high density of people is expected beforehand, such as at a crowded concert or on a bus during rush hour, then we make various communicative adjustments to manage the space issue. Unexpected breaches of personal space can lead to negative reactions, especially if we feel someone has violated our space voluntarily, meaning that a crowding situation didn't force them into our space. Additionally, research has shown that crowding can lead to criminal or delinquent behaviour, known as a "mob mentality" (Andersen, 1999). To better understand how proxemics functions in nonverbal communication, we will more closely examine the proxemic distances associated with personal space and the concept of territoriality.

Proxemic Distances

We all have varying definitions of what our "personal space" is, and these definitions are contextual and depend on the situation and the relationship. Although our bubbles are invisible, people are socialized into the norms of personal space within their cultural group. Scholars have identified four zones—public, social, personal, and intimate distance—and these are shown in Images 4.5 and 4.6 (Hall, 1968). The zones are more elliptical than circular, taking up more space in front, where our line of sight is, than at our sides or back where we can't monitor what people are doing. Even within a particular zone, interactions may differ depending on whether someone is in the outer or inner part of the zone.

Image 4.5

- The **public zone** starts about 12 feet (3.6 m) from a person and extends outward from there. This is the least personal of the four zones and would typically be used when a person is engaging in a formal speech and is removed from the audience to allow the audience to see or when a high-profile or powerful person like a celebrity or executive maintains such a distance as a sign of power or for safety and security reasons. In terms of regular interactions, we are often not obligated or expected to acknowledge or interact with people who enter our public zone. It would be difficult to have a deep conversation with someone at this level because you have to speak louder and don't have the physical closeness that is often needed to promote emotional closeness and/or establish rapport.

- Communication that occurs in the **social zone**, which is 4 to 12 feet (1.2 to 3.6 m) away from our body, is typically in the context of a professional or casual interaction, but not intimate or public. This distance is preferred in many professional settings because it reduces the suspicion of any impropriety. The expression "keep someone at an arm's length" means that someone is kept out of the personal space and kept in the social or professional space. If two people held up their arms and stood so that just the tips of their fingers were touching, they would be about 4 feet (1.2 m) away from each other, which is perceived as a safe distance because the possibility for intentional or unintentional touching doesn't exist. It is also possible to have people in the outer portion of our social zone but not feel obligated to interact with them, but when people come much closer than 6 feet (1.8 m) to us, then we often feel obligated to at least acknowledge their presence.
- Much of our communication occurs in the **personal zone,** which is what we typically think of as our "personal space bubble," and extends from 1.5 to 4 feet (0.45 to 1.2 m) away from our body. Much of this zone, as well as the intimate zone, is reserved for friends, close acquaintances, and significant others. In this zone, even though we are closer to the physical body of another person, we may use verbal communication to signal that our presence in this zone is friendly and not intimate. Even people who know each other could be

uncomfortable spending too much time in this zone unnecessarily. The personal zone is broken up into two subzones, which helps us negotiate close interactions with people who we may not be close to interpersonally (McKay et al., 1995). The **outer-personal zone** extends from 2.5 to 4 feet (0.6 to 1.2 m) and is useful for conversations that need to be private but that occur between people who are not interpersonally close. This zone allows for relatively intimate communication but doesn't convey the intimacy that a closer distance would, which can be beneficial in professional settings. The **inner-personal zone** extends from 1.5 to 2.5 feet (0.45 to 0.6 m) and is a space reserved for communication with people we are interpersonally close to or trying to get to know. In this subzone, we can easily touch the other person as we talk to them, briefly placing a hand on their arm or engaging in other light social touching that facilitates conversation, self-disclosure, and feelings of closeness.

- As we breach the invisible line that is 1.5 feet (0.45 m) from our body, we enter the **intimate zone**, which is reserved for only the closest friends, family, and romantic or intimate partners. It is impossible to completely ignore people when they are in this space, even if we are trying to pretend that we're ignoring them. A breach of this space can be comforting in some contexts and annoying or frightening in others.

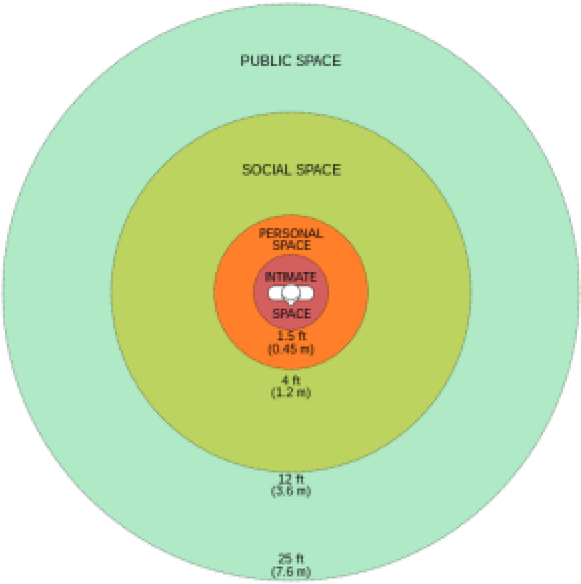

Image 4.6

Territoriality

Territoriality is an innate drive to take up and defend spaces. This drive is shared by many creatures and entities, ranging from packs of animals to individual humans to nations. Whether it's a gang territory, a neighbourhood claimed by a particular salesperson, your preferred place to sit in a restaurant, your usual desk in the classroom, or the seat you've marked to save while getting concessions at a sporting event, we claim certain spaces as our own. There are three main divisions for territory: primary, secondary, and public (Hargie, 2011). Sometimes our claim to a space is official. These spaces are known as our **primary territories** because they are marked or understood to be exclusively ours and under our control. A person's house, yard, room, desk, side of the bed, or shelf in the medicine cabinet could be considered primary territories.

Secondary territories don't belong to us and aren't exclusively under our control, but they are associated with us, which may lead us to assume that the space will be open and available to us when we need it without us taking any further steps to reserve it. This regularly happens in classrooms. Students often sit at the same desk or at least in the same general area as they did on the first day of class. There may be some small adjustments during the first couple of weeks, but a month into the semester, students are not moving much voluntarily. When someone else takes a student's regular desk, that student typically becomes annoyed.

Public territories are open to everyone. People are allowed to mark public territory and use it for a limited period of time, but space is often up for grabs, which makes public space difficult to manage for some people and can lead to conflict. To avoid this type of situation, people use a variety of objects that are typically recognized by others as nonverbal cues that mark a place as temporarily reserved—for example, jackets, bags, papers, or a drink. There is some ambiguity in the use of markers, though. A half-empty cup of coffee may be seen as trash and thrown away, which would be an annoying surprise to a person who left it to mark their table while visiting the restroom. For example, a full drink sitting on a table could reserve a space in a college coffeeshop for more than an hour, but a cup only half full usually only works as a marker of territory for less than 10 minutes. People have to decide how much value they want their marker to have. Obviously, leaving a laptop on a table indicates that the table is occupied, but it could also lead to the laptop being stolen. A pencil, on the other hand, could just be moved out of the way and the space taken.

Chronemics

Chronemics refers to the study of how time affects communication. Time can be classified into several different categories, including biological, personal, physical, and cultural time (Andersen, 1999). **Biological time** refers to the rhythms of living things. Humans follow a circadian rhythm, meaning that we are on a daily cycle that influences when we eat, sleep, and wake. When our natural rhythms are disturbed by all-nighters, jet lag, or other scheduling abnormalities, our physical and mental health and our communication competence and personal relationships can suffer. Keep biological time in mind as you communicate with others. Remember that early morning conversations and speeches may require more preparation to get yourself awake enough to communicate well and a more patient or energetic delivery to accommodate others who may still be getting warmed up for their day.

Personal time refers to the ways in which individuals experience time. The way we experience time varies based on our mood, our interest level, and other factors. Think about how quickly time passes when you are interested in and therefore engaged in something. A 50-minute college class may seem to drag on forever, whereas a three-hour class might zip by. Individuals also vary based on whether or not they are future or past oriented. People with a past orientation may want to reminisce about the past, reunite with old friends, and put considerable time into preserving memories and keepsakes in scrapbooks and photo albums. People who are future oriented may spend the same amount of time making career and personal plans, writing out to-do lists, or researching future vacations, potential retirement spots, or what book they're going to read next.

Physical time refers to the fixed cycles of days, years, and seasons. Physical time, especially seasons, can affect our mood and psychological state. Some people experience seasonal affective disorder, which leads them to experience emotional distress and anxiety during the changes of seasons, primarily from warm and bright to dark and cold (from summer to fall and winter).

Cultural time refers to how a large group of people view time. **Polychronic** people do not view time as a linear progression that needs to be divided into small units and scheduled in advance. They keep more flexible schedules and may engage in several activities at once. **Monochronic** people tend to schedule their time more rigidly and do only one thing at a time. A polychronic or monochronic orientation to time influences our social realities and how we interact with others.

Additionally, the way we use time depends in some ways on our status. For example, doctors can make their patients wait for extended periods of time, and executives and celebrities may run consistently behind schedule, making others wait for them. Promptness and the amount of time that is socially acceptable for lateness and waiting varies among individuals and contexts. Chronemics also covers the amount of time we spend talking. We've already learned that conversational turns and turn-taking patterns are influenced by social norms and help our conversations progress. We all know how annoying it can be when a person dominates a conversation or when we can't get a person to contribute anything.

Now that we have had a chance to discuss many aspects of nonverbal communications, we will turn the discussion in the next section to ways we can improve our nonverbal competence.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Provide some examples of how eye contact plays a

role in your communication throughout the day.

2. One of the key functions of vocalics is to add emphasis to our verbal messages to influence the meaning. Provide a meaning for each of the following statements based on which word is emphasized: "*She* is my friend," "She is *my* friend," and "She is my *friend*."
3. Many people do not think of time as an important part of our nonverbal communication. Provide an example of how chronemics sends nonverbal messages in academic settings, professional settings, and personal settings.

Attribution

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4.4 Improving Nonverbal Communication Competence

As we age, we internalize social and cultural norms related to sending (encoding) and interpreting (decoding) nonverbal communication. In terms of sending, the tendency of children to send unmonitored nonverbal signals lessens as we get older and begin to monitor and perhaps censor or mask them (Andersen, 1999). Likewise, as we become more experienced communicators, we tend to think that we become better at interpreting nonverbal messages. In this section, we will discuss some strategies for effectively encoding and decoding nonverbal messages. We receive little, if any, official instruction in nonverbal communication, but you can think of this chapter as a training manual to help improve your own nonverbal communication competence. As with all aspects of communication, improving your nonverbal communication takes commitment and continued effort. However, research shows that education and training in nonverbal communication can lead to quick gains in knowledge and skill (Riggio, 1992). Additionally, once someone puts an initial effort into improving their nonverbal encoding and decoding skills, and those new skills are put into practice, they are typically encouraged by the positive reactions from others. Remember that people enjoy interacting with others who are skilled at nonverbal encoding and decoding, which will be evident in their reactions, providing further motivation and encouragement to hone one's skills.

Guidelines for Sending Nonverbal Messages

First impressions matter. Nonverbal cues account for much of the content from which we form initial impressions, so it's important to know that people make judgements about our identities and skills after only a brief exposure. Our competence regarding and awareness of nonverbal communication can help determine how an interaction will proceed and, in fact, whether it will take place at all. People who are skilled at encoding nonverbal messages are more favourably evaluated after initial encounters. This is likely because people who are more nonverbally expressive are also more attention getting and engaging and make people feel more welcome and warm owing to their increased immediacy behaviours, all of which enhance perceptions of charisma.

Understand That Nonverbal Communication Is Multichannel

Be aware of the **multichannel** nature of nonverbal communication. We rarely send a nonverbal message in isolation. For example, a posture may be combined with a touch or eye behaviour to create what is called a **nonverbal cluster** (Pease & Pease, 2004). **Nonverbal congruence** refers to consistency among different nonverbal expressions within a cluster. Congruent nonverbal communication is more credible and effective than ambiguous or conflicting nonverbal cues. Even though you may intend for your nonverbal messages to be congruent, they may still be decoded in a way that doesn't match up with your intent, especially since nonverbal expressions vary in terms of their degree of conscious encoding. In this sense, the multichannel nature of nonverbal communication creates the potential for both increased credibility and increased ambiguity.

When we become more aware of the messages we are sending, we can monitor for nonverbal signals that are incongruent with other messages or may be perceived as such. If a student is talking to their instructor about their performance in the class and their concerns about their grade, the instructor may lean forward and nod, encoding a combination of a body orientation and a head movement that conveys attention. However, if the instructor regularly breaks off eye contact and looks anxiously at the office door, then they are sending a message that could be perceived as disinterest, which is incongruent with the overall message of care and concern they probably want to encode. Increasing our awareness of the multiple channels through which we send nonverbal cues can help us make our signals more congruent in the moment.

Understand That Nonverbal Communication Affects Our Interactions

Nonverbal communication affects our own and others' behaviours and communication. Changing our nonverbal signals can affect our thoughts and emotions. Knowing this allows us to have more control over the trajectory of our communication, possibly allowing us to intervene in a negative cycle. For example, if you are waiting in line to get your driver's licence renewed and the agents in front of you are moving more slowly than you'd like, and the person in front of you doesn't have their materials organized and is asking unnecessary questions, you might start to exhibit nonverbal clusters that signal frustration. You might cross your arms—a closing-off gesture—and combine that with wrapping your fingers tightly around one bicep and occasionally squeezing, which is a self-touch adaptor that results from anxiety and stress. The longer you stand like that, the more frustrated and defensive you will become because that nonverbal cluster reinforces and heightens your feelings. Increased awareness about these cycles can help you make conscious moves to change your nonverbal communication and, subsequently, your cognitive and emotional states (McKay et al., 1995).

Image 4.7

As your nonverbal encoding competence increases, you can strategically manipulate your behaviours. Restaurant servers, bartenders, car salespeople, realtors, and many others who work in a service or sales capacity know that part of "sealing the deal" is making people feel liked, valued, and important. The strategic use of nonverbal communication to convey these messages is largely accepted and expected in our society, and as customers or patrons, we often play along because it feels good in the moment to think that the other person actually cares about us.

As you get better at monitoring and controlling your nonverbal behaviours and understanding how nonverbal cues affect our interaction, you may show more competence in multiple types of communication. For example, people who are more skilled at monitoring and controlling nonverbal displays of emotion report that they are more comfortable public speakers (Riggio, 1992). Since speakers become more nervous when they think that audience members are able to detect their nervousness based on outwardly visible, mostly nonverbal cues, it is logical that confidence in one's ability to control those outwardly visible cues would result in a lessening of that common fear.

Understand How Nonverbal Communication Creates Rapport

Humans have evolved an innate urge to mirror each other's nonverbal behaviour, and though we aren't often aware of it, this urge influences our behaviour daily (Pease & Pease, 2004). Think, for example, about how people "fall into formation" when waiting in a line. Our nonverbal communication works to create an unspoken and subconscious cooperation, as people move and behave in similar ways. When one person leans to the left the next person in line may also lean to the left, and this shift in posture may continue all the way down the line to the end until someone else makes another movement and the whole line shifts again. This phenomenon is known as **mirroring**, which refers to the often subconscious practice of using nonverbal cues in a way that match those of the people around us. Mirroring sends implicit messages to others that say, "Look! I'm just like you." It evolved as an important social function in that it allowed early humans to more easily fit in with larger groups. Logically, early humans who were more successful at mirroring were more likely to secure food, shelter, and security, and therefore passed that genetic disposition down to us.

Understand How Nonverbal Communication Regulates Conversations

The ability to encode appropriate turn-taking signals can help ensure that we can hold the floor when needed in a conversation or work our way into a conversation smoothly without inappropriately interrupting someone or otherwise being seen as rude. People with nonverbal encoding competence are typically more "in control" of conversations. This regulating function can be useful in initial encounters when we are trying to learn more about another person and in situations where status differentials are present or compliance gaining or dominance are goals. Although close friends, family, and relational partners can sometimes be an exception, interrupting is generally considered rude and should be avoided. Even though verbal communication is most often used to interrupt another person, interruptions are still studied as a part of chronemics because they interfere with another person's "talk time." Instead of interrupting, you can use nonverbal signals like leaning in, increasing your eye contact, or using a brief gesture like subtly raising one hand or the index finger to signal to another person that you'd like to soon take the floor.

Understand How Nonverbal Communication Relates to Listening

Part of being a good listener involves nonverbal-encoding competence because nonverbal feedback in the form of head nods, eye contact, and posture can signal that a listener is paying attention and the speaker's message is being received and understood. Active listening, for example, combines good cognitive listening practices with outwardly visible cues that signal to others that we are listening. We all know from experience which nonverbal signals convey attentiveness and which convey a lack of attentiveness. Listeners are expected to make more eye contact with the speaker than the speaker makes with them, so it's important to "listen with your eyes" by maintaining eye contact, which signals attentiveness. Listeners should also avoid distracting movements in the form of self, other, and object adaptors. Being a higher self-monitor can help you catch nonverbal signals that might signal you aren't listening, at which point you could consciously switch to more active listening signals.

Understand How Nonverbal Communication Relates to Impression Management

The nonverbal messages we encode also help us express our identities and play into impression management, which is a key part of communicating to achieve identity goals. Being able to control nonverbal expressions and competently encode them allows us to better manage our persona and project a desired self to others; for example, a self that is perceived as competent, socially attractive, and engaging. Being nonverbally expressive during an initial interaction usually leads to a more favourable impression. So smiling, keeping an attentive posture, and offering a solid handshake help communicate confidence and enthusiasm that can be useful on a first date, during a job interview, when visiting family for the holidays, or when running into an acquaintance at the grocery store. Nonverbal communication can also impact the impressions you make as a student. Research has found that students who are more nonverbally expressive are liked more by their teachers and are more likely to have their requests met by their teachers (Mottet et al., 2004).

Increase Competence in Specific Channels of Nonverbal Communication

Although it is important to recognize that we send nonverbal signals through multiple channels simultaneously, we can also increase our nonverbal communication competence by becoming more aware of how it operates in specific channels.

Kinesics

The following guidelines may help you more effectively encode nonverbal messages sent using your hands, arms, body, and face.

Gestures

- Illustrators make our verbal communication more engaging. It is recommended that people doing phone interviews or speaking on the radio make an effort to gesture as they speak, even though people can't see the gestures, because it will make their words sound more engaging.
- Remember that adaptors can hurt your credibility in more formal or serious interactions. Figure out what your common adaptors are and monitor them so you can avoid creating unfavourable impressions.
- Gestures send messages about your emotional state. Since many gestures are spontaneous or subconscious, it is important to raise your awareness of them and monitor them. Be aware that clenched hands may signal aggression or anger, nail biting or fidgeting may signal nervousness, and finger tapping may signal boredom.

Eye Contact

- Eye contact is useful for initiating and regulating conversations. To make sure someone is available for interaction and to avoid being perceived as rude, it is usually a good idea to "catch their eye" before you start talking to them.

Image 4.8

- Avoiding eye contact or shifting your eye contact from place to place can lead others to think you are being deceptive or inattentive. Minimize distractions by moving a clock, closing a door, or closing window blinds to help minimize distractions that may lure your eye contact away.
- Although avoiding eye contact can be perceived as a sign of disinterest, low confidence, or negative emotionality, eye contact avoidance can be used positively as a face-saving strategy. The notion of **civil inattention** refers to a social norm that leads us to avoid making eye contact with people in situations that deviate from expected social norms, such as witnessing someone fall or being in close proximity to a stranger expressing negative emotions, such as crying. We also use civil inattention when we avoid making eye contact with others in crowded spaces (Goffman, 2010).

Facial Expressions

- You can use facial expressions to manage your expression of emotions to intensify what you're feeling, to diminish what you're feeling, to cover up what you're feeling, to express a different emotion than you're feeling, or to simulate an emotion that you're not feeling (Metts & Planalp, 2002).
- Be aware of the power of **emotional contagion**—the spread of emotion from one person to another. Since facial expressions are key for emotional communication, you may be able to strategically use your facial expressions to cheer someone up, lighten a mood, or create a more serious and sombre tone.
- Smiles are especially powerful as an immediacy behaviour and a rapport-building tool. Smiles can also help to disarm a potentially hostile person or de-escalate conflict. When you have a problem or complain in a customer service situation, always be sure to smile at the clerk, manager, or other person before you begin talking to help set a more positive tone for the interaction.

Vocalics

The following guidelines may help you more effectively encode nonverbal signals using paralanguage.

- Verbal fillers are often used subconsciously and can negatively affect your credibility and reduce the clarity of your message when you are speaking in more formal situations. In fact, verbal fluency is one of the strongest predictors of persuasiveness (Hargie, 2011). Becoming a higher self-monitor can help you notice your use of verbal fillers and begin to eliminate them. Beginner speakers can often reduce their use of verbal fillers noticeably over just a short period of time.
- Vocal variety increases listener and speaker engagement, understanding, information recall, and motivation. So having a more expressive voice that varies appropriately in terms of

rate, pitch, and volume can help you achieve communication goals related to maintaining attention, effectively conveying information, and getting others to act in a particular way.

Proxemics

The following guidelines may help you more effectively encode nonverbal signals related to interpersonal distances.

- When breaches of personal space occur, it is a social norm to make nonverbal adjustments such as lowering our level of immediacy, changing our body orientation, and using objects to separate ourselves from others. To reduce immediacy, we engage in civil inattention and reduce the amount of eye contact we make with others. We also shift the front of our body away from others because it has most of our sensory inputs and also allows access to body parts that are considered vulnerable, such as the stomach, face, and genitals (Andersen, 1999). When we can't shift our bodies, we often use coats, bags, books, or our hands to physically separate or block off the front of our bodies from others.

Image 4.9

- Although pets and children are often granted more leeway to breach other people's space since they are still learning social norms and rules, as a pet owner, parent, or temporary caretaker, be aware of this possibility and try to prevent such breaches or correct them when they occur.

Chronemics

The following guidelines may help you more effectively encode nonverbal signals related to time.

- In terms of talk time and turn-taking, research shows that

people who take a little longer with their turn, holding the floor slightly longer than normal, are actually seen as more credible than people who talk too much or too little (Andersen, 1999).
- Our lateness or promptness can send messages about our professionalism, dependability, or other personality traits. Formal time usually applies to professional situations in which we are expected to be on time or even a few minutes early. You generally wouldn't want to be late for work, a job interview, a medical appointment, and so on. Informal time applies to casual and interpersonal situations in which there is much more variation in terms of expectations for promptness. For most social meetings with one other person or a small group, you can be five minutes late without having to offer much of an apology or explanation. For larger social gatherings, you can usually be up to 15 minutes late as long as your late arrival doesn't interfere with the host's plans or preparations.
- Quality time is an important part of interpersonal relationships, and sometimes time has to be budgeted so that it can be saved and spent with certain people or on certain occasions, such as date nights for couples or family time for parents and children or other relatives.

Guidelines for Interpreting Nonverbal Messages

We learn to decode or interpret nonverbal messages through practice and by internalizing social norms. Following the suggestions to become a better encoder of nonverbal communication will lead to better decoding competence through increased awareness. Since nonverbal communication is more ambiguous than verbal communication, we have to learn to interpret these cues as clusters within contexts. People watching is a great way to increase knowledge about nonverbal communication.

Just by consciously taking in the variety of nonverbal signals around us, we can build our awareness and occasionally be entertained. Skilled decoders of nonverbal messages are said to have nonverbal sensitivity, which, very similarly to skilled encoders, leads them to have larger social networks, be more popular, and exhibit less social anxiety (Riggio, 1992).

There Is No Nonverbal Dictionary

The first guideline for decoding nonverbal communication is to realize that there is no nonverbal dictionary. Some nonverbal scholars and many nonverbal skill trainers have tried to catalogue nonverbal communication like we do verbal communication to create dictionary-like guides that people can use to interpret nonverbal signals. Although those guides may contain many valid "rules" of nonverbal communication, those rules are always relative to the individual, social, and cultural contexts in which an interaction takes place. In short, you can't read people's nonverbal communication like a book, and there are no A-to-Z guides that capture the complexity of nonverbal communication (DePaulo, 1992). Rather than using a list of specific *rules*, it may be better for people to develop more general *tools* that will be useful in and adaptable to a variety of contexts.

Recognize That Certain Nonverbal Signals Are Related

The second guideline for decoding nonverbal signals is to recognize that certain nonverbal signals are related. Nonverbal rulebooks aren't effective because they typically view a nonverbal signal in isolation, similar to how dictionaries separately list denotative definitions of words. To get a better understanding of the meaning behind nonverbal cues, we can look at them as progressive or layered. For example, people engaging in negative critical evaluation of a speaker may cross their legs, cross one arm over their stomach, and put the other arm up so the index finger is resting close to the eye while the chin rests on the thumb (Pease & Pease, 2004). A person wouldn't likely perform all those signals simultaneously. Instead, they would likely start with one and then layer more cues on as the feelings intensified. If we notice that a person is starting to build related signals like the ones above onto one another, we might be able to intervene in the negative reaction that is building. Of course, as nonverbal cues are layered on, they may contradict other signals, in which case we can turn to context clues to aid our interpretation.

Read Nonverbal Cues in Context

We can also gain insight into how to interpret nonverbal cues through personal contexts. People have distinctive nonverbal behaviours that create an individual context that varies with each person. Even though we generally fit into certain social and cultural patterns, some people deviate from those norms. For example, some cultures tend towards less touching and greater interpersonal distances during interactions. Those from North America fall into this general category, but there are people who were socialized into these norms and who as individuals deviate from them and touch more and stand closer to others while conversing. As a different communicator inches towards their conversational partner, the partner may move back to re-establish the interpersonal distance norm. Such deviations may lead people to misinterpret sexual or romantic interest or feel uncomfortable. Although these actions could indicate such interest, they could also be idiosyncratic. As this example shows, these individual differences can increase the ambiguity of nonverbal communication, but when observed over a period of time, they can actually help us generate meaning.

Image 4.10

Try to compare observed nonverbal cues to a person's typical or baseline nonverbal behaviour to help avoid misinterpretation. In some instances it is impossible to know what sorts of individual nonverbal behaviours or differences people have because there isn't a relational history. In such cases, we have to turn to our knowledge about specific types of nonverbal communication or draw from more general contextual knowledge.

Detecting Deception

Although people rely on nonverbal more than verbal communication to determine whether or not a person is being deceptive, there is no set profile of deceptive behaviours that you can use to create your own nonverbally based lie detector. Research finds that people generally perceive themselves as good detectors of deception, but when tested, people only accurately detect deception at levels a little higher than what we would by random chance. Given that deception is so widespread and common, it is estimated that we actually only detect about half the lies we are told, meaning that we all operate on false information without even being aware of it. Although this may be disappointing to those of you who like to think of yourselves as human lie detectors, there are some forces working against our deception-detecting abilities. One such force is the **truth bias**, which leads us to believe that a person is telling the truth, especially if we know and like that person. Conversely, people who have interpersonal trust issues and people in occupations such as law enforcement may also have a **lie bias**, meaning they assume people are lying to them more often than not (Andersen, 1999).

It is believed that deceptive nonverbal behaviours result from **nonverbal leakage**, which refers to nonverbal behaviours that occur as we try to control the cognitive and physical changes that happen during states of cognitive and physical arousal (Hargie, 2011). Anxiety is a form of arousal that leads to bodily reactions like those we experience when we perceive danger or become excited for some other reason. Some of these reactions are visible, such as increased movement, and some are audible, such as changes in voice pitch, volume, or rate. Other reactions, such as changes in the electrical conductivity of the skin, increased breathing, and increased heart rate, are not always detectable. Polygraph machines, or "lie detectors," work on the principle that the presence of signs of arousal is a reliable indicator of deception in situations where other factors that would also evoke such signals are absent.

So the nonverbal behaviours that we associate with deception don't actually stem from the deception but from the attempts to control the leakage that results from cognitive and physiological changes. These signals appear and increase because we are conflicted about the act of deception, and because we are conditioned to believe that being honest is better than lying, we are afraid of getting caught and punished, even when we are motivated to succeed with the act of deception—in essence, to get away with it. Leakage also occurs because of the increased cognitive demands associated with deception. Our cognitive activity increases when we have to decide whether to engage in deception or not, which often involves some internal debate. If we decide to engage in deception, we then have to compose a fabrication or execute some other manipulation strategy that we think is believable. To make things more complicated, we usually tailor our manipulation strategy to the person to whom we are speaking. In short, lying isn't easy because it requires us to go against social norms and deviate from the comfortable and familiar communication scripts that we rely on for so much of our interaction. Of course, skilled and experienced deceivers develop new scripts that can also become familiar and comfortable and allow them to engage in deception without arousing as much anxiety or triggering physical reactions to it (Andersen, 1999).

There are certain nonverbal cues that have been associated with deception, but the problem is that these cues are also associated with other behaviours, which could lead to the assumption that someone is being deceptive when they are actually nervous, guilty, or excited. In general, people who are more expressive are better deceivers, and people who are typically anxious are not good liars. Also, people who are better self-monitors are better deceivers because they are aware of verbal and nonverbal signals that may "give them away" and may be better able to control or account for them. Research also shows that people get better at lying as they get older because they learn more about the intricacies of communication signals and they also get more time to practise (Andersen, 1999). Studies have found that actors, politicians, lawyers, and salespeople are also better liars because they are generally higher self-monitors and have learned how to suppress internal feelings and monitor their external behaviours.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. As was indicated earlier, research shows that instruction in nonverbal communication can lead people to make gains in their nonverbal communication competence. List some nonverbal skills that you think are important in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic.
2. Using concepts from this section, analyze your own nonverbal communication competence. What are your strengths and weaknesses?
3. To understand how chronemics relates to nonverbal communication norms, answer the following questions:
    - In what situations is it important to be early?
    - In what situations can you arrive late?
    - How long would you wait for someone you were meeting for a group project for a class? A date? A job interview?

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Kamala Harris, example of a woman who overcame systemic challenges, now in a high position in government by United States Senate – The Office of Kamala Harris, Public domain

4.5 Nonverbal Communication in Context

Nonverbal communication receives less attention than verbal communication as part of our everyday lives. Learning more about nonverbal communication and becoming more aware of our own and others' use of nonverbal cues can help us be better relational partners and professionals. In addition, learning about cultural differences in nonverbal communication is important for people travelling abroad but also because of our increasingly multinational business world and the expanding diversity and increased frequency of intercultural communication within our own borders.

Nonverbal Communication in Relational Contexts

A central, if not primary, function of nonverbal communication is the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Further, people who are skilled at encoding nonverbal messages have various interpersonal advantages, including being more popular, having larger social networks consisting of both acquaintances and close friends, and being less likely to be lonely or socially anxious (Riggio, 1992).

Image 4.11

Nonverbal communication increases our expressivity, and people generally find attractive and want to pay more attention to things that are expressive. This increases our chances of initiating interpersonal relationships. Relationships then form as a result of some initial exchanges of verbal and nonverbal information through mutual self-disclosure. As the depth of self-disclosure increases, messages become more meaningful if they are accompanied by matching nonverbal cues. Impressions formed at this stage of interaction help determine whether or not a relationship will progress. As relationships progress from basic information exchange and the establishment of early interpersonal bonds to more substantial emotional connections, nonverbal communication plays a more central role. As we've learned, nonverbal communication conveys much emotional meaning, so the ability to effectively encode and decode appropriate nonverbal messages sent through facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and touch leads to high-quality interactions that are rewarding for the communicators involved.

Nonverbal communication helps maintain relationships once they have moved beyond the initial stages by helping us communicate emotions and seek and provide social and emotional support. In terms of communicating emotions, competent communicators know when it is appropriate to express emotions and whether more self-regulation is needed. They also know how to adjust their emotional expressions to fit various contexts and individuals, which is useful in preventing emotional imbalances within a relationship. Emotional imbalances occur when one relational partner expresses too much emotion in a way that becomes a burden for the other person. Ideally, each person in a relationship is able to express their emotions in a way that isn't too taxing for the other person. Occasionally, one relational partner may be going through an extended period of emotional distress, which can become very difficult for other people in their life. Since people with nonverbal communication competence are already more likely to have larger social support networks, it is likely that they will be able to spread around their emotional communication, specifically related to negative emotions, in ways that do not burden others. Unfortunately, since people with less nonverbal skill are likely to have smaller social networks, they may end up targeting one or two people for their emotional communication, which could lead the other individuals to withdraw from the relationship.

Expressing the need for support is also an important part of relational maintenance. People who lack nonverbal encoding skills may send unclear or subtle cues requesting support that are not picked up on by others, which can lead to increased feelings of loneliness. Skilled encoders of nonverbal messages, on the other hand, are able to appropriately communicate the need for support in recognizable ways. As relationships progress in terms of closeness and intimacy, nonverbal signals become a shorthand form of communicating because information can be conveyed with a particular look, gesture, tone of voice, or posture. Family members, romantic couples, close friends, and close colleagues can bond over their familiarity with each other's nonverbal behaviours, which creates a shared relational reality that is unique to the relationship.

Nonverbal Communication in Professional Contexts

In surveys of current professionals and managers, most report that nonverbal skills are important to their jobs (DePaulo, 1992). Although important, there is rarely any training or instruction related to nonverbal communication, and a consistent issue that has been reported by employees has been difficulty with mixed messages coming from managers. Interpreting contradictory verbal and nonverbal messages is challenging in any context and can have negative effects on job satisfaction and productivity. A supervisor who gives positive and negative feedback regularly and in periodic performance evaluations, it is important to be able to match nonverbal signals with the content of the message. For example, appropriate nonverbal cues can convey the seriousness of a customer or coworker complaint, help ease the delivery of constructive criticism, or reinforce positive feedback. Professionals also need to be aware of how context, status, and power intersect with specific channels of nonverbal communication. For example, even casual touching of supervisees, mentees, or employees may be considered condescending or inappropriate in certain situations. A well-deserved pat on the back is different from an unnecessary hand on the shoulder to say hello at the start of a business meeting.


Image 4.12

In professional contexts, managers and mentors with nonverbal decoding skills can exhibit sensitivity to others' nonverbal behaviour and better relate to employees and mentees. In general, interpreting emotions from nonverbal cues can have interpersonal and professional benefits. One study found that salespeople who were skilled at recognizing emotions through nonverbal cues sold more products and earned higher salaries (Byron et al., 2007). Aside from bringing financial rewards, nonverbal communication also helps create supportive climates. Bosses, supervisors, and service providers such as therapists can help create rapport and a positive climate by consciously mirroring the nonverbal communication of their employees or clients. In addition, mirroring the nonverbal communication of others during a job interview, sales pitch, or performance evaluation can help put the other person at ease and establish rapport. Much of the mirroring we do is natural, so trying to overcompensate may actually be detrimental, but engaging in self-monitoring and making small adjustments could be beneficial (DePaulo, 1992).

You can also use nonverbal communication to bring positive attention to yourself. Being able to nonverbally encode turn-taking cues can allow people to contribute to conversations at relevant times, and getting an idea or a piece of information or feedback in at the right time can help bring attention to your professional competence. Being able to encode an appropriate amount of professionalism and enthusiasm during a job interview can also aid in desired impression formation because people make judgements about others' personalities based on their nonverbal cues. A person who comes across as too enthusiastic may be seen as pushy or fake, and a person who comes across as too relaxed may be seen as unprofessional and unmotivated.

Nonverbal Communication and Culture

As with other aspects of communication, norms for nonverbal communication vary from country to country and also among cultures within a particular country. We have already learned that some nonverbal communication behaviours appear to be somewhat innate because they are universally recognized. Two such universal signals are the "eyebrow flash" of recognition when we see someone we know and the open hand and the palm up gesture that signals a person would like something or needs help (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Smiling is also a universal nonverbal behaviour, but the triggers that lead a person to smile vary from culture to culture. The expansion of media, particularly from Canada, the United States, and other Western countries around the world, is leading to more nonverbal similarities among cultures, but the biggest cultural differences in nonverbal communication occur within the categories of eye contact, touch, and personal space (Pease & Pease, 2004). Take the time to watch the video below as it reviews some of the nonverbal communication concepts we covered in this chapter and relates them to differences within cultures.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=789#oembed-1

(Study Hall, 2022)

Next, we will give an overview of some interesting and instructive differences within several channels of nonverbal communication that we have discussed so far. As you read, remember that these are not absolute in that nonverbal communication, like other forms of communication, is influenced by context and varies among individuals within a particular cultural group as well.

Kinesics

Cultural variations in the way we gesture, use head movements, and use eye contact fall under the nonverbal category of **kinesics**.

Gestures

Remember that **emblems** are gestures that correspond to a word and an agreed-on meaning. When we use our fingers to count, we are using emblematic gestures, but even our way of counting varies among cultures (Pease & Pease, 2004). You could fairly accurately separate British people and North Americans from French, Greek, and German people based on a simple and common gesture. Try this exercise—first, display with your hand the number five. Second, keeping the five displayed, change it to a two. If you are from North America or Britain, you are probably holding up your index finder and your middle finger. If you are from a continental European country, you are probably holding up your thumb and index finger. While North Americans and Brits start counting on their index finger and end with five on their thumb, Europeans start counting on their thumb and end with five on their pinky finger.

Image 4.13

How you use your hands can also get you into trouble if you're unaware of cultural differences (Pease & Pease, 2004). For example, the "thumbs up" gesture, as we just learned, can mean "one" in mainland Europe, but it is also a signal for hitchhiking or means "good," "good job," "way to go," or "OK" in many other cultures. Two hands up with the palms facing outward can signal "ten" in many Western countries and is recognized as a signal for "I'm telling the truth" or "I surrender" in many cultures.

Head Movements

Bowing is a nonverbal greeting ritual that is more common in Asian cultures than Western cultures, but the head nod, which is a common form of acknowledgement in many cultures, is actually an abbreviated bow. Japan is considered a **noncontact culture**, which refers to cultural groups in which people stand farther apart while talking, make less eye contact, and touch less during regular interactions. Because of this, bowing is the preferred nonverbal greeting over handshaking. Bows vary based on status, with higher status people bowing the least. For example, in order to indicate the status of another person, a Japanese businessperson may bow deeply. An interesting ritual associated with the bow is the exchange of business cards when greeting someone in Japan. This exchange allows each person to view the other's occupation and title, which provides useful information about the other person's status and determines who should bow more. Since bowing gives each person a good view of the other person's shoes, it is very important to have clean shoes that are in good condition since they play an important part of initial impression formation.

Eye Contact

In some cultures, avoiding eye contact is considered a sign of respect. However, such eye contact aversion could also be seen as a sign that the other person is being deceptive, is bored, or is being rude. Some Indigenous groups teach that people should avoid eye contact with elders, teachers, and other people with status. This can create issues in classrooms when teachers are unaware of this norm and may consider a student's lack of eye contact as a sign of insubordination or lack of engagement, which could lead to false impressions that the student is a troublemaker or less intelligent.

Haptics

As we've learned, touch behaviours are important during initial interactions, and cultural differences in these nonverbal practices can lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding. For example, shaking hands as a typical touch greeting but varies among cultures (Pease & Pease, 2004). It is customary for British, Australian, German, Canadian, and American colleagues to shake hands when meeting each other for the first time and then to shake again when departing company. In Canada or the United States, colleagues do not normally shake hands again if they see each other once more later in the day, but European colleagues may shake hands with each other several times a day. Once a certain level of familiarity and closeness is reached, North American colleagues will likely not even shake hands daily unless engaging in some more formal interaction, but many European colleagues will continue to shake each time they see one another. Some French businesspeople have been known to spend up to 30 minutes a day shaking hands. The squeezes and up-and-down shakes used during handshakes are often called "pumps," and the number of pumps used in a handshake also varies among cultures. Although the Germans and French shake hands more often throughout the day, they typically only give one or two pumps and then hold the shake for a couple seconds before letting go. The British tend to give three to five pumps, and Canadians tend to give five to seven pumps. This can be humorous to watch at a multinational business event, but it also affects the initial impressions people make of each other. A Canadian may think that a German is being unfriendly or distant because of their single hand pump, whereas a German may think that a Canadian is overdoing it with seven.

Contact cultures are cultural groups in which people stand closer together, engage in more eye contact, touch more frequently, and speak more loudly. Italians are especially known for their vibrant nonverbal communication in terms of gestures, volume, eye contact, and touching, which not surprisingly places them in the contact culture category. Italians use hand motions and touching to regulate the flow of conversations, and when non-Italians don't know how to mirror an Italian's nonverbal communication, they may not get to contribute much to the conversation, which likely feeds into the stereotype of Italians as domineering in conversations or overly expressive. For example, Italians speak with their hands raised as a way to signal that they are holding the floor for their conversational turn. If their conversational partner starts to raise their hands, the Italian might gently touch the other person and keep on talking. Conversational partners often interpret this as a sign of affection or of the Italian's passion for what they are saying. In fact, it is a touch intended to keep the partner from raising their hands, which would signal that the Italian's conversational turn is over and the other person now has the floor. It has been suggested that in order to get a conversational turn, you must physically grab the other person's hands in midair and pull them down. While this would seem very invasive and rude to northern Europeans and North Americans, it is a nonverbal norm in Italian culture and may be the only way to get to contribute to a conversation (Pease & Pease, 2004).

Vocalics

The volume at which we speak is influenced by specific contexts and is more generally influenced by our culture. In European countries like France, England, Sweden, and Germany, it is not uncommon to find restaurants that have small tables very close together. In many cases, two people dining together may be sitting at a table that is actually touching the table of another pair of diners. Most North Americans would consider this a violation of personal space, and Europeans often perceive North Americans to be rude in such contexts because they do not control the volume of their conversations more. Since personal space is usually more plentiful in places such as Canada and the United States, people are used to speaking at a level that is considered loud to many cultures where less personal space is the norm .

Proxemics

Cultural norms for personal space vary much more than some other nonverbal communication channels such as facial expressions, which have more universal similarity and recognizability. We have already learned that contact and noncontact cultures differ in their preferences for touch and interpersonal distance. Countries in South America and southern Europe exhibit characteristics of contact cultures, whereas countries in northern Europe and Southeast Asia exhibit noncontact cultural characteristics. Because of the different comfort levels with personal space, a Guatemalan and a Canadian might come away with differing impressions of each other because of proxemic differences. The Guatemalan may feel that the Canadian is standoffish, and the Canadian may feel that the Guatemalan is pushy or aggressive.

Chronemics

The United States, Canada and many European countries have a **monochronic** orientation to time, meaning that time is seen as a commodity that can be budgeted, saved, spent, and wasted. Events are to be scheduled in advance and have set beginning and ending times. Countries such as Spain and Mexico have a **polychronic** orientation to time. Appointments may be scheduled at overlapping times, making an "orderly" schedule impossible. People may also miss appointments or deadlines without offering an apology, which would be considered very rude by a person with a monochronic orientation to time. People from cultures with a monochronic orientation to time are frustrated when people from polychromic cultures cancel appointments or close businesses for family obligations. Conversely, people from polychromic cultures feel that Canadians, for example, follow their schedules at the expense of personal relationships (Martin & Nakayama, 2010).

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Identify some nonverbal behaviours that would signal a positive interaction on a first date and on a job interview. Then identify some nonverbal behaviours that would signal a negative interaction in each of those contexts.
2. Discuss an experience where you had some kind of miscommunication or misunderstanding because of cultural differences in encoding and decoding nonverbal messages. What did you learn in this chapter that could help you in similar future interactions?

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Man in white suit, thumbs up, looking at viewer by Katusali, CC BY-SA 4.0

4.6 Review

Matching Review

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=791#h5p-7

Review Quiz

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=791#h5p-8

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CHAPTER V

COMMUNICATION AND EMOTIONS WITHIN RELATIONSHIPS

5.1 Introduction to Communication and Emotions within Relationships

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to

1. Describe the different stages of relationships and the benefits of effective communication within them
2. Describe the role and effects of self-disclosure in interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships
3. Describe strategies for expressing and managing emotions
4. Identify different forms of fallacies
5. Explain emotional intelligence and its impact on interpersonal communication
6. Describe cultural variations in the expression of emotions

Chapter Overview

We all have various forms of relationships with others in our lives. These may include personal, professional, romantic, or friendship-based relationships. All of these are important parts of our everyday lives and, as such, the communication we use in these relationships is important as well. How do we come to form relationships with friends, family, romantic partners, and co-workers? Why are some of these relationships more exciting, stressful, enduring, or short-lived than others? Are we guided by fate, astrology, luck, personality, or other forces to the people we like and love? Emotions, emotional intelligence, self-disclosure, and key stages of relationship building are important considerations when answering these questions. This chapter will investigate these concepts and try to answer some of the questions listed above.

5.2 Communication in Relationships

We will begin this section by discussing different forms and stages of relationships and providing the foundation for discussing the various forms of communication and emotions that are involved in these relationships. Communication and the accompanying emotions play an integral role in all relationships, whether they are personal, social or professional.

We can classify our key relationships by distinguishing between our personal and social relationships (VanLear et al., 2006). **Personal relationships** meet emotional, relational, and instrumental needs because they are intimate, close, and interdependent relationships and include those we have with best friends, partners, or immediate family. **Social relationships** occasionally meet our needs but lack the closeness and interdependence of personal relationships. Examples of social relationships include co-workers, distant relatives, and acquaintances. Another distinction useful for categorizing relationships is whether or not they are voluntary. For example, some personal relationships are voluntary, such as those with romantic partners, and others are involuntary, like those with close siblings. Likewise, some social relationships are voluntary, such as those with acquaintances, and others are involuntary, like those with neighbours or distant relatives. You can see how various relationships fall into each of these dimensions. Now that we have a better understanding of how we define relationships, we will examine the stages that most of our relationships go through as they move from formation to termination.

The 10 Stages of Relational Interaction

Communication is at the heart of forming our interpersonal relationships. We reach the achievement of relating through the everyday conversations and otherwise trivial interactions that form the fabric of our relationships. It is through our communication that we adapt to the dynamic nature of our relational worlds, given that relational partners do not enter each encounter or relationship with compatible expectations. Communication allows us to test and be tested by our potential and current relational partners. It is also through communication that we respond when someone violates or fails to meet those expectations (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009).

Knapp's relational model has **10 established stages of interaction** that can help us understand how relationships come together and come apart (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009). We should keep the following things in mind about this model of relationship development: relational partners do not always go through the stages in order, some relationships do not experience all the stages, we do not always consciously move between stages, and coming together and coming apart are not inherently good or bad. Relationships are always changing—they are dynamic. Although this model has often been applied to romantic relationships, most relationships follow a similar pattern that may be adapted to a particular context.

The following video provides an overview of much of the content in this section and provides a foundational understanding of the development of relationships and the communication in them.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online *here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=968#oembed-1*

(Study Hall, 2022)

Stage 1: Initiating

In the **initiating stage**, people size each other up and try to present themselves favourably. Whether you run into someone in the hallway at school or in the produce section at the grocery store, you scan the person and consider any previous knowledge you have of them, expectations for the situation, and so on. Initiating is influenced by several factors.

If you encounter a stranger, you may say, "Hi, my name's Crystal." If you encounter a person you already know, you've already gone through this before, so you may just say, "Hey, what's up?" Time constraints also affect initiation. A quick encounter calls for a quick hello, whereas a scheduled meeting may entail a more formal start. If you already know the person, the length of time that has passed since your last encounter will affect your initiation. For example, if you see a friend from high school while home for a winter break, you may set aside a long block of time to catch up; however, if you see someone at work that you just spoke to 10 minutes earlier, you may skip the initiating communication. The setting also affects how we initiate conversations because we communicate differently in a crowded bar than we do on an airplane. Even with all this variation, people typically follow standard social scripts for interaction at this stage.

Stage 2: Experimenting

A basic exchange of information is typical as the **experimenting stage** begins. For example, on the first day of class, you might chat with the person sitting beside you and take turns sharing information about where you're from and your program of study. Then you may branch out and see if there are any common interests that emerge. Finding out that you are both fans of the same hockey team or like the same kind of music could then lead to more conversation about hockey and other hobbies or interests; however, sometimes the experiment may fail. If your attempts at information exchange with another person during the experimenting stage are met with silence or hesitation, you may interpret their lack of communication as a sign that you shouldn't pursue future interaction.

Experimenting continues in established relationships. **Small talk**, a hallmark of the experimenting stage, is common among young adults catching up with their parents when they return home for a visit or committed couples when they recount their day while preparing dinner. Small talk can be annoying sometimes, especially if you feel like you have to do it out of politeness. However, it serves important functions, such as creating a communicative entry point that can lead people to uncover topics of conversation that go beyond the surface level, helping us audition someone to see if we'd like to talk to them further, and generally creating a sense of ease and community with others. And even though small talk isn't viewed as very substantial, Knapp's model indicates that most of our relationships do not progress far beyond this point (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009).

Stage 3: Intensifying

As we enter the **intensifying stage**, we indicate that we would like or are open to more intimacy, then we wait for a signal of acceptance before we attempt to pursue the relationship further. This incremental intensification of intimacy can occur over a period of weeks, months, or years, and may involve inviting a new friend to join you at a party, then to your place for dinner, then to go on vacation together. It would be seen as odd, even if the experimenting stage went well, to invite a person who you're still getting to know on vacation with you without engaging in some less intimate interaction beforehand. To save face and avoid making ourselves overly vulnerable, **steady progression** is key in this stage. Aside from sharing more intense personal time, requests for and granting favours may also play into the intensification of a relationship. For example, one friend helping the other prepare for a big party on their birthday can increase closeness. However, if one person asks for too many favours or fails to reciprocate favours granted, then the relationship can become unbalanced, which could result in a transition to another stage, such as **differentiating**.

Other signs of the intensifying stage include the creation of nicknames, inside jokes, increased use of *we* and our, and a loosening of typical restrictions on possessions and personal space. For example, you may have a key to your best friend's apartment and can hang out there if your roommate is getting on your nerves. Navigating the changing boundaries between individuals in this stage can be tricky, which can lead to conflict or uncertainty about the relationship's future as new expectations develop. Successfully managing this increasing closeness can lead to **relational integration**.

Stage 4: Integrating

In the **integrating stage**, two people's identities and personalities merge, and a sense of interdependence develops. Even though this stage is most evident in romantic relationships, elements of this stage can appear in other relationship forms. Some verbal and nonverbal signals of the integrating stage occur when the social networks of two people merge, when those outside the relationship begin to refer to or treat the relational partners as if they were one person (e.g., always referring to them together—"Let's invite Olaf and Bettina"), or when the relational partners present themselves as one unit (e.g., both signing and sending one holiday card or opening a joint bank account). Even as two people integrate, they likely maintain some sense of self by spending time with friends and family separately, which helps balance their needs for independence and connection.

Stage 5: Bonding

The **bonding stage** includes a public ritual that announces formal commitment. These types of rituals include weddings, commitment ceremonies, and civil unions (Image 5.1). Obviously, this stage is almost exclusively applicable to romantic couples. In some ways, the bonding ritual is arbitrary in that it can occur at any stage in a relationship. In fact, bonding rituals are often later annulled or reversed because a relationship doesn't work out, perhaps because there wasn't sufficient time spent in the experimenting or integrating phases. However, bonding warrants its own stage because the symbolic act of bonding can have very real effects on how two people communicate about and perceive their relationship. For example, the formality of the bond may lead the couple and those in their social network to more diligently maintain the relationship if conflict or stress threatens it.

Image 5.1

Stage 6: Differentiating

Individual differences can present a challenge at any given stage in the relational interaction model; however, in the **differentiating stage**, communicating these differences becomes a primary focus. Differentiating is the reverse of integrating, as *we* and *our* reverts back to I and *my*. People may try to re-boundary some of their life prior to the integrating of the current relationship, including reclaiming other relationships or possessions. For example, Carrie may reclaim friends who became "shared" as she got closer to her roommate Julie and their social networks merged by saying, "I'm having *my friends* over to the apartment and would like to have privacy for the evening." Differentiating may occur in a relationship that bonded before the individuals knew each other in enough depth and breadth. Even in relationships where the bonding stage is less likely to be experienced, such as a friendship, unpleasant discoveries about the other person's past, personality, or values during the integrating or experimenting stage could lead a person to begin differentiating.

Stage 7: Circumscribing

To *circumscribe* means to draw a line around something or put a boundary around it (Merriam-Webster, 2023), so in the **circumscribing stage**, communication decreases and certain areas or subjects become restricted as individuals verbally close themselves off from each other. They may say things like "I don't want to talk about that any more" or "You mind your business, and I'll mind mine." If one person was more interested in differentiating in the previous stage or the desire to end the relationship is one-sided, verbal expressions of commitment may not be reciprocated; for example, when one person's statement, "I know we've had some problems lately, but I still like being with you," is met with silence. Once the increase in boundaries and decrease in communication becomes a pattern, the relationship further deteriorates toward **stagnation**.

Stage 8: Stagnating

During the **stagnating stage**, the relationship may come to a standstill as individuals basically wait for the relationship to end. Outward communication may be avoided, but internal communication may be frequent. The relational conflict flaw of mind reading takes place as a person's internal thoughts lead them to avoid communication. For example, a person may think, "There's no need to bring this up again because I know exactly how he'll react!" This stage can be prolonged in some relationships. Parents and children who are estranged, couples who are separated and awaiting a divorce, or friends who want to end a relationship but don't know how to do it may have extended periods of stagnation. Short periods of stagnation may occur right after a failed exchange in the experimental stage, where you may be in a situation that's not easy to get out of, but the other person is still there. Although most people don't like to linger in this unpleasant stage, some may do so to avoid the potential pain of termination, some may still hope to rekindle the spark that started the relationship, or some may enjoy leading their relational partner on.

Stage 9: Avoiding

Moving to the **avoiding stage** may be a way to end the awkwardness that comes with stagnation as people signal that they want to close down the lines of communication. Communication in the avoiding stage can be very direct—"I don't want to talk to you any more"—or more indirect—"I have to meet someone in a little while, so I can't talk long." Although physical avoidance such as leaving a room or requesting a schedule change at work may help clearly communicate the desire to terminate a relationship, we don't always have that option. In a parent-child relationship where the child is still dependent on the parent or in a roommate situation where a lease agreement prevents leaving, people may engage in **cognitive dissociation**, which means they mentally shut down and ignore the other person even though they are still physically co-present.

Stage 10: Terminating

The **terminating stage** of a relationship can occur shortly after initiation or after a 10- or 20-year relational history has been established. Termination can result from outside circumstances such as geographic separation or from internal factors such as changing values or personalities that lead to a weakening of the relationship bond. Termination exchanges involve some typical communicative elements and may begin with a summary message that recaps the relationship and provides a reason for the termination. For example, a statement such as "We've had some ups and downs over our three years together, but I'm getting ready to go to college, and I either want to be with someone who is willing to support me, or I want to be free to explore who I am." The summary message may be followed by a distance message that further communicates the relational drift that has occurred, such as "We've really grown apart over the past year," which may be followed by a disassociation message that prepares people to be apart by projecting what happens after the relationship ends—"I know you'll do fine without me. You can use this time to explore your options and figure out whether or not you want to go to college, too." Finally, there is often a message regarding the possibility for future communication in the relationship, such as "I think it would be best if we don't see each other for the first few months, but text me if you want to" (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009).

These **10 stages of relational development** provide insight into the complicated processes that affect relational formation and deterioration. We also make decisions about our relationships by weighing costs and rewards.

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory essentially entails weighing f the costs and rewards in a given relationship (Harvey & Wenzel, 2006). Rewards are outcomes that we get from a relationship that benefit us in some way, whereas costs range from granting favours to providing emotional support. When we do not receive the outcomes or rewards that we think we deserve, then we may negatively evaluate the relationship, or at least a given exchange or moment in the relationship, and view ourselves as being "under benefited." In an **equitable relationship**, costs and rewards are balanced, which usually leads to a positive evaluation of the relationship and satisfaction.

Commitment and interdependence are important interpersonal and psychological dimensions of a relationship that relate to social exchange theory. **Interdependence** refers to the relationship between a person's well-being and involvement in a particular relationship.

A person will feel interdependence in a relationship when

- Satisfaction is high or the relationship meets important needs;
- The alternatives are not good, meaning that the person's needs couldn't be met without the relationship; or
- Investment in the relationship is high, meaning that resources might decrease or be lost without the relationship (Harvey & Wenzel, 2006).

We should be careful, though, to not view social exchange theory as a this-for-that accounting of costs and rewards (Noller, 2006). We wouldn't be very good relational partners if we carried around a little notepad, notating each favour or good deed we completed so we can expect its repayment. As noted earlier, we all become aware of the balance of costs and rewards at some point in our relationships, but that awareness isn't persistent. We also have communal relationships in which members engage in a relationship for mutual benefit and do not expect returns on investments such as favours or good deeds (Harvey & Wenzel, 2006). As the dynamics in a relationship change, we may engage communally without even being aware of it, just by simply enjoying the relationship. It has been suggested that we become more aware of the costs and rewards balance when a relationship is going through conflict (Noller, 2006). Overall, relationships are more likely to succeed when there is satisfaction and commitment, meaning that we are pleased in a relationship intrinsically or by the rewards we receive.

Intercultural Relationships and Communication

Intercultural relationships are formed between people who have different cultural identities and include friends, romantic partners, family, and co-workers. This type of relationship has certain benefits, including increasing cultural knowledge, challenging previously held stereotypes, and learning new skills (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Although differences between people's cultural identities may be obvious, it takes some effort to uncover commonalities that can form the basis of a relationship. Perceived differences in general also create anxiety and uncertainty that is not as present in intracultural relationships. Once some similarities are found, the tension, if present, begins to balance out and uncertainty and anxiety lessen. Negative stereotypes may also hinder progress towards relational development, especially if the individuals are not open to adjusting their preexisting beliefs. Intercultural relationships may also take more work to nurture and maintain. The benefit of increased cultural awareness is often achieved because the relational partners explain their cultures to each other. This type of explaining requires time, effort, and patience and may be an extra burden that some are not willing to carry.

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in various cultural contexts. ICC has numerous components, including motivation, self- and other knowledge, and tolerance for uncertainty. Two main ways to build ICC are through **experiential learning** and **reflective practices** (Bednarz, 2010). We must first realize that competence isn't any one thing. Part of being competent means that you can assess new situations and adapt your existing knowledge to new contexts. What it means to be competent will vary depending on your physical location, your role (personal, professional, etc.), and your life stage, among other things. Sometimes we will know or be able to figure out what is expected of us in a given situation, but sometimes we may need to act in unexpected ways to meet the needs of a situation. Competence enables us to better cope with the unexpected, adapt to the non-routine, and connect to uncommon frameworks. Reflective practices can also help us process the rewards and challenges associated with developing ICC. As we open ourselves to new experiences, we are likely to have both positive and negative reactions. It can be very useful to take note of any negative or defensive reactions you have. This can help you identify certain triggers that may create barriers to effective intercultural interaction. Noting positive experiences can also help you identify triggers for learning that you could seek out or recreate to enhance the positive (Bednarz, 2010).

Now that we have discussed the stages and important aspects of relationships and the communication in them, we will now discuss **disclosure** in relationships. This is an important component of how we communication in any given relationship.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Pick a relationship that is important to you and determine what stage of relational interaction you are currently in with that person. What communicative signals support your determination? What other stages from the 10 listed have you experienced with this person?
2. How do you weigh the costs and rewards in your

relationships? What are some rewards you are currently receiving from your closest relationships? What are some costs?

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Image Credit

13 Feb, wedding ceremony at church (1) by Armineaghayan, CC BY-SA 4.0

5.3 Self-Disclosure

Self-Disclosure

Have you ever said too much on a first date? At a job interview? To an instructor? Have you ever posted something on social media only to return later and remove it? When self-disclosure works out well, it can have positive effects for interpersonal relationships. Conversely, self-disclosure that does not work out well can lead to embarrassment, lower self-esteem, and relationship deterioration or even termination. As with all other types of communication, increasing your competence regarding self-disclosure can have many positive effects.

So what is self-disclosure? It could be argued that any verbal or nonverbal communication reveals something about the self. The clothes we wear, what we laugh at, or even what we order at the drive-through may offer glimpses into our personality or past, but they are not necessarily self-disclosure. **Self-disclosure** is purposeful disclosure of personal information to another person. If I purposefully wear the baseball cap of my favourite team to reveal my team loyalty to a new friend, then this clothing choice constitutes self-disclosure. Self-disclosure doesn't always have to be deep to be useful or meaningful. Superficial self-disclosure, often in the form of small talk, is key in initiating relationships that then move onto more personal levels of self-disclosure. Telling a classmate your major or your hometown during the first week of school carries relatively little risk but can build into a friendship that lasts beyond the class.

Theories of Self-Disclosure

Social Penetration Theory

Social penetration theory states that as we get to know someone, we engage in a reciprocal process of self-disclosure that changes in breadth and depth and affects how a relationship develops. **Depth** refers to how personal or sensitive the information is, and **breadth** refers to the range of topics discussed (Greene et al., 2006). Although certain circumstances can lead to a rapid increase in the depth and/or breadth of self-disclosure, the theory states that in most relationships, people gradually penetrate through the layers of each other's personality like peeling the layers from an onion.

The theory also argues that people in a relationship balance needs that are sometimes in tension, which is a **dialectic**. Balancing a dialectic is like walking a tightrope—you have to lean from one side to the other to keep yourself balanced and not fall. The constant back and forth allows you to stay balanced, even though you may not always be even or standing straight up. One of the key dialectics that must be negotiated in relationships is the tension between openness and closedness (Greene et al., 2006). We want to make ourselves open to others through self-disclosure, but we also want to maintain a sense of privacy.

Social Comparison Theory

We may also engage in self-disclosure for the purposes of social comparison. **Social comparison theory** states that we evaluate ourselves based on how we compare with others (Hargie, 2011). We may disclose information about our intellectual aptitude or athletic abilities to see how we relate to others. This type of comparison helps us decide whether we are superior or inferior to others in a particular area. Disclosures about abilities or talents can also lead to self-validation if the person to whom we disclose reacts positively. By disclosing information about our beliefs and values, we can determine whether they are the same as or different from others. Last, we may disclose fantasies or thoughts to another person to determine if they are acceptable or unacceptable. We can engage in social comparison as the discloser or the receiver of disclosures, which may allow us to determine whether or not we are interested in pursuing a relationship with another person.

The Johari Window

The final theory of self-disclosure that we will discuss is the **Johari window**, which is named after its creators Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham (Luft, 1969). The Johari window, which is shown in Image 5.2, can be applied to a variety of interpersonal interactions in order to help us understand what parts of ourselves are open, hidden, blind, and unknown. To help understand the concept, think of a window with four panes. One axis of the window represents things that are known to us, and the other axis represents things that are known to others. The upper left pane contains open information that is known to us and to others. The amount of information that is openly known to others varies based on relational context. When you are with close friends, there is probably a lot of information already in the open pane, and when you are with close family, there is also probably a lot of information in the open pane. The information could differ, though, as your family might know much more about your past, and your friends may know more about your present. Conversely, there isn't much information in the open pane when we meet someone for the first time, aside from what the other person can guess based on our nonverbal communication and appearance.

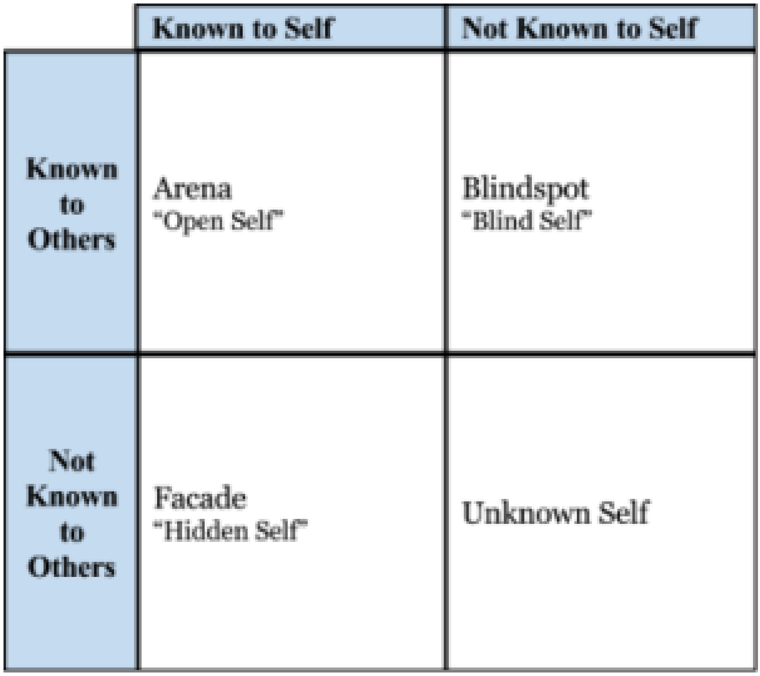

Image 5.2

The bottom left pane contains hidden information that is known to us but not to others. As we are getting to know someone, we engage in self-disclosure and move information from the "hidden" to the "open" pane. By doing this, we decrease the size of our hidden area and increase the size of our open area, which increases our shared reality. The reactions that we get from people as we open up to them help us form our self-concepts and also help determine the trajectory of the relationship. If the person reacts favourably to our disclosures and reciprocates disclosure, then the cycle of disclosure continues and a deeper relationship may be forged.

The upper right pane contains information that is known to others but not to us. For example, we may be unaware of the fact that others see us as pushy or as a leader. We can see that people who have a disconnect between how they see themselves and how others see them may have more information in their blind pane. Engaging in perception checking and soliciting feedback from others can help us learn more about our blind area.

The bottom right pane represents our unknown area because it contains information not known to ourselves or to others. To become more self-aware, we must solicit feedback from others to learn more about our blind pane, but we must also explore the unknown pane. To discover the unknown, we have to leave our comfort zones and try new things. We have to pay attention to the things that excite or scare us and investigate them more to see if we can learn something new about ourselves. By being more aware of what is contained in each of these panes and how we can learn more about each one, we can more competently engage in self-disclosure and use this process to enhance our interpersonal relationships.

The Process of Self-Disclosure

There are many decisions that go into the process of self-disclosure. We have many types of information we can disclose, but we have to determine whether or not we will proceed with disclosure by considering the situation and the potential risks. Then we must decide when, where, and how to disclose. Since all these decisions will affect our relationships, we will examine each one in turn.

The **four main categories** for disclosure are observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs (Hargie, 2011). **Observations** include what we have done and experienced. For example, you could tell someone that you live in Edmonton, Alberta. If you disclosed that you thought moving from Vancouver to Edmonton was a good decision, you would be sharing your **thoughts**, because this would include a judgement about your experiences. Sharing **feelings** includes expressing emotions; for example, "I'm happy to wake up every morning and look out at the sunrise. I feel lucky." Lastly, we may communicate **needs** or wants by saying something like "My best friend is looking for a job, and I really want them to move here, too." We usually begin disclosure with observations and thoughts, then move onto feelings and needs as the relationship progresses. There are some exceptions to this. For example, we are more likely to disclose deeply in crisis situations, and we may also disclose more than usual with a stranger if we do not think we'll meet the person again or do not share social networks. Although we don't often find ourselves in crisis situations, you may recall scenes from movies or television shows where people who are trapped in an elevator or stranded after a plane crash reveal their deepest feelings and desires. It is possible that we have all been in a situation where we said more about ourselves to a stranger than we normally would.

Deciding when to disclose something in a conversation may not seem as important as deciding whether or not to disclose at all. But deciding to disclose and then doing it at an awkward time in a conversation could lead to negative results. As far as timing goes, you should consider whether to disclose the information early, in the middle, or late in a conversation (Greene et al., 2006). If you get something off your chest early in a conversation, you might ensure that there's plenty of time to discuss the issue and that you don't end up losing your nerve. If you wait until the middle of the conversation, you have some time to feel out the other person's mood and set up the tone for your disclosure. For example, if you meet up with your roommate to tell her that you're planning to move out and she starts by saying, "I've had the most terrible day!" the tone of the conversation has now shifted, and you may not end up making your disclosure. If you start by asking her how she's doing, and things seem to be going well, you may be more likely to follow through with the disclosure. You may choose to disclose late in a conversation if you're worried about the person's reaction. If you know they have an appointment or you have to go to class at a certain time, disclosing just before that time could limit your immediate exposure to any negative reaction. However, if the person doesn't have a negative reaction, they could still become upset because they don't have time to discuss the disclosure with you.

Sometimes self-disclosure is unplanned. Someone may ask you a direct question or disclose personal information, which leads you to reciprocate disclosure. In these instances, you may not manage your privacy well because you haven't had time to think through any potential risks. In the case of a direct question, you may feel comfortable answering, you may give an indirect or general answer, or you may feel enough pressure or uncertainty to give a dishonest answer. If someone unexpectedly discloses personal information, you may feel the need to reciprocate by also disclosing something personal. If you're uncomfortable doing this, you can still provide support for the other person by listening and giving advice or feedback.

Once you've decided when and where to disclose information to another person, you need to figure out the best channel to use. Face-to-face disclosures may feel more genuine or intimate given the shared physical presence and ability to receive verbal and nonverbal communication. There is also an opportunity for immediate verbal and nonverbal feedback, such as asking follow-up questions or demonstrating support or encouragement through a hug. The immediacy of a face-to-face encounter also means you have to deal with the uncertainty of the reaction you will receive. If the person reacts negatively, you may feel uncomfortable, pressured to stay, or even fearful. If you choose a mediated channel such as an email, letter, text, note, or phone call, you may seem less genuine or personal, but you have more control over the situation in that you can take time to carefully choose your words, and you do not have to immediately face the reaction of the other person. This can be beneficial if you fear a negative or potentially violent reaction. Another disadvantage of choosing a mediated channel, however, is the loss of nonverbal communication, which can add much context to a conversation. Although our discussion of the choices involved in self-disclosure so far have focused primarily on the discloser, self-disclosure is an interpersonal process that has much to do with the receiver of the disclosure.

Reasons for Self-Disclosure

Generally speaking, some people are naturally more transparent and willing to self-disclose, whereas others are more opaque and hesitant to reveal personal information (Jourard, 1964). Interestingly, research suggests that the pervasiveness of reality television, much of which includes participants who are very willing to disclose personal information, has led to a general trend among reality television viewers to engage in self-disclosure through other mediated means such as blogging and video sharing (Stefanone & Lackaff, 2009). Whether online or face-to-face, there are other reasons for disclosing or not, including self-focused, other-focused, interpersonal, and situational reasons (Green et al., 2006).

Self-focused reasons for disclosure include having a sense of relief or catharsis, clarifying or correcting information, or seeking support. Self-focused reasons for not disclosing include fear of rejection and loss of privacy. In other words, we may disclose to get something off our chest in hopes of finding relief, or we may not disclose out of fear that the other person may react negatively to our revelation.

Other-focused reasons for disclosure include a sense of responsibility to inform or educate. Other-focused reasons for not disclosing include feeling like the other person will not protect the information. If someone mentions that their car wouldn't start this morning and you disclose that you are good at working on cars, you've disclosed to help out the other person. On the other side, you may hold back disclosure about your new relationship from your co-worker because that person is known to be loose-lipped with other people's information.

Interpersonal reasons for disclosure involve the desire to maintain a trusting and intimate relationship. Interpersonal reasons for not disclosing include fear of losing the relationship or deeming the information irrelevant to the particular relationship. Your decision to disclose an affair in order to be open with your partner and hopefully work through the aftermath together or withhold that information out of fear they will leave you is based on interpersonal reasons.

Finally, **situational reasons** for disclosure may be the other person being available, directly asking a question, or being directly involved in or affected by the information being disclosed. Situational reasons for not disclosing include the person being unavailable, a lack of time to fully discuss the information, or the lack of a suitable (that is, a quiet or private) place to talk. For example, finding yourself in a quiet environment where neither person is busy might be ideal for disclosure, whereas a house full of company may not be.

To summarize some of the content discussed in this section, the benefits of or reasons for self-disclosing are listed below, followed by some of the risks or reasons for not disclosing.

Benefits of Self-Disclosure

- **Catharsis:** A sense of relief, to reveal regrets, mental and emotional relief
- **Reciprocity:** One act of self-disclosure leads to another and honesty creates a safe climate
- **Self clarification:** To clarify beliefs, opinions, thoughts, attitudes, or feelings by talking about them
- **Self-validation:** Seeking validation of our behaviour
- **Identity management:** To make ourselves more attractive, to market ourselves, to be perceived as more attractive, likable, or sensitive
- **Relationship maintenance and enhancement:** Relational success

- **Social influence:** Revealing can increase control over the other person and/or situation

(Maricopa Community College District, 2016)

Risks of Self-Disclosure

- **Rejection:** Fear of disapproval, danger of being too revealing; note that this may be exaggerated and/or illogical
- **Negative impression:** Not wanting others to have a bad impression of you; for example, not wanting to tell a new friend about the time you broke the law and got into trouble
- **Decrease in relational satisfaction:** Not wanting to negatively affect a relationships; for example, saying something like, "I think you are too clingy, but I like being close to you"
- **Loss of influence:** Confessing a weakness to another person can lead to them viewing you differently; for example, a manager confesses they have no real control about wages, resulting in employees viewing the manager as weak
- **Hurting the other person:** Not wanting to disclose something that can harm another person

(Maricopa Community College District, 2016)

Effects of Self-Disclosure

The process of self-disclosure is **circular**. An individual self-discloses, the recipient of the disclosure reacts, and the original discloser processes the reaction. How the receiver interprets and responds to the disclosure are key elements of the process. Part of the response results from the receiver's attribution of the cause of the disclosure, which may include dispositional, situational, and interpersonal attributions (Jiang et al., 2010). Let's say a co-worker discloses that they think the new boss got their promotion because of favouritism instead of merit. You may make a **dispositional attribution** that connects the cause of the disclosure to the co-worker's personality by thinking, for example, that the individual is outgoing, inappropriate for the workplace, or fishing for information. If the personality trait to which you attribute the disclosure is positive, then your reaction to the disclosure is more likely to be positive. **Situational attributions** identify the cause of a disclosure with the context or surroundings in which it takes place. For example, you may attribute your co-worker's disclosure to the fact that you agreed to go to lunch with them. **Interpersonal attributions** identify the relationship between sender and receiver as the cause of the disclosure. So, if you attribute your co-worker's comments to the fact that you are best friends at work, you may think your unique relationship caused the disclosure. If the receiver's primary attribution is interpersonal, then relational intimacy and closeness will likely be reinforced more than if the attribution is dispositional or situational because the receiver feels like they were specially chosen to receive the information.

The receiver's role doesn't end with attribution and response. There may be added burdens if the information shared with you is a secret. As was noted earlier, there are clear risks involved in the self-disclosure of intimate or potentially stigmatizing information if the receiver of the disclosure fails to keep that information secure. As the receiver of a secret, you may feel the need to unburden yourself from the co-ownership of the information by sharing it with someone else (Derlega et al., 1993). This is not always a bad thing. You may strategically tell someone who is removed from the social network of the person who told you the secret to keep the information secure. Although unburdening yourself can be a relief, sometimes people tell secrets they were entrusted to keep for less productive reasons. A research study of office workers found that 77% of workers that received a disclosure and were told not to tell anyone else told at least two other people by the end of the day (Hargie, 2011). They reported doing so to receive attention for having inside information or to demonstrate their power or connection. Needless to say, spreading someone's private disclosure without permission and for personal gain does not demonstrate communication competence.

When the cycle of disclosure goes well for the discloser, there is likely to be a greater sense of relational intimacy and self-worth, and there are also positive psychological effects such as reduced stress and increased feelings of social support. Self-disclosure can also have effects on physical health (Greene et al., 2006).

Alternatives to Self-Disclosure

So, what are some techniques you can use if you don't want to self-disclose to others? Below, we discuss some alternatives to self-disclosure that can be used.

- **Deception:** Sometimes people lie simply to avoid conflict. This is true in cases where the person may become extremely upset—they may lie to gain power or to save face. They may also lie to guide the interaction.
- **Equivocate:** This means not answering a question or providing comments. Rather, you simply restate what the other person in a different way. For instance, if a friend asks, "How do you like the new clothes I bought?" you can reply by saying "Wow! That's a new outfit!" In this case, you don't say how you feel, and you don't disclose your opinion. You only offer the information that has been provided to you.
- **Hint:** Perhaps, you don't want to lie or equivocate to someone you care about. You might use indirect or face-saving comments. For example, if your roommate has not helped you clean your shared apartment, you might say things like, "It sure

is messy in here" or "This place could really use some cleaning."

- **Silence:** Another option is to simply remain silent and not disclose anything.

(Maricopa Community College District, 2016)

This section of the chapter provided a thorough description of self-disclose, which is an integral part of communication in relationships. Next, we will discuss another important aspect of communication with others—emotions.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Answer these questions from the beginning of the section: Have you ever said too much on a first date? At a job interview? To an instructor? Have you ever posted something on social media only to return later and remove it?
   If you answered yes to any of the questions, what have you learned in this chapter that may lead you to do something differently?
2. Have you ever experienced negative results because of self-disclosure as either a sender or receiver? If so, what could have been altered in the decisions of what, where, when, or how to disclose that may have improved the situation?
3. Under what circumstances is it okay to share information that someone has disclosed to you? Under what circumstances is it not okay to share the

information?

Attribution

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Image Credit

Johari window by Spaynton, CC BY-SA 4.0

5.4 Emotions and Relationships

Have you ever been at a movie and let out a bellowing laugh and snort only to realize no one else is laughing? Have you ever become uncomfortable when someone cries in class or in a public place? Emotions are clearly personal because they often project what we're feeling on the inside to those around us whether we want it to show or not (University of Minnesota, 2016). Emotions are also interpersonal in that another person's show of emotion usually triggers a reaction from us—perhaps support if the person is a close friend or awkwardness if the person is a stranger. Emotions are central to any interpersonal relationship, and it's important to know what causes and influences emotions so we can better understand our own emotions and better respond to others when they display emotions (University of Minnesota, 2016).

Emotions are physiological, behavioural, and communicative reactions to stimuli that are cognitively processed and experienced as emotional (Planalp et al., 2006). This definition includes several important dimensions of emotions. First, emotions are often internally experienced through **physiological changes** such as increased heart rate, a tense stomach, or a cold chill (University of Minnesota, 2016). These physiological reactions may not be noticeable to others and are therefore intrapersonal unless we exhibit some change in behaviour that clues others into our internal state or we **verbally** or **nonverbally** communicate our internal state (University of Minnesota, 2016). Sometimes our behaviour is **voluntary**—we ignore someone, which may indicate we are angry with them—or **involuntary**—we fidget or avoid eye contact while talking because we are nervous. When we communicate our emotions, we call attention to ourselves and **express** information to others that may inform how they should react. For example, when someone we care about displays behaviours associated with sadness, we are likely to know that they need support (Planalp et al., 2006). We learn, through socialization, how to read and display emotions, though some people are undoubtedly better at reading emotions than others. However, as with most aspects of communication, we can all learn to become more competent with increased knowledge and effort (University of Minnesota, 2016).

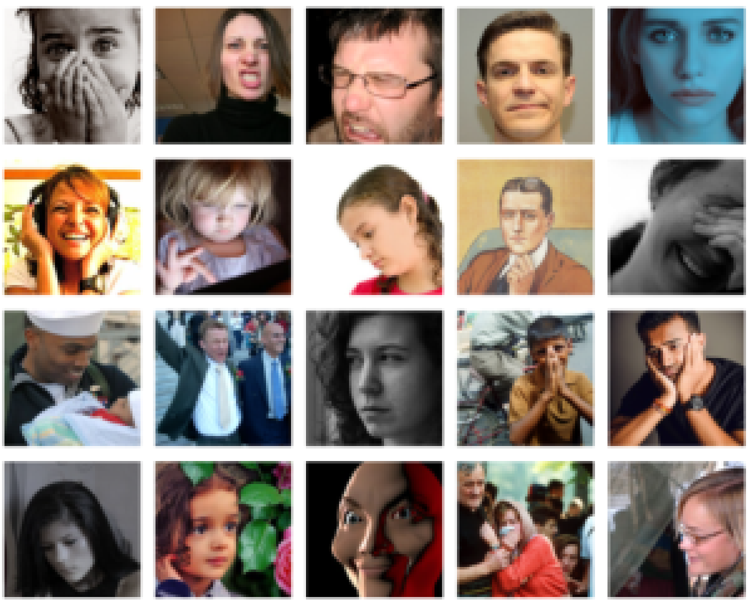

Image 5.3

Primary emotions are innate emotions that are experienced for short periods of time and appear rapidly, usually as a reaction to an outside stimulus, and are experienced similarly across cultures (University of Minnesota, 2016). The primary emotions are joy, distress, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust. Members of a remote tribe in New Guinea, who had never been exposed to Westerners, were able to identify these basic emotions when shown photographs of Americans making corresponding facial expressions (Evans, 2001).

Secondary emotions are not as innate as primary emotions, and they do not have a corresponding facial expression that makes them universally recognizable (University of Minnesota, 2016). These emotions are processed by a different part of the brain that requires higher-order thinking, so they are not reflexive. Secondary emotions are love, guilt, shame, embarrassment, pride, envy, and jealousy (Evans, 2001). These emotions develop over time, take longer to fade away, and are interpersonal because they are most often experienced in relation to real or imagined others. You can be fearful of a the dark but feel guilty about an unkind comment made to your mother or embarrassed at the thought of doing poorly on a presentation in front of an audience (University of Minnesota, 2016). Because these emotions require more processing, they are more easily influenced by thoughts and can be managed, which means we can become more competent communicators by becoming more aware of how we experience and express secondary emotions (University of Minnesota, 2016). Although there is more cultural variation in the meaning and expression of secondary emotions, they are still universal in that they are experienced by all cultures. It's hard to imagine what our lives would be like without emotions, and, in fact, many scientists believe we wouldn't be here without them. These emotions are not always felt in isolation, meaning that they often present together and can be conflicting. For example, you can be both joyful and sad at the same time, something that is often referred to as having **mixed emotions** (University of Minnesota, 2016).

Understanding Emotions

To start our examination of the idea of emotions and feelings and how they relate to harmony and discord in a relationship, it is important to differentiate between emotions and feelings. **Emotions** are our physical reactions to stimuli in the outside environment. They can be objectively measured by blood flow, brain activity, and nonverbal reactions to things because they are activated through neurotransmitters and hormones released by the brain. **Feelings** are the conscious experience of emotional reactions. They are our responses to thoughts and interpretations given to emotions based on experiences, memory, expectations, and personality. So, there is a relationship between emotions and feelings, but the two things are different.

Being emotional is an inherent part of being human. However, the way we communicate about emotion can make emotion seem negative. Have you ever said, "Don't feel that way" or "I shouldn't feel this way"? When we negate our own or someone else's emotions, we are negating ourselves or that person and dismissing the right to have emotional responses (University of Minnesota, 2016). At the same time, though, no one else can make you "feel" a specific way—our emotions are our emotions. They are how we interpret and cope with life. A person may set up a context where you experience an emotion, but you are the one who is still experiencing that emotion and allowing yourself to experience that emotion. If you don't like "feeling" a specific way, then you can change it. We all have the ability to alter our emotions. Altering our emotional states (in a proactive way) is how we get through life (University of Minnesota, 2016). Maybe you just broke up with a romantic partner and listening to music helps you work through the grief you are experiencing. Someone else may need to openly communicate about how they are feeling in an effort to work through their emotions. Everyone has a different way of processing their emotions (University of Minnesota, 2016).

Attempting to deny that an emotion exists is not an effective way to process emotions (University of Minnesota, 2016). Think of this like a balloon. With each breath of air, you blow into the balloon. Eventually, the balloon will get to a point where it cannot handle any more air, and it explodes. Humans can be the same way with emotions when we bottle them up inside. The final breath of air in our emotional balloon doesn't have to be big or intense, but it can still cause tremendous emotional outpouring that is often very damaging to the person and their interpersonal relationships (University of Minnesota, 2016). Research has demonstrated that handling negative emotions during conflicts within a marriage can lead to faster de-escalations of conflicts and faster conflict mediation between spouses (Levenson et al., 2014).

Functions of Emotions

Intrapersonal Functions of Emotions

Emotions are rapid information-processing systems that help us act with minimal thinking (Tooby & Cosmides, 2008). Problems associated with birth, battle, and death have occurred throughout history, and emotions evolved to aid humans in adapting to those situations rapidly and with minimal conscious cognitive effort. If we did not have emotions, we could not make rapid decisions about whether to attack, defend, flee, care for others, reject food, or approach something useful, all of which have been functionally adaptive in human history and helped us to survive. For instance, drinking spoiled milk or eating rotten eggs has negative consequences for our welfare. The emotion of disgust, however, helps us immediately take action by not ingesting bad food in the first place or by vomiting it out. This response is adaptive because it ultimately aids in our survival and allows us to act immediately without much thinking. In some instances, taking the time to sit and rationally think about what to do—calculating cost-benefit ratios in one's mind—is a luxury that might cost one's life. Emotions evolved so that we can act without that depth of thought.

Emotions Prepare the Body for Immediate Action

Emotions prepare us for behaviour. When triggered, emotions orchestrate systems such as perception, attention, inference, learning, memory, goal choice, motivational priorities, physiological reactions, motor behaviours, and behavioural decision making (Tooby & Cosmides, 2008). Emotions simultaneously activate certain systems and deactivate others in order to prevent the chaos of competing systems operating at the same time, allowing for coordinated responses to environmental stimuli (Levenson, 1999). For instance, when we are afraid, our bodies shut down temporarily unneeded digestive processes, resulting in saliva reduction (a dry mouth), blood flows disproportionately to the lower half of the body, the visual field expands, and air is breathed in, all preparing the body to flee. Emotions initiate a system of components that includes subjective experience, expressive behaviours, physiological reactions, action tendencies, and cognition, all for the purpose of specific actions—the term "emotion" is, in reality, a metaphor for these reactions.

One common misunderstanding when thinking about emotions is the belief that emotions must always directly produce action. This is not true. Emotion certainly prepares the body for action, but whether someone actually engages in action is dependent on many factors, such as the context within which the emotion has occurred, the target of the emotion, the perceived consequences of one's actions, previous experiences, and so on (Baumeister et al., 2007; Matsumoto & Wilson, 2008). Thus, emotions are just one of many determinants of behaviour, although an important one.

Emotions Influence Thoughts

Emotions are also connected to thoughts and memories. Memories are not just facts that are encoded in our brains; they are coloured with the emotions felt at the times the memories occurred (Wang & Ross, 2007). Thus, emotions serve as the neural glue that connects those disparate facts in our minds. That is why it is easier to remember happy thoughts when happy, and angry times when angry. Emotions serve as the basis of many attitudes, values, and beliefs that we have about the world and the people around us. Without emotions, those attitudes, values, and beliefs would just be statements without meaning—emotions give those statements meaning. Emotions influence our thinking processes, sometimes in constructive ways, but sometimes not. It is difficult to think critically and clearly when we feel intense emotions and easier when we are not overwhelmed with emotions (Matsumoto et al., 2006).

Image 5.4

Emotions Motivate Future Behaviours

Because emotions prepare our bodies for immediate action, influence thoughts, and can be felt, they are important motivators of future behaviour. Many of us strive to experience feelings of satisfaction, joy, pride, or triumph in our accomplishments and achievements. At the same time, we also work very hard to avoid strong "negative" feelings; for example, once we have felt the emotion of disgust when drinking spoiled milk, we generally work very hard to avoid having those feelings again. For example, we might check the expiration date on the label before buying the milk, smell the milk before drinking it, or watch to see if the milk curdles in a cup of coffee before drinking it. Emotions, therefore, not only influence immediate actions, but also serve as an important motivational basis for future behaviours.

Interpersonal Functions of Emotions

Emotions are expressed both verbally through words and nonverbally through facial expressions, voices, gestures, body postures, and movements. We constantly express emotions when interacting with others, and others can reliably judge those emotional expressions (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002; Matsumoto, 2001). Thus, emotions have signal value to others and influence others and our social interactions. Emotional expressions communicate information to others about our feelings, intentions, relationship with the target of the emotions, and the environment.

Emotional Expressions Facilitate Specific Behaviours in Perceivers

Because facial expressions of emotion are universal social signals, they contain meaning not only about the psychological state but also about that person's intent and subsequent behaviour. This information affects what the perceiver is likely to do. People observing fearful faces, for instance, are more likely to produce approach-related behaviours, whereas people who observe angry faces are more likely to produce avoidance-related behaviours (Marsh et al., 2005). Even the subliminal presentation of smiles produces increases in how much beverage people pour and consume and how much they are willing to pay for it; the presentation of angry faces decreases these behaviours (Winkielman et al., 2005). Also, emotional displays evoke specific, complementary emotional responses from observers; for example, anger evokes fear in others (Dimberg & Ohman, 1996; Esteves et al., 1994), whereas distress evokes sympathy and aid (Eisenberg et al., 1989).

Expressing Emotions

Emotion sharing involves communicating the circumstances, thoughts, and feelings surrounding an emotional event; it usually starts immediately following an emotional episode (University of Minnesota, 2016). The **intensity** of the emotional event corresponds with the **frequency** and **length** of the sharing, with high-intensity events being told more often and over a longer period of time (University of Minnesota, 2016). Research shows that people communicate with others after almost any emotional event, positive or negative, and that emotion sharing offers intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits because individuals feel inner satisfaction and relief after sharing, and social bonds are strengthened through the interaction (Rimé, 2007).

Our social bonds are enhanced through emotion sharing because the support we receive from our relational partners increases our sense of closeness and interdependence (University of Minnesota, 2016). We should also be aware that our expressions of emotion are infectious owing to **emotional contagion**, or the spreading of emotion from one person to another (Hargie, 2011). Think about a time when someone around you got the giggles and you couldn't help but laugh along with them, even if you didn't know what was funny. While those experiences can be uplifting, the other side of emotional contagion can be unpleasant. We've probably all worked with someone or had a family member who couldn't seem to say anything positive, and others react by becoming increasingly frustrated with them (University of Minnesota, 2016).

To verbally express our emotions, it is important that we develop an **emotional vocabulary** (University of Minnesota, 2016). The more specific we can be when verbally communicating our emotions, the less ambiguous they will be for the person decoding our message. As we expand our emotional vocabulary, we are able to convey the intensity of the emotion we're feeling, whether it is mild, moderate, or intense. For example, happy is mild, delighted is moderate, and ecstatic is intense; ignored is mild, rejected is moderate, and abandoned is intense (Hargie, 2011). Aside from conveying the intensity of your emotions, you can also verbally frame your emotions in a way that allows you to have more control over them (University of Minnesota, 2016).

It's important to **distinguish** among our emotional states and how we interpret an emotional state. For example, you can feel sad or depressed because those are feelings. However, you cannot feel alienated because this is not a feeling. Your sadness and depression may lead you to perceive yourself as alienated, but alienation is a perception (that is, a thought rather than an emotion) of one's self and not an actual emotional state. There are several evaluative terms that people ascribe to themselves, usually in the process of blaming others for their feelings, that they label as emotions, but which are in actuality evaluations and not emotions. Examples of these include words such as abandoned, pressured, unappreciated, unwanted, intimidated, and unwanted. Instead, using actual emotional words will communicate your feelings effectively. Most of us have a very limited emotional vocabulary. Think about it—how many emotion words can you even list? And more importantly, how many emotional experiences can you appropriately label? One of the best ways to improve your ability to be assertive is to improve your emotional vocabulary. A great tool for this is a **Feelings Wheel** as shown in Image 5.5 below.

Image 5.5

As you can see, there are a lot of words that can be used to describe our emotions. One of the world's leading experts in emotions is Susan David, and her research shows that we need to have an emotional vocabulary of at least 30 words in order to accurately experience, express, and ultimately work through our emotions. The video below is a TedTalk by Susan David in which she discusses the importance of expressing, and not denying, our emotions.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=971#oembed-1

(TED, 2018)

The points below give examples of effective ways in which to share your emotions, including describing the emotions, the behaviour that triggered the emotions, and the "why" behind them.

- **The emotion(s):** Explicitly state the emotion(s) you are experiencing. The more specific you can be, the more likely the other person will be to understand what you are feeling. Here, it is important to have a rich and nuanced emotional vocabulary to better understand and express these emotions to others because emotions can be mild, moderate, or intense. For example, consider the difference between the terms sad, melancholy, and despondent. Use the Feelings Wheel above (Image 5.5) to identify feelings.
- **The behaviour:** Just as it is important to be able to describe a specific emotion, it is likewise important to describe the specific behaviour(s) that triggered the emotion. For example, if your roommate leaves dirty dishes on the kitchen counter, you may feel annoyed. When describing the behaviour, you should state only what you have observed, objectively and specifically, and not in an evaluative or accusatory manner. "Leaving dirty dishes in the kitchen" is an appropriate way to describe behaviour, whereas "acting like a jerk" is an evaluation of that behaviour and is not very conducive to a productive interaction. Instead, you could say, "I feel annoyed when dirty

dishes are left in the kitchen," versus "I feel annoyed when you act like a jerk." The latter statement also contains a "you" statement rather than an "I" statement.

- **The "why":** Finally, it's useful to include a "why" in your "I" statement. Consider expressing a reason for why the behaviour bothers you and leads to your particular emotional reaction. The why offers an explanation, interpretation, effect, or consequence of the behaviour. One example might be "I feel annoyed when dirty dishes are left around the kitchen because it attracts cockroaches." When describing the why, avoid "you" language. For example, saying "I feel sad when our plans are broken because you are neglecting me" still inserts that problematic "you," which suggests blame and could lead to the other person becoming defensive. Instead, consider something like "I feel sad when our plans are broken because I want to spend more time together."

"You" can easily creep into all three parts of an "I" message and can be tricky to avoid at first, so you may want to mentally rehearse or even write down what you plan to say. Also, it is a good idea to repeat the statement back to yourself and think about how you might respond if someone said the exact same thing to you in a similar situation. If it would cause you to react negatively or defensively, revise your statement.

You might find that, in some situations, avoiding "you" may not be productive. At times, it might be useful to share the thoughts you attach to another person's behaviour. You can share your perspective by using a phrase such as "I took it to mean …." In this case, "you" might show up in your interpretation. However, you can reduce the potential for defensiveness by using language that reflects tentativeness and ownership. An example of this is "I'm confused about the dishes being left because it seems out of the norm for you, and I'm wondering if something is going on." Another example might be "I get frustrated when the dishes are left on the counter because I remember talking about this before, and I think I'm not being heard." We will learn more about language and actions that contribute to and reduce defensiveness in future chapters. Understanding and asserting our emotions is important and challenging work.

In a time when so much of our communication is electronically mediated, it is likely that we will communicate emotions through the written word in an email, text, or instant message (University of Minnesota, 2016). We may also still resort to pen and paper when sending someone a thank-you note, a birthday card, or a sympathy card. Communicating emotions through the written (or typed) word can have advantages such as time to compose your thoughts and convey the details of what you're feeling (University of Minnesota, 2016). There are also disadvantages in that important context and nonverbal communication can't be included. Elements such as facial expressions and tone of voice offer much insight into emotions that may not be expressed verbally (University of Minnesota, 2016). Immediate feedback is also lacking from written communication. Sometimes people respond immediately to a text or email, but think about how frustrating it is when you text someone and they don't get back to you right away. If you're in need of emotional support or want validation for an emotional message you just sent, waiting for a response could end up negatively affecting your emotional state and your relationship (University of Minnesota, 2016).

Debilitative Emotions

Debilitative emotions are harmful and difficult emotions that detract from effective functioning. This is the opposite of **facilitative emotions**, which are emotions that would contribute to our effective functioning. The level, or **intensity,** of the emotion we are feeling, determines our response to the emotion. There is a difference between "a little upset" and "irate." Debilitative emotions can affect our ability to interpret emotions, and most involve communication that has led to conflict. Some intensity in emotion can be constructive, but too much intensity makes the situation worse. The other part of debilitative emotions is their duration. Again, there is a difference between "momentarily" feeling a certain way and "forever" feeling a certain way. When something happens, sometimes you feel like your whole life has crashed down on you and that there's no way to pick up the pieces. One unexpected, disappointing situation does not have to completely change the core of your being. This can result in **rumination**, which is repeatedly thinking about or dwelling on negative thoughts and emotions. If something bad does happen, a strategy for working through these emotions is to give yourself a few days to think it over. It's still important to recognize your feelings, as well as understand them, instead of completely brushing them off. After those few days are over, you may realize that there's much more out there and remind yourself about what makes you happy and the goals you want to accomplish. Some debilitative emotions take a long time to recover from, but allowing yourself to let go of grudges so that they don't affect your future communication and interpersonal relationships is important for emotional health.

Most emotions are the result of our way of thinking. Debilitative emotions arise from accepting a number of irrational thoughts that are called **fallacies**. These fallacies lead to illogical and false conclusions that in turn become debilitative emotions. We may not be aware of these thoughts, which makes them very powerful.

Here are some fallacies that lead to the arousal of debilitative emotions:

- **Fallacy of Perfection:** This fallacy is thinking we should be able to handle every situation perfectly with no room for error. We constantly strive for an unrealistic goal of perfection. We may think that others will not appreciate us if we are not "perfect," which makes it difficult for us to admit our mistakes. Although it's tempting to try to appear perfect, the costs of such deception are very high. If others ever find you out, they'll see you as being phony. This illusion of perfection will lower your self-confidence because nothing and no one is perfect and may hinder others from liking you. Like everyone else, you make mistakes from time to time, and there is no reason to hide this.

- **Fallacy of Helplessness:** This fallacy is being convinced that powers beyond a person's control can determine their satisfaction or happiness. For example, when people say "I don't know how" or "I can't do anything about it," they are expressing helplessness or an unwillingness to change—the "can'ts" are really justifications for not wanting to change. For instance, lonely people tend to attribute their poor interpersonal relationships to uncontrollable causes. This irrational thinking increases debilitative emotions and empowers them.
- **Fallacy of Catastrophic Expectations:** The fallacy is people working on the assumption that if something bad can possibly happen, it will; that is, they imagine the worst possible catastrophic consequences. For example, someone may think "If I speak about this issue, everyone will laugh at me." This in turn creates harmful debilitative emotions and a self-fulfilling prophecy will begin to build. For instance, a study revealed that people who believed that their romantic partners would not change for the better were likely to behave in ways that contributed to the breakup of the relationship.
- **Fallacy of Overgeneralization:** This fallacy comprises two types. The first type of overgeneralization occurs when a belief is based on a limited amount of evidence. For instance, saying, "I'm so stupid, I can't even figure out how to download music onto my smartphone." The second type overgeneralization takes place when we exaggerate shortcomings. For example, when we say, "You never listen to me" or "You are always late." These statements are inevitably false (events seldom "always" or "never" occur), and saying things like this lead to nothing other than anger and debilitative emotions.

Culture and Emotions

Although our shared past dictates some universal similarities in emotions, triggers for emotions and the norms for displaying emotions vary widely. Certain emotional scripts that we follow are socially, culturally, and historically situated (University of Minnesota, 2016). Take the example of falling in love. Westerners may be tempted to critique the practice of arranged marriages in other cultures and question a relationship that isn't based on falling in love. However, arranged marriages have historically been a part of Western culture, and the emotional narrative of falling in love has only recently become a part of that culture. Even though we know that compatible values and shared social networks rather than passion are more likely to predict the success of a long-term romantic relationship, Western norms privilege the emotional role of falling in love in our courtship narratives and practices (Crozier, 2006). While this example shows how emotions tie into larger social and cultural narratives, rules and norms for displaying emotions affect our day-to-day interactions (University of Minnesota, 2016).

Display rules are sociocultural norms that influence emotional expression (University of Minnesota, 2016). These rules influence who can express emotions, which emotions can be expressed, and how intense the expressions can be. In **individualistic cultures**, where personal experience and self-determination are values built into cultural practices and communication, expressing emotions is viewed as a personal right. In fact, the outward expression of our inner states may be exaggerated because getting attention from those around us is accepted and even expected in individualistic cultures such as those in Canada and the United States (Safdar et al., 2009). In **collectivistic cultures**, emotions are viewed as more interactional and less individual, which ties them into social context rather than into an individual right to free expression. An expression of emotion reflects on the family and cultural group rather than only on the individual (University of Minnesota, 2016), so emotional displays are more controlled. Maintaining group harmony and relationships is a primary cultural value, which is very different from the more individualistic notion of having the right to get something off your chest (University of Minnesota, 2016).

There are also cultural norms regarding which types of emotions can be expressed (University of Minnesota, 2016). In individualistic cultures, especially in the Canada and United States, there is a cultural expectation that people will exhibit positive emotions (University of Minnesota, 2016). People seek out happy situations and communicate positive emotions even when they do not necessarily feel them. Being positive implicitly communicates that you have achieved your personal goals, have a comfortable life, and have a healthy inner self (Mesquita & Albert, 2007). In these individualistic cultures, failure to express positive emotions could lead others to view you as a failure or to recommend psychological help or therapy. The cultural predisposition to express positive emotions is not universal. The people who live on the island of Ifalik in the Pacific do not encourage the expression of happiness because they believe it will lead people to neglect their duties (Mesquita & Albert, 2007). Similarly, collectivistic cultures may view expressions of positive emotions negatively because someone is bringing undue attention to themselves, which could upset group harmony and potentially elicit jealous reactions from others (University of Minnesota, 2016).

Emotional expressions of grief also vary among cultures and are often tied to religious or social expectations (Lobar et al., 2006). Thai and Filipino funeral services often include wailing, a more intense and loud form of crying, which shows respect for the deceased (University of Minnesota, 2016). The intensity of the wailing varies based on the importance of the individual who died and the closeness of the relationship between the mourner and the deceased. Therefore, close relatives like spouses, children, or parents would be expected to wail louder than distant relatives or friends (University of Minnesota, 2016).

This section has provided an overview of many aspects of emotions and how they tie into our relationships. Another related and important concept in reference to emotions is our **emotional intelligence (EQ)**, which will be discussed on the next page.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. In what situations would you be more likely to communicate emotions through electronic means rather than in person? Why?
2. Can you think of a display rule for emotions that is not mentioned in the chapter? What is it and why do you think this norm developed?
3. When you are trying to determine someone's emotional state, what nonverbal communication do you look for and why?
4. Which of the fallacies that often lead to debilitative emotions do you more commonly experience? Provide an example of when that happened.

Attribution

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Maricopa Community College District. (2016).

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5.5 Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI), which is also known as **emotional quotient (EQ)**, is a topic that has been researched since the early 1990s and has been found to be an important indicator of life and career success (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). Emotional intelligence refers to a form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor your own as well as others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide your thinking and actions (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

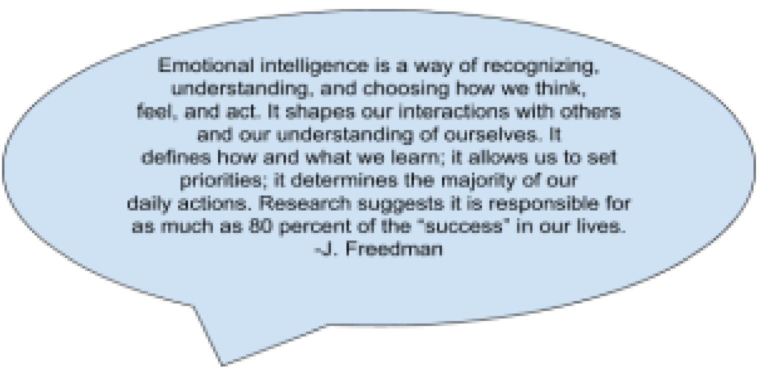

Image 5.6

Goleman's Theory on Emotional Intelligence

Although the term "emotional intelligence" was created by researchers Peter Salovey and John Mayer in their article "Emotional Intelligence" in 1990, true popularity of the term and the concept didn't take place until 1995, when Dan Goleman (Image 5.7) published his first article on the topic (Karafyllis & Ulshöfer, 2008). Goleman claimed that emotional quotient (EQ) is a more important factor than intelligence quotient (IQ) in enjoying a successful life and maintaining fruitful and secure relationships with others (Karafyllis & Ulshöfer, 2008). Goleman proposed a new definition of intelligence that included qualities such as optimism, self-control, and moral character, and suggested that unlike general intelligence, which is viewed as stable over time, emotional intelligence can be learned and increased at any time during one's life (Karafyllis & Ulshöfer, 2008).

Goleman defined emotional intelligence as "the ability to identify, assess, and control one's own emotions, the emotions of others, and that of groups" (Karafyllis & Ulshöfer, 2008, p.135). Goleman's four emotional intelligence competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.

Image 5.7

Goleman's Four Main Aspects to Emotional Intelligence

- **Self-awareness:** This refers to a person's ability to understand their feelings from moment to moment (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). It might seem as if this is something we know, but we often go about our day without thinking or being aware of our emotions and how they impact our behaviour in work or personal situations. Understanding our emotions can help us reduce stress and make better decisions, especially when we are under pressure (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). In addition, knowing and recognizing our own strengths and weaknesses is part of self-awareness. People with strong self-awareness are realistic; they are not overly self-critical nor naively hopeful. They are honest with themselves and about themselves, as well as honest about themselves with others (Goleman et al., 2002). Self-aware people make time to reflect and think over things rather than reacting impulsively, thus bringing to their work life the thoughtful mode of self-reflection (Goleman et al., 2002). All these traits of self-awareness enable us to act with the conviction and authenticity (Goleman et al., 2002). Part of self-awareness is the idea of positive psychological capital, which can include emotions such as hope, optimism, which results in higher confidence, and resilience, or the ability to bounce back quickly from challenges. Psychological capital can be gained through self-awareness and self-management, which is our next area of emotional intelligence (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

Self-Awareness Example

Assume that Prasad is upset about a new process being implemented in the organization. Lack of self-awareness may result in him feeling angry and anxious without really knowing why. High self-awareness EQ might cause Prasad to recognize that his anger and anxiety stem from the last time the organization changed processes and 15 people got laid off (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

- **Self-management:** This refers to our ability to manage our emotions and is dependent on our self-awareness ability (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). How do we handle frustration, anger, and sadness? Are we able to control our behaviours and emotions? Self-management is also the ability to follow through with commitments and take initiative at work. Someone who lacks self-awareness may project stress on others (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). Self-management, in other words, refers to being able to manage your internal states, impulses, and resourcse (Goleman, 2015).

  According to Goleman, there are **six competencies** related to self-management, including the following:

  - **Emotional self-control:** Keeping disruptive emotions and impulses in check
  - **Transparency:** Maintaining integrity
  - **Adaptability:** Flexibility in handling change
  - **Achievement:** Striving to improve or meet a standard of excellence
  - **Initiative:** Readiness to act on opportunities
  - **Optimism:** Persistence in pursuing goals despite obstacles and setbacks

(Goleman, 2015)

Self-Management Example

Project manager Mae is very stressed about an upcoming Monday deadline. Lack of self-management may cause Mae to lash out at people in the office because of the deadline. Higher EQ in this area might result in Mae being calm, cool, and collected so she is better able to motivate her team to focus and finish the project on time (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

- **Social awareness:** This is our ability to understand social cues that may affect others around us (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). In other words, understanding how another person is feeling, even if we do not feel the same way. Social awareness also includes having empathy for another and recognizing power structures and unwritten workplace dynamics. Most people with high social awareness have charisma and make people feel good with every interaction. Daniel Goleman contends that the main component of social awareness is **empathy**, having the ability to perceive the feelings of others and how they see the world (Goleman, 2016). Empathy is our social radar. It requires being able to read another's emotions; at a higher level, it entails sensing and responding to a person's unspoken concerns or feelings. At the highest levels, "empathy is understanding the issues or concerns that lie behind another's feelings" (Goleman, 1998, p. 4).

Social Awareness Example

Erik continually talks and does not pick up subtleties, such as body language, in meetings at the office. Because of this, he can't understand or even fathom that his monologues can be frustrating to others. If Erik had a higher EQ in social awareness, he might still talk in meetings, but he would also spend a lot of time listening and observing to get a sense of how others feel. He might also directly ask people how they feel. This would demonstrate high social awareness (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

- **Relationship management:** This refers to our ability to communicate clearly, maintain good relationships with others, work well in teams, and manage conflict (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). Relationship management relies on your ability to use the other three areas of EQ to manage relationships effectively. Relationship management is especially important when it comes to fostering diversity and inclusion in the workplace. People who are skilled in managing relationships are better equipped to handle conflict by drawing out all parties, helping others understand differing perspectives, and fostering common ideals that everyone can endorse (Goleman et al., 2002). Individuals skilled in relationship management value teamwork and encourage an atmosphere that is friendly and safe, modelling respect, helpfulness, and cooperation (Goleman et al., 2002). Relationship management has been identified as facilitating cooperation and team work, and those skilled in managing relationships take the time to identify true, authentic close relationships (Goleman et al., 2002).

Relationship Management Example

Keiko is good at reading people's emotions and showing empathy for them, even if she doesn't agree. As a manager, her door is always open, and she makes it clear to colleagues and staff that they are welcome to speak with her anytime (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). If Keiko has a low EQ in the area of relationship management, she might belittle people and have a difficult time being positive. She may not be what is considered a good team player, which would show her lack of ability to manage relationships (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

Watch the video below of Dan Goleman introducing his theory of emotional intelligence. Although this is an older video, it provides a good overview of his theory and view of emotional intelligence.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=973#oembed-1

(Big Think, 2012)

Improving Emotional Intelligence

To increase our **self-awareness skill**s, we should spend time thinking about our emotions to understand why we experience a specific emotion (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). We examine those things that cause a strong reaction, such as anger, to help us understand the underlying reasons for that reaction. By doing this, we can begin to see patterns within ourselves that help explain how we behave and how we feel in certain situations. This allows us to better handle those situations when they arise (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

Image 5.8

To increase our **self-management skills**, we can focus on the positive instead of the negative (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). Taking deep breaths increases blood flow, which helps us handle difficult situations. Although seemingly childish, counting to 10 before reacting can help us manage emotions such as anger (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). This gives us time to calm down and think about how we will handle the situation. Practising positive self-talk can help increase our self-management. **Self-talk** refers to the thoughts we have about ourselves and situations throughout the day. Since we have over 50,000 thoughts per day (Willax, 1999), getting into the habit of managing those thoughts is important. By recognizing the negative thoughts, we can change them to be positive (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

Table 5.1. Positive versus Negative Thoughts

Positive	Negative
I made a mistake.	I am (or, that was) dumb.
I need to work on *xx* skills.	I am an idiot.
It may take a bit more effort to show them what I have to offer.	They will never accept me.
I need to reprioritize my to-do list.	I will never be able to get all of this done.
Let me see what seminars and training are available.	I just don’t have the knowledge required to do this job.

(Maricopa Community College District, 2016)

Increasing **social awareness** means observing others' actions and watching people to get a good sense of how they are reacting (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). We can gain social awareness skills by learning people's names and watching their body language. Living in the moment can help our interactions with others as well. Practising listening skills and asking follow-up questions can also help improve our social awareness skills (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

As stated above, **empathy** is a key component of social awareness. Frieda Edgette, a certified executive coach and organizational strategist, suggests five ways to increase your empathy and, by doing so, also increase social awareness (El-Attrash, 2020).

Five ways to increase empathy:

1. **Be authentic:** Seek a better understanding of who you are. Develop self-awareness by exploring your identity, background, principles, and life experiences.
2. **Self-manage:** What is your natural response when presented with difference or conflict? Do you fight, flee, or freeze up? Take note of your default response. Develop an "in the moment" strategy to practise self-control like taking a deep breath, going for a run, or just assuming a power pose.
3. **Practice active listening:** When interacting with others, watch verbal and nonverbal cues. Make sure you turn your inner voice off for a moment and focus entirely on the other person.
4. **Get curious:** Ask open-ended questions that start with "what" or "how." What experiences shaped the other person's life? Where do they get their information? What's most important to them? Your only mission is to understand.
5. **Respect, connect:** By being more open and more respectful of one another, we can improve communications and better connect, resulting in enhanced communication and productivity.

(El-Attrash, 2020)

Strategies for **relationship management** might include being open, acknowledging another's feelings, and showing that you care (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). Being willing to listen to others and understanding them on a personal level can help enhance relationship management skills. Being willing to accept feedback and grow by using that feedback can help people be more comfortable talking with you (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). All relationships take work, time, effort, and know-how.

Approaches to relationship management that promote diverse, healthy relationships include the following:

- Continuously build trust
  - Be consistent in your words and actions
- Tackle tough conversations
  - Look for agreement or common ground
  - Make sure people feel "heard"
  - Remain open and non-defensive
- Be open and curious
  - Share information about yourself
  - Show genuine interest and curiosity in others
- Always work on your communication style
  - Pay attention to times where your style has created confusion or troubled reactions
- Don't avoid the inevitable
  - Face reality
  - Use empathy and common purpose
- Align your intention with your impact
  - Think before you speak or act
  - Make careful observations

(University of Florida, Human Resources, n.d.)

In this chapter, we have looked at different stages of relationships, aspects of culture that affect our relationships, self-disclosure, emotions, and emotional intelligence. These are all integral aspects of communication and are aspects of all types of relationships. In the next chapter, we will have a chance to look more closely into our relationships and how these important concepts we just discussed need to be considered when conflict occurs.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Consider Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence (EQ) and reflect on an experience where either yourself or another individual was lacking the EQ needed to effective handle the situation.
    - What area of emotional intelligence needed to be developed?
    - What can be done to increase emotional intelligence in this area?
    - What is another way the situation could have been handled?
2. If you could pick one of the four aspects of EQ according to Goleman to work on, which one would it be? Why? How would you work to develop this area of your EQ?
3. What area of EQ do you think is the most important? Why?

Attribution

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5.6 Review

Matching Review

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=977#h5p-9

Review Quiz

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=977#h5p-10

Attribution

CHAPTER VI

CONFLICT WITHIN RELATIONSHIPS

6.1 Introduction to Conflict within Relationships

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to

1. Discuss the concept of communication climate and factors that influence it
2. Describe conflict patterns and conflict management strategies
3. Discuss effective strategies in handling communication challenges and conflict
4. Identify "crazymaking" and other conflict behaviours that can detrimentally affect communication
5. Discuss the stages and importance of negotiation
6. Explain the concept of forgiveness and the factors that contribute to it
7. Discuss strategies for negotiating cultural differences in conflict resolution

Chapter Overview

In the previous chapter, we discussed emotions and the role they play in our relationships. When we think of emotions, conflict often comes to mind. Conflict is not necessarily a dramatic fight, though it could be. It occurs for many reasons and can result from us perceiving another person in any type of relationship to have different goals than our own. This can lead to different levels of conflict, from ignoring the issue to "having it out." In this chapter, we will dive into different forms of relationship conflicts and, more importantly, discuss how to handle conflict effectively. When dealt with appropriately, conflict can strengthen relationships by building trust and increasing relational satisfaction.

6.2 Communication Climate

Do you feel organized or confined in a clean workspace? Are you more productive when the sun is shining than when it is grey and cloudy outside? Just as factors such as weather and physical space impact the way we feel, communication climate influences our interpersonal interactions. **Communication climate** is the overall feeling or emotional mood that exists between different people. If you dread going to visit your family during the holidays because of tension between you and your sister, or if you look forward to dinner with a particular set of friends because they make you laugh, you are responding to the communication climate—the overall mood that is created because of the people involved and the type of communication they bring to the interaction.

Principles of Communication Climates

Messages Contain Relational Subtexts that Can Be Felt

In addition to generating and perceiving meaning in communicative interactions, we also subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) convey and perceive the way we feel about each other. Almost all messages operate on two levels: content and relational. The **content** is the substance of what's being communicated—the "what" of the message. The **relational** dimension isn't the actual thing being discussed and instead can reveal something about the relational dynamic that exist between the individuals—the "who" of the message. We can think of it as a kind of subtext, an underlying or hidden message that says something about how the parties feel towards one another. For example, when deciding what TV program to watch, your partner might politely suggest, "I'd like to watch this show, how about you?" The content of the message is about what they want to watch. The relational subtext is subtle but suggests your partner values your input and wants to share decision-making control. The climate of this interaction is likely to be neutral or warm. However, consider how the relational subtext changes if your partner insists (with a raised voice and a glare), "We are watching this show tonight!" The content is still about what they want to watch. But what is the subtext now? In addition to what your partner wants to watch, they seem to be sending a relational message of dominance, control, and potential disrespect for your needs and wants. You might also hear an additional message of "I don't care about you," which is likely to feel cold and elicit a negative emotional reaction such as defensiveness or sadness.

Climate Is Vonveyed Through Words, Action, and Non-action

Relational subtexts can be conveyed through direct words and actions. A student making a complaint to an instructor can word their remarks with respect, as in "Would you have a few minutes after class to discuss my grade?" or without, as in "I can't believe you gave me such a bad grade, and we need to talk about it right after class!" We can often find more of the relational meaning in the accompanying and more indirect nonverbals—the way something is said or done. For example, two of your co-workers might use the exact same words to make a request of you, but the tone, emphasis, and facial expression will change the relational meaning, which influences the way you feel. The words "Can you get this done by Friday?" will convey different levels of respect and control depending upon the nonverbal emphasis, tone, and facial expressions paired with the verbal message. For example, the request can be made in a questioning tone versus a frustrated or condescending one. Additionally, a relational subtext might also be perceived by what is *not* said or done. For example, one co-worker adds a “thanks” or a “please” and the other doesn’t. Or, one co-worker shows up to your birthday coffee meetup and the other doesn’t. What do these non-actions suggest to you about the other person’s feelings or attitude towards you? Consider for a moment some past messages (and non-messages) that felt warm or cold to you.

Climate Is Perceived

Relational meanings are not inherent in the messages themselves—they are not literal, and they are not facts. The subtext of any communicative message is in the eye of the beholder. The relational meaning can be received in ways that were **unintentional**. Additionally, like content messages, relational messages can be influenced by what we attend to and by our expectations. They also stand out more if they contrast with what you normally expect or prefer.

You might interpret your partner’s insistence on watching a certain TV show to mean they are bossy. However, your partner might have perceived you to be the bossy one and is attempting to regain the loss of decision control. Control could be exerted because doing so is the accepted relational dynamic between you, or it could be a frustrated reaction to a frequent loss of decision control, which they want to regain. Here, it needs to be noted that the relational message someone hears at any given time is a **perception** and doesn’t necessarily mean the message received was the message intended. Meaning depends on who is delivering the message and in what context. Cultural and co-cultural context will also impact the way a message is interpreted, which we will discuss later.

Climate Is Determined by Social and Relational Needs

Although relational messages can potentially show up in dozens of different communicative forms, they generally fall into categories that align with specific types of human **social needs**, which vary from person to person and situation to situation. In addition to **physical needs**, such as food and water, human beings have social and relational needs that can have negative consequences if ignored. Negative consequences can range from frustrating work days to actual death (in cases of infants not getting human touch and attention and the elderly, who suffer in isolation). Social needs can be categorized in many different ways. For example, one theory states that we are more likely to develop relationships with people who meet one or more of three basic interpersonal needs: affection, control, and belonging. We want to be liked or loved. We want to be able to influence others and our own environments (at least somewhat). We want to feel included. Each need exists on a continuum from low to high, with some people needing only a little of one and more of another. The level of need also varies by context, with some situations calling for more affection (e.g., romantic relationships) and others calling for less (e.g., the workplace).

During interactions, we detect on some level whether the person with whom we are communicating is meeting a particular need, such as the need for respect. We may not really be aware, on a conscious level, of why we feel cold towards a co-worker, but it is likely that the co-worker's jokes, eye rolls, and criticisms towards you feel like a relational message of inferiority or disrespect. In this case, your unmet need for dignity, competence, respect, or belonging may be contributing to your cold reaction towards this person. When other people's messages don't meet our needs in whole or in part, we tend to have an emotionally cold reaction. When messages do meet our needs, we tend to feel warm.

Consider how needs may be met (or not met) when you are in a disagreement of opinion with someone else. For example, needs may be met if we feel heard by the other person and not met if we feel disrespected when we present our opinion. In a different example, consider all the different ways you could request that someone turn the volume of their music down. You could do both of these things with undertones (relational subtexts) of superiority, anger, dominance, ridicule, coldness, or distance. Or you could do them with warmth, equality, playfulness, shared control, respect, or trust.

Image 6.1

Because both our own needs and the needs of others play an important role in the communication climate, we will use the following three general categories when we refer to social needs that can be addressed through communication:

- **Need for connection:** Belonging, inclusion, acceptance, warmth, kindness
- **Need for freedom:** Autonomy, control, freedom from imposition by others, space, privacy

- **Need for meaning:** Competence, capability, dignity, worthiness, respect, to matter, to be understood

Relational Messages Are Multi-levelled

On one level, we want to feel that our social needs are being met, and we hope that others in our lives will meet them through their communication, at least in part. On another level, though, we are concerned with how we are perceived; the self-image we convey to others is important to us. We want it to be apparent to others that we belong, matter, are respected, understood, competent, and in control of ourselves. Some messages carry relational subtexts that harm or threaten our self-image, whereas others confirm and validate it.

To help better understand this second level of relational subtexts, let's discuss the concept of **face needs**. **Face** refers to our self-image when communicating with others (Ting-Toomey, 2005; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Lim & Bowers, 1991). Most of us are probably unaware of the fact that we are frequently negotiating this face as we interact with others. However, on some level, whether we are aware of it or not, many of our social needs relate to the way we want to be perceived by others. Specifically, we not only want to feel included in particular groups, but we also want to be seen as someone who belongs. We want to feel capable and competent, but we also want others to think we are capable and competent. We want to experience a certain level of autonomy, but we also want to be seen as free from the imposition of others. Communication subtexts such as disrespect tend to threaten our face needs, whereas other behaviours such as the right amount of recognition support them. Effective communication sometimes requires a delicate dance that involves addressing, maintaining, and restoring our own face and that of others simultaneously.

Confirming and Disconfirming Messages

Positive and negative communication climates can be understood by looking at confirming and disconfirming messages. We experience **positive climates** when we receive **confirming messages** that demonstrate our value and worth. Conversely, we experience **negative climates** when we receive **disconfirming messages** that suggest we are devalued and unimportant. Obviously, most of us like to be in positive climates because they foster emotional safety as well as personal and relational growth. However, it is likely that most of our relationships fall somewhere between the two extremes.

Confirming Messages

Confirming messages demonstrate value and worth and generally fall within three categories:

- **Recognition messages:** This type of message can confirm or deny another person's existence. For example, if a friend enters your home and you smile, hug them, and say, "I'm so glad to see you," you are confirming their existence. On the other hand, if you say, "Good morning," to a colleague and they ignore you by walking out of the room without saying anything, they may create a disconfirming climate by not recognizing your greeting.
- **Acknowledgment messages:** These messages go beyond recognizing another's existence by confirming what they say or how they feel. Nodding our head while listening or laughing appropriately at a funny story are nonverbal acknowledgment messages. When a friend tells you they had a really bad day at work and you respond with, "Yeah, that does sound hard. Do you want to talk about it?" you are acknowledging and

responding to their feelings. In contrast, if you were to respond to your friend's frustrations with a comment like, "That's nothing. Listen to what happened to me today," you would be ignoring their experience and presenting yours as more important.

- **Endorsement messages:** This type of message goes one step further by recognizing a person's feelings as valid. Suppose a friend comes to you upset after a fight with their partner. If you respond with, "Yeah, I can see why you would be upset," you are endorsing their right to feel upset. However, if you say, "Get over it. At least you have a partner," you would be sending a message that denies your friend their right to feel frustrated at that moment. While it is difficult to see people we care about in emotional pain, people are responsible for their own emotions. When we let people own their emotions and do not tell them how to feel, we are creating a supportive climate that provides a safe environment for them to work through their problems.

Disconfirming Messages

Disconfirming messages imply, "You don't exist. You are not valued," which contributes to negative climates. As such, they are important to be aware of in order to be a more competent communicator.

There are seven specific types of disconfirming messages:

1. **Impervious response** fails to acknowledge another person's communication attempt through either verbal or nonverbal channels. Failure to return phone calls, emails, and letters are examples.
2. In an **interrupting response**, one person starts to speak before the other person is finished.
3. **Irrelevant responses** are comments that are completely unrelated to what the other person was just talking about.

They indicate that the listener wasn't really listening at all and therefore doesn't value what the speaker had to say. In each of these first three types of responses, the speaker is not acknowledged.

4. In a **tangential response**, the speaker is acknowledged but with a comment that is used to steer the conversation in a different direction.
5. In an **impersonal response**, the speaker offers a monologue of impersonal, intellectualized, and generalized statements that trivialize the other person's comments (e.g., "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger").
6. **Ambiguous responses** are messages with multiple meanings, and these meanings are highly abstract or may be a private joke to the speaker alone.
7. **Incongruous responses** communicate two messages that seem to conflict along verbal and nonverbal channels. The verbal channel demonstrates support, while the nonverbal channel is disconfirming. An example might be complimenting someone's cooking while nonverbally indicating you are choking.

Supportive vs. Defensive Messages

Another useful framework for understanding communication climate can be found in the six **defensive** and **supportive** behaviour pairs proposed by psychologist Jack Gibb in 1965. These six behaviours are, on one side of the spectrum, likely to generate an emotional climate of defensiveness (cold), and, on the other side of the spectrum, are likely to generate a supportive climate (warm). Our natural instinct when we feel threatened is to become defensive.

As a **defensive communicator**, we focus on protecting ourselves and our interests, which is not necessarily a bad thing because we must learn to stand up for ourselves (ASCCC OERI, 2023).

Unfortunately, defensiveness is usually a **negative cycle** that creates defensiveness in others and causes conflicts to escalate (ASCCC OERI, 2023). For example, defensive behaviours such as rolling the eyes, not listening, making excuses, or blaming others can cause your communication partner to argue back louder, walk away, or blame you back. We have all been in the position before where the more defensive we become, the less we are able to communicate effectively (ASCCC OERI, 2023).

Image 6.2

Conversely, supportive climates create more calm and productive communication outcomes (ASCCC OERI, 2023). This allows communicators to better focus on the intent and meanings of messages. The six pairs of supportive and defensive behaviours that Jack Gibb came up with to help provide a better context for learning about and understanding communication climate are the following:

1. Description vs. evaluation
2. Collaboration vs. control
3. Straightforwardness vs. manipulation
4. Empathy vs. indifference
5. Flexibility vs. certainty
6. Equality vs. superiority

In the table below, we examine each pair of behaviours and consider their potential outcomes (ASCCC OERI, 2023).

Table 6.1. Supportive vs. Defensive Behaviours

Behaviour Pair	Supportive Behaviour	Defensive Behaviour
Description vs. Evaluation	**Description** • **Description:** Neutral facts that avoid any "loaded" words or judgements. • **Example:** "I feel left out when you guys go to the mall without me." • **Possible interpretation:** The recipient knows exactly how you feel about what is bothering you. Using the "I" message doesn't place blame and communicates an openness for calm discussion.	**Evaluation** • **Description:** Statements containing a tone of accusation, blame, and/or judgement. • **Example:** "You guys always abandon me and leave me out when you go to the mall." • **Possible interpretation:** Recipient feels attacked and judged for something that may have been unintended and misinterpreted.

Behaviour Pair	Supportive Behaviour	Defensive Behaviour
Collaboration vs. Control	**Collaboration** • **Description:** The parties involved are working with each other towards a win-win situation. Everyone's voice and ideas are just as important as the next person's. • **Example:** "Let's all share what has worked for you and what has not worked for you." • **Possible interpretation:** Everyone involved feels included, respected, and productive.	**Control** • **Description:** The speaker conveys a know-it-all attitude that shows little or no interest in the receiver's needs and ideas. • **Example:** "I'm right. You're wrong. We do it my way, or we don't do it at all!" • **Possible interpretation:** The recipient may feel hostile, competitive, and disrespected towards the speaker, which may result in reluctance and uncooperativeness.

Behaviour Pair	Supportive Behaviour	Defensive Behaviour
Straightforwardness vs. Manipulation	**Straightforwardness** • **Description:** Direct, candid, unambiguous, open, and honest • **Example:** "You didn't get a raise this quarter, because although you made more sales, the volume of those sales has been down." • **Possible interpretation:** The recipient may still be disappointed but knows exactly how and why their raise did not come through.	**Manipulation** • **Description:** To exploit, manoeuvre, or mastermind with hidden intentions. • **Example:** "If you had put in more hours and effort like John, you might have seen a raise this quarter." • **Possible interpretation:** The receiver may feel judged that John did a better job and that their own efforts were not appreciated. The receiver may also feel defeated and unmotivated.

<table>
<tr><th>Behaviour Pair</th><th>Supportive Behaviour</th><th>Defensive Behaviour</th></tr>
<tr><td>Empathy vs. Indifference</td><td>Empathy
Description: Walking a mile in the other person’s shoes and trying to relate to and support the other person.
Example: “I understand you’re going through a rough time. I hope that extending the deadline for you will help relieve some of the stress and pressure you must be feeling.”
Possible interpretation: The receiver feels compassion, understanding, and even relief.</td><td>Indifference
Description: Apathetic, detached, and aloof, with a general lack of concern for the other person.
Example: “Everyone’s got problems! If you can’t meet the deadline, you’ll just have to pay the penalty.”
Possible interpretation: The receiver feels unimportant and insignificant.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Flexibility vs. Certainty</td><td>Flexibility
Description: Open-minded and showing a willingness to adapt to something better.
Example: “I’d love to learn how we can use this new technology to work smarter, not harder.”
Possible interpretation: The receiver may feel encouraged to investigate, share, and try new things.</td><td>Certainty
Description: Overconfidence that “I’m right and you’re wrong.” No other input is needed.
Example: “I’ve done this a million times. This is the only way to fix it!”
Possible interpretation: The receiver feels unwelcome, unvalued, and unwilling to put themselves out there.</td></tr>
</table>

Behaviour Pair	Supportive Behaviour	Defensive Behaviour
Equality vs. Superiority	**Equality** • **Description:** A sense of fairness, justness, and impartiality; everyone has the same chance. • **Example:** "I remember struggling when I first started, too. It's going to take some time, but let me help you." • **Possible interpretation:** The receiver may feel validated, respected, and capable.	**Superiority** • **Description:** Communicating a sense of dominance and having the upper hand. • **Example:** "I've shown you how to do this a million times! Move over! Let me finish it!" • **Possible interpretation:** The receiver may feel inept, inadequate, defensive, and angry.

(ASCCC OERI, 2023)

The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse

During the 1980s and 1990s, John Gottman conducted extensive observational studies to understand what made relationships fail and what made them successful (Beel et al., 2023). Although the focus of his research was on couples and resulted in the Gottman method couples therapy (GMCT), his theory can be applied to many other relationships.

Gottman focused on conducting longitudinal observational studies to identify what couple dynamics and interaction patterns either destroyed relationships or strengthened them (Beel et al., 2023). He established what became known as the "Love Lab," firstly at the University of Washington and more recently at the Gottman Institute in Seattle, Washington. His research eventually resulted in many new approaches to couples therapy and in his theory called the **Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.** This metaphor describes the counterproductive communication and behaviours that can predict relationship failure if left unchanged—**criticism**, **defensiveness**, **contempt**, and **stonewalling**. Each "horseman" corrodes the level of trust and commitment in any relationship (Beel et al., 2023).

- **Criticism:** The first horsemen of the Apocalypse, criticism is an attack on another person's character, focusing on their defects rather than the actual issue or complaint.
- **Defensiveness:** The second horsemen of the Apocalypse, defensiveness is an automatic batting away of someone else's issue or complaint. It is often a response to criticism. Defensiveness is a lack of taking responsibility and accountability for one's own actions, including an inability to listen and validate someone else's perspective.
- **Contempt:** The third horseman of the Apocalypse, contempt communicates to someone else an attitude of superiority, that you look down at them, implying that someone else is inferior, less than, or worthless. Contempt is used to create a position of moral superiority.
- **Stonewalling:** The fourth horseman of the Apocalypse, stonewalling is a form of defensiveness. Stonewalling means to shut down interaction and stop responding to someone else. Internally, the person stonewalling is experiencing heightened levels of stress and physiological arousal.

(Beel et al., 2023)

The video below discusses both Gottman's theory and the principles of health relationships.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=1150#oembed-1

(Study Hall, 2022)

Creating a Positive Climate

As mentioned earlier, it is important in our relationships to build a positive communication climate. There are a number of ways to create a more positive climate, and some of the most integral ones are discussed below. Some of these strategies have been discussed earlier in the book, but in this case, they are specifically tailored to creating a positive communication climate for our relationships.

Empathy

We have discussed **empathy** in other chapters of this book, and this theory of empathy is specifically applied to creating a positive communication climate. The concept of empathy has been defined in many ways, and one way to define it is as the ability to (metaphorically) "put yourself in someone else's shoes"; that is, to feel what another person may be feeling. On one level, this description is technically accurate, but empathy is actually more complex. Our human capacity for empathy has three levels: cognitive, affective, and compassionate.

The **cognitive** level of empathy involves more thinking than feeling. A more appropriate metaphor for this level is "putting on someone else's perception glasses"; that is, to attempt to view a situation in the way someone else might view it. It requires thinking about someone else's thinking, considering factors that make up someone's unique perceptual schema, and trying to view a situation through that lens. For example, employees don't always see things the way managers do. A good manager can "see" through employee glasses and anticipate how workplace actions, decisions, and messages may be interpreted.

The **affective**, or **emotional**, level of empathy involves attempting to feel the emotions of others. The "shoes" metaphor fits best for this level. Attempting to truly feel what another human feels requires envisioning exactly what they might be going through in their lives. Doing so effectively might even require "taking off your own shoes." For example, to empathize with a complaining customer, you must temporarily put your own needs aside and really picture what it would feel like to be the customer experiencing the problem situation. Your own need might be to take care of the complaint quickly so you can go to lunch. Yet, if it were you in the problem situation, you would likely want someone to be warm, attentive, and supportive, and to take the time needed to solve the problem.

Image 6.3

The third level of empathy is **compassionate concern** for the well-being of our fellow humans (Goleman, 2006). Feeling empathy at this level motivates us to act compassionately in the interest of others. Examples may include dropping off a casserole for a grieving friend, taking on some of your co-worker's tasks when they are especially busy or stressed, or organizing a neighbourhood clean-up. At this level of empathy, we sense what people need and feel compelled to help. Most of us are usually able to empathize at this level with people who are important to us.

Strategies for Building Empathy

Although empathy comes more naturally to some people than others, it is a skill that can be developed (Goleman, 2006) with a greater awareness of and attention to the perception process. Remember that perception is unique to each person. We all interpret and judge the world through our own set of "perception glasses" that are framed by factors such as upbringing, family background, ethnicity, age, attitude, knowledge of person and situation, past experiences, amount of exposure to others, and social roles.

Specific ways to build our empathy skills are addressed below. The strategies fall into two categories: adding information to the rims of our perception glasses and bringing attention to the perception process itself.

1. Add more information to our perception glasses

In order to add more information to our perception glasses, we need to find out as much as we can about a situation or the person whom we are seeking to understand and empathize with. Ways to do this include the following:

- **Taking in information:** When we observe, listen, question, perception check, paraphrase, and pay attention to nonverbals and feelings, we take information in rather than putting information out (e.g., listening more and talking less).
- **Broadening or narrowing our perspective:** Sometimes we feel stuck, allowing one interaction with one person to become all-consuming. If we remember how big the world is and how many people are dealing with similar situations right now, we gain perspective that helps us see the situation in a different way. On the other hand, sometimes we generalize too broadly, seeing an entire group of people in one way or assuming all things are bad at our workplace. Focusing on one person or one situation at a time is another way to helpfully shift perspectives.
- **Imagining or seeking stories and information through books, films, articles, and technology:** We can learn and imagine what people's lives are really like by reading, watching, or listening to the stories of others.
- **Seeking out actual experiences to help us understand what it's like to be in others' shoes:** We can do something experiential like riding along with a police officer or spending a

day on the streets to really try to feel what it's like to be in a situation with which we are not familiar.

2. Bring attention to the perception process

Try taking off your own perception glasses and putting on a pair of someone else's. Thinking about our thinking is a process called **metacognition**. We do this by turning our attention towards the way we perceive information and how that perception makes us feel. What factors make up the "rims" of our glasses, and how do these factors shape our perspectives, thoughts, feelings, and actions? Consider what makes another person unique, and what rim factors may influence the person's perspectives and feelings. We should try to see the situation through those glasses, inferring how unique perceptual schemata might shape the others person's emotions and actions. Remember, though, that we can never be certain how or why people do what they do—only they know for sure. But communication can be more effective if we at least attempt some speculative forethought before we act or react. And when in doubt, we can always ask.

Metacommunication

Metacommunication requires mindfully elevating awareness beyond the content level of communication, but also requires us to actually discuss needs and relational messages out loud. Metacommunication literally means communicating about communication and occurs when we talk to each other about any part of the communication process, including what is said or done, how it is interpreted, how we feel, and what we wish had been said or done. For example, metacommunication occurs any time you say, "I feel frustrated when you interrupt me" or "I wish you'd have asked me before you made that decision." Other forms of metacommunication bring relational messages and social needs right to the surface for discussion; for example, if you say, "When you brought that up in front of my friends, I felt embarrassed and undignified" or "When I don't hear from you, it makes me think we are not connected."

Metacommunication can involve any of the skills we've learned so far ("I" messages, perception checking, and so on) and can be used deliberately to address our own wants and needs or to clarify our intentions when something we've expressed may have been poorly received. It can help us in the middle of an interaction to clarify and prevent misunderstandings as we both send and receive messages. For example, if you notice someone reacting in a way you didn't intend, you can ask about it ("How are you feeling right now? What are you hearing me say?"), or you can clarify your intent and adjust ("My intent was not for you to feel disrespected. How can I say this differently so that you hear my respect for you?"). We can also respond to the cold relational messages of others with "When you say it that way, I hear not only what you're saying but an extra message that you don't think I'm capable" or "Not giving me options leaves me feeling boxed in, and I really want to feel more freedom in this relationship."

Reflective Communication: Mindfulness

The word **mindfulness** refers to "paying attention on purpose" and has many uses in personal and work life. For interpersonal communication purposes, mindfulness relates to becoming more conscious of how we encode and decode messages. We can better meet our communication goals with increased awareness of how communication carries relational subtexts, how those subtexts may be perceived to meet (or not meet) social needs, and how those perceptions might result in a warm or cold emotional temperature. As with all communication competence skills, awareness helps us shift from a habitual or automatic state of being and thinking to a mindful and thoughtful state where we put more effort, attention, and forethought into what we hope to accomplish and why.

Becoming mindful of climate means increasing our awareness of the needs of self and others before, during, and after interactions. It requires reflecting on our own desires, thought processes ,and emotional reactions, and with applied forethought, thinking about and speculating about those of others. Learning about relational messages and social needs gives us access to a greater variety of perceptual frameworks through which to view communication; for example, how a message might be received by others. It also requires that during interactions, we observe, reflect on, and attend to others' emotional reactions and shift gears midstream, if necessary. For example, if mid-interaction we observe that a person's outward response seems to indicate embarrassment, shame, agitation or defensiveness, we can adjust our behaviour or discuss and clarify our intent. We may even take notice of an interaction after it occurred, reviewing it and considering how well it went or how we might do better next time. Through awareness, reflection, mindfulness, we can build a cognitively complex repertoire of skills, knowledge, and motivation that helps us engage in a skillful dance of communication that attempts to honour social needs.

Climate-Centred Message Planning

Climate-centred message planning (CCMP) is a term coined by Gerber and Murphy (2019). It refers to the conscious encoding (planning and forethought) involved in meeting communication goals. CCMP requires two steps and takes the basics of empathy a bit further into message construction. The steps include the following:

1. **Thinking about what we want to say or do:** What is our goal? What outcome(s) do we hope to achieve? What message or behaviours are we considering? What needs do we hope to fulfill? What emotional temperature do we hope to create?

Which behaviours or message strategies will help us achieve it?

2. **Thinking about how the other person (or persons) might hear (or perceive) what we say:** Here, we should try putting on the other person's perception glasses and considering as many factors as possible that affect how the person might hear and feel our message. We should think about whether the message is likely to be perceived and received as intended. If not, we should rethink what we want to say and rephrase it in a way that the other person will be more likely to hear what we want them to hear. That is, we want to convey our message such in a way that the other person is more likely to interpret the message as it was intended.

Remember once again that we can never completely ensure that someone hears what we want them to hear—that is, interprets a message in the way we intended. However, with some awareness and forethought, we can ensure that there's a better chance of it. The strategies presented here will also give us a better awareness of how what we say and how we say it may impact another person's relational or face needs. Our consideration of what human beings need will help us infer how they might react to messages emotionally, intellectually, or relationally. Doing so helps us become more competent communicators and build a positive communication climate.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Recall a situation where either you or someone else

used disconfirming messages. What was the result? How did it feel? How could the message have been changed to a confirming message? What would that have changed?

2. Apply Gibb's theory of defensive and supportive messages to different situations, either real world or imaginary. How does using supportive messages change things?
3. Creating a positive environment is important. Which one of the approaches above appeals to you the most? Which one can you see yourself using and why?

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6.3 Conflict and Interpersonal Communication

Who do you have the most conflict with right now? Your answer to this question probably depends on the various contexts in your life. If you still live at home with a parent or parents, you may have daily conflicts with your family as you try to balance your autonomy, or desire for independence, with the practicalities of living under your family's roof. If you've recently moved away to go to college, you may be negotiating roommate conflicts as you adjust to living with someone you may not know at all. You probably also have experiences managing conflict in romantic relationships and in the workplace. So think back and ask yourself, "How well do I handle conflict?" As with all areas of communication, we can improve if we have the background knowledge to identify relevant communication phenomena and the motivation to reflect on and enhance our communication skills.

Interpersonal conflict often occurs in interactions where there are real or perceived incompatible goals, scarce resources, or opposing viewpoints. Interpersonal conflict may be expressed verbally or nonverbally along a continuum ranging from a nearly imperceptible cold shoulder to a very obvious blowout.

Conflict is an inevitable part of close relationships and can take a negative emotional toll. It takes effort to ignore someone or to be passive-aggressive, and the anger or guilt we may feel after blowing up at someone is a valid negative feeling. However, conflict isn't always negative or unproductive. In fact, numerous research studies have shown that the quantity of conflict in a relationship is not as important as how the conflict is handled (Markman et al., 1993). Additionally, when conflict is well managed, it has the potential to lead to more rewarding and satisfactory relationships (Canary & Messman, 2000).

Image 6.4

Improving your competence in dealing with conflict can yield positive effects in the real world. Since conflict is present in our personal and professional lives, the ability to manage conflict and negotiate desirable outcomes can help us be more successful at both. Whether you and your partner are trying to decide what brand of flat-screen television to buy or you are discussing the upcoming political election with your mother, the potential for conflict is present. In professional settings, the ability to engage in conflict management, sometimes called **conflict resolution**, is a necessary and valued skill. However, many professionals do not receive training in conflict management even though they are expected to do it as part of their job (Gates, 2006).

Lack of training and lack of competence could be a recipe for disaster. Many colleges and universities now offer undergraduate degrees, graduate degrees, or certificates in conflict resolution. Being able to manage conflict situations can make life more pleasant rather than letting a situation stagnate or escalate. The negative effects of poorly handled conflict could range from an awkward last few weeks of the semester with a college roommate to violence or divorce in a romantic relationship. However, there is no absolute right or wrong way to handle a conflict. Remember that being a **competent communicator** doesn't mean that you follow a set of absolute rules. Rather, a competent communicator assesses multiple contexts and applies or adapts communication tools and skills to fit the dynamic situation.

Causes of Conflict

There are many potential causes of conflict, and many theories concerning them. A few potential causes of conflict were mentioned above and include real or perceived incompatible goals, scarce resources, or opposing viewpoints. **Relational transgressions** are another common cause, and they occur when people violate implicit or explicit relational rules. These rule violations can be events, actions, or behaviours that violate relationship norms or rules. **Explicit rules** tend to be relationship specific, such as those prompted by the bad habits of a partner (e.g., excessive drinking or drug abuse) or those that emerge from attempts to manage conflict (e.g., rules that prohibit spending excess time with a friends or talking about a former girlfriend or boyfriend). **Implicit rules** tend to be those that are accepted as cultural standards for proper relationship conduct (e.g., secrets should be kept private).

Conflict Management Styles

Would you describe yourself as someone who prefers to avoid conflict? Do you like to get your way? Are you good at working with someone to reach a solution that is mutually beneficial? Odds are that you have been in situations where you could answer yes to each of these questions, which underscores the important role that context plays in conflict and in conflict management styles in particular. The way we view and deal with conflict is learned and contextual. Is the way you handle conflict similar to the way your parents handle conflict? As children, we test out the different conflict resolution styles we observe in our families with our parents and siblings. Later, as we enter adolescence and begin developing platonic and romantic relationships outside the family, we begin testing what we've learned from our parents in other settings. If a child has observed and used negative conflict management styles with siblings or parents, they are likely to exhibit those behaviours with non–family members (Reese-Weber & Bartle-Haring, 1998).

Much research has been done on different conflict management styles, which are communication strategies that attempt to avoid, address, or resolve a conflict. Keep in mind that we don't always consciously choose a style. We may instead be caught up in emotion and become reactionary. The strategies for more effectively managing conflict that will be discussed later may allow you to slow down the reaction process, become more aware of it, and intervene in the process to improve your communication.

A powerful tool for mitigating conflict is **information exchange.** Asking for more information before you react to a conflict-triggering event is a good way to add a buffer between the trigger and your reaction. Another key element is whether or not a communicator is oriented toward **self-centred** or **other-centred goals**. For example, if your goal is to "win" or make the other person "lose," you show a high concern for self and a low concern for others. If your goal is to facilitate a "win-win" resolution or outcome, you show a high concern for both self and others. In general, strategies that facilitate information exchange and include concern for mutual goals will be more successful for managing conflict (Sillars, 1980). The five strategies for managing conflict that we will discuss are **competing**, **avoiding**, **accommodating**, **compromising**, and **collaborating**. Each of these conflict styles accounts for the concern we place on self versus others.

Watch this video as an introduction to conflict management styles that will be discussed in the next section.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=1152#oembed-1

(Study Hall, 2022)

To better understand the elements of the five styles of conflict management, we will apply each to the following scenario:

Rosa and D'Shaun have been partners for 17 years. Rosa is growing frustrated because D'Shaun continues to give money to their teenage daughter, Casey, even though they decided to keep the teen on a fixed allowance to try to teach her more financial responsibility. Although conflicts regarding money and child-rearing are very common, we will examine the numerous ways that Rosa and D'Shaun could address this problem.

Competing Style

The **competing style** of conflict management indicates a high concern for self and a low concern for others. When we compete, we are striving to "win" the conflict, potentially at the expense or "loss" of the other person. One way we may gauge our win is by being granted or taking concessions from the other person. For example, if D'Shaun gives Casey extra money behind Rosa's back, he is taking an indirect competitive route, resulting in a "win" for him because he got his way. The competing style also involves the use of power, which can be either noncoercive or coercive (Sillars, 1980). **Noncoercive strategies** include requesting and persuading. When **requesting**, we suggest that the conflict partner change a behaviour. Requesting doesn't require a high level of information exchange. When we **persuade**, however, we give our conflict partner reasons to support our request or suggestion, meaning that there is more information exchange, which may make persuading more effective than requesting. Rosa could try to persuade D'Shaun to stop giving Casey extra allowance money by bringing up their fixed budget or reminding him that they are saving for a summer vacation. **Coercive strategies** violate standard guidelines for ethical communication and may include aggressive communication directed at rousing your partner's emotions through insults, profanity, and shouting, or through threats of punishment if you do not get your way. If Rosa is the primary income earner in the family, she could use that power to threaten to take D'Shaun's ATM card away if he continues giving Casey money. In all these scenarios, the "win" that could result would only be short-term and could lead to conflict escalation. Interpersonal conflict is rarely isolated—there can be ripple effects that connect the current conflict to previous and future conflicts. D'Shaun's behind-the-scenes money giving or Rosa's confiscation of the ATM card could lead to built-up negative emotions that could further test their relationship.

Competing has been linked to **aggression**, though the two are not always paired. If assertiveness does not work, there is a chance the conflict could escalate to hostility. There is a pattern to verbal escalation: requests, demands, complaints, angry statements, threats, harassment, and verbal abuse (Johnson & Roloff, 2000). Aggressive communication can become patterned, which can create a volatile and hostile environment.

Image 6.5

The competing style of conflict management is not the same thing as having a competitive personality. Competition in relationships isn't always negative, and people who enjoy engaging in competition may not always do so at the expense of another person's goals. In fact, research has shown that some couples engage in competitive shared activities like sports or games to maintain and enrich their relationship (Dindia & Baxter, 1987).

Avoiding Style

The **avoiding style** of conflict management often indicates a low concern for self and a low concern for others, and no direct communication about the conflict takes place. However, in cultures that emphasize group harmony over individual interests, and even in some situations in Canada, avoiding a conflict can indicate a high level of concern for others. In general, avoiding doesn't mean that there is no communication about the conflict. Remember that you cannot not communicate. Even when we try to avoid conflict, we may intentionally or unintentionally give our feelings away through our verbal and nonverbal communication. Rosa's sarcastic tone as she tells D'Shaun that he's "Soooo good with money!" and his subsequent eyeroll both bring the conflict to the surface without specifically addressing it. The avoiding style is either passive or indirect, meaning that there is little information exchange, which may make this strategy less effective than others. We may decide to avoid conflict for many different reasons, some of which are better than others. If you view the conflict as having little importance to you, it may be better to ignore it. If the person you're having conflict with will only be working in your office for a week, you may perceive a conflict to be temporary and choose to avoid it and hope that it will solve itself. If you are not emotionally invested in the conflict, you may be able to reframe your perspective and see the situation in a different way, therefore resolving the issue. In all these cases, avoiding doesn't really require an investment of time, emotion, or communication skill, so there is not much at stake to lose.

Avoidance is not always an easy conflict management choice because sometimes the person we have a conflict with isn't a temporary employee in our office or a weekend houseguest. Although it may be easy to tolerate a problem when you're not personally invested in it or view it as temporary when faced with a situation like Rosa and D'Shaun's, avoidance would just make the problem worse. For example, avoidance could first manifest as changing the subject, then progress from avoiding the issue to avoiding the person altogether, to even ending the relationship.

Indirect strategies of hinting and joking also fall under the avoiding style. While these indirect avoidance strategies may lead to a buildup of frustration or even anger, they allow us to vent a little of our built-up steam and may make a conflict situation more bearable. When we **hint**, we drop clues that we hope our partner will find and piece together to see the problem and hopefully change, thereby solving the problem without any direct communication. In almost all the cases of hinting, the person dropping the hints overestimates their partner's detective abilities. For example, when Rosa leaves the bank statement on the kitchen table in the hope that D'Shaun will realize how much extra money he is giving Casey, D'Shaun may simply ignore it or even get irritated with Rosa for not putting the statement with all the other mail. We also tend to overestimate our partner's ability to decode the **jokes** we make about a conflict situation. It is more likely that the receiver of the jokes will think you're genuinely trying to be funny or feel provoked or insulted rather than realizing that you are referencing the conflict situation. So, more frustration may develop when the hints and jokes are not decoded, which often leads to a more extreme form of hinting or joking—passive-aggressive behaviour.

Passive-aggressive behaviour is a way of dealing with conflict in which one person indirectly communicates their negative thoughts or feelings through nonverbal behaviours, such as not completing a task. For example, Rosa may wait a few days to deposit money into the bank so D'Shaun can't withdraw it to give to Casey, or D'Shaun may cancel plans for a romantic dinner because he feels like Rosa is questioning his responsibility with money. Although passive-aggressive behaviour can feel rewarding in the moment, it is one of the most unproductive ways to deal with conflict. These behaviours may create additional conflicts and may lead to a cycle of passive-aggressiveness in which the other partner begins to exhibit these behaviours as well, while never actually addressing the conflict that originated the behaviour. In most avoidance situations, both parties lose. However, as noted above, avoidance can be the most appropriate strategy in some situations—for example, when the conflict is temporary, when the stakes are low, when there is little personal investment, or when there is the potential for violence or retaliation.

Accommodating Style

The **accommodating style** of conflict management indicates a low concern for self and a high concern for others and is often viewed as **passive** or **submissive** in that someone complies with or obliges another without providing personal input. The context for and motivation behind accommodating play an important role in whether or not it is an appropriate strategy. Generally, we accommodate because we are being generous, we are obeying, or we are yielding (Bobot, 2010). If we are being generous, we accommodate because we genuinely want to; if we are obeying, we don't have a choice except to accommodate, perhaps because of the potential for negative consequences or punishment; and if we yield, we may have our own views or goals but give up on them owing to fatigue, time constraints, or because a better solution has been offered. Accommodating can be appropriate when there is little chance that our own goals can be achieved, when we don't have much to lose by accommodating, when we feel we are wrong, or when advocating for our own needs could negatively affect the relationship (Isenhart & Spangle, 2000). The occasional accommodation can be useful in maintaining a relationship—remember that earlier we discussed putting another's needs before your own as a way of achieving relational goals. For example, Rosa may say, “It’s okay that you gave Casey some extra money. She had to spend more on gas this week because the prices went up.” However, being a team player can slip into being a pushover, which people generally do not appreciate. If Rosa keeps telling D’Shaun, “It’s okay this time,” they may find themselves short on spending money at the end of the month. At that point, Rosa and D’Shaun’s conflict may escalate as they question each other’s motives, or the conflict may spread if they direct their frustration at Casey and blame it on her irresponsibility.

Image 6.6

Research has shown that the accommodating style is more likely to occur when there are time constraints and less likely to occur when someone does not want to appear weak (Cai & Fink, 2002). If you’re standing outside the movie theatre and two movies are starting, you may say, “Let’s just have it your way,” so you don’t miss the beginning of the film. If you’re a new manager at an electronics store and an employee wants to take Sunday off to watch a football game, you may say no to set an example for the other employees. As with avoiding, there are certain cultural influences we will discuss later that make accommodating an effective strategy.

Compromising Style

The **compromising style** of conflict management shows a moderate concern for self and others and may indicate that there is a low investment in the conflict and/or the relationship. Even though we often hear that the best way to handle a conflict is to compromise, the compromising style isn't a win-win solution—it is a partial win-lose. In essence, when we compromise, we give up some or most of what we want. It's true that the conflict is resolved temporarily, but lingering thoughts of what you gave up could lead to a future conflict. Compromising may be a good strategy when there are time limitations or when prolonging a conflict may lead to relationship deterioration. Compromise may also be good when both parties have equal power or when other resolution strategies have not worked (Macintosh & Stevens, 2008).

A negative aspect of compromising is that it may be used as an easy way out of a conflict. The compromising style is most effective when both parties find the solution agreeable. Rosa and D'Shaun could decide that Casey's allowance needs to be increased, and they could each give her $10 more a week by committing to taking their lunch to work twice a week instead of eating out. In this situation, they are both giving up something, and if neither of them has a problem with taking their lunch to work, then the compromise was equitable. If the couple agrees that the extra $20 a week should come out of D'Shaun's golf budget, the compromise isn't as equitable, and D'Shaun, though he agreed to the compromise, may end up with feelings of resentment. Wouldn't it be better to both win?

Collaborating Style

The **collaborating style** of conflict management involves a high degree of concern for self and others and usually indicates investment in both the conflict situation and the relationship. Although the collaborating style takes the most work in terms of communication competence, it ultimately leads to a win-win situation in which neither party has to make concessions because a mutually beneficial solution is discovered or created. The obvious advantage is that both parties are satisfied, which could lead to positive problem solving in the future and strengthen the overall relationship. For example, Rosa and D'Shaun may agree that Casey's allowance needs to be increased and may decide to give her $20 more a week in exchange for her babysitting her little brother one night a week. In this case, they didn't make the conflict personal but focused on the situation and came up with a solution that may end up saving them money. The disadvantage is that this style is often time consuming, and only one person may be willing to use this approach while the other person is eager to compete to meet their goals or is willing to accommodate.

Here are some tips for collaborating to achieve a win-win outcome:

- Do not view the conflict as a contest you are trying to win.
- Remain flexible and realize that there are solutions yet to be discovered.
- Distinguish the people from the problem—don't make it personal.
- Determine what the underlying needs are that are driving the other person's demands; needs can still be met through different demands.
- Identify areas of common ground or shared interests that you can work from to develop solutions.
- Ask questions to allow the other person to clarify their point of view and to help you understand their perspective.

- Listen carefully, and provide verbal and nonverbal feedback.

(Hargie, 2011)

Common Conflict Behaviours

It is important to be aware common conflict behaviours. Some help to resolve conflict, whereas others increase the chance of both causing and perpetuating conflict. Increasing your awareness of these behaviours can help to reduce negative conflict spirals, identify these behaviours in your interactions with others, and promote awareness of alternative and more collaborative and peaceful responses.

One form of behaviour is a type of **passive aggression** referred to as **crazymaking** (Bach & Goldberg, 1974). Often crazymaking behaviours are unconsciously done and are indirect attacks. However, they result in upsetting others or "driving others crazy," hence the name. This is a subtle conflict style in which a person expresses hostility or resistance to others through stubbornness, resentment, procrastination, jokes with ambiguous meanings, petty annoyances, or persistent failure to fully meet expectations or responsibilities. Someone who displays this style of conflict may disavow any negative intent if confronted or questioned about their behaviour. Examples of crazymaking and some other forms of unproductive conflict behaviours are discussed below.

Crazymaking Behaviours

The Contract Tyrannizer: This person refuses to allow the relationship to change from the way it was. Roles, expectations, and beliefs about the relationship are set in stone and cannot ever be allowed to change (Schinstock, 2013).

The Withholder: This person is unwilling to be open and honest about something that is upsetting them (Schinstock, 2013). They instead punish the other person by withholding something. This could be in the form of withholding affection, humour, or courtesy or respect, which eventually results in increasing resentment within the relationship (Schinstock, 2013).

The Goat-Getter: This individual does not share underlying resentments, but instead does little things to irritate others. This can take the form of behaviours such as not putting things away or playing music loudly, and when they are asked about the behaviour, they deny it (Schinstock, 2013).

The Joker: Instead of talking about conflict, this person will make jokes and avoid the topic when someone wants to discuss it. As a result, it is not possible to have a serious conversation, and when pushed, the behaviour becomes worse and the joker act similarly to the goat-getter (Schinstock, 2013).

The Benedict Arnold: This form of crazymaking involves using sabotage to get back at someone else. It can even take the form of encouraging ridicule from others outside the situation and failing to defend someone from attack (Schinstock, 2013).

Beltlining: This refers to a boxing move that means to hit below the belt (ASCCC OERI, 2023). In terms of conflict, this metaphor refers to using intimate information against another person to cause hurt and anger. For example, Annabelle and Ariana are having a conflict over their friendship, and Ariana beltlines Annabelle with this comment: "You have often wondered why you don't have more friends. Based on how you are acting right now, I don't need to wonder any more" (ASCCC OERI, 2023).

Gunnysacking: This is an imaginary bag (a gunnysack) that we all carry into which we place unresolved conflicts or grievances over time. Holding onto the way things used to be can be like a stone in your gunnysack and influence how you interpret your current context. Gunnysacking may be expressed by bringing up previous behaviours the other person has engaged in or previous arguments you felt were unresolved.

Silencers: This type of behaviour, which includes crying, yelling, or heavy breathing, can stifle and silence the conflict (ASCCC OERI, 2023). When conflict escalates quickly, parties may use silencers to deflect attention away from the conflict issue and instead make the conflict about the silencers. For example, let's say that friends Jasmine and Sam are having a conflict over money. Jasmine assertively tells Sam that she expects to be repaid for the money she lent him. Rather than responding to Jasmine's request, Sam begins crying and suggests that Jasmine is a bully for bringing up the topic. The conflict now becomes about Jasmine's approach and Sam's crying, and the money problem not addressed addressed (ASCCC OERI, 2023).

Kitchen Sinking: With gunnysacking, people store up their grievances to unload at a later date, whereas kitchen sinking refers to bringing up past conflicts, even those that have been resolved, to gain leverage in the conflict. The challenge created by kitchen sinking is that it can distract from the conflict at hand by bringing up the past (ASCCC OERI, 2023).

Counterpunch: This is a defensive response to conflict in which rather than responding to the initial topic of conflict, the other person reacts by sharing their own, often unrelated criticism (ASCCC OERI, 2023). For example, Sunita asks Ethan to make a better effort cleaning up after himself in the kitchen. Rather than responding to Sunita's request, Ethan responds with, "If you were a better cook, it might motivate me to clean up my dishes."

Other Conflict Behaviours

Blame: Some conflicts have a clearly identifiable source, but often there are multiple causes for the conflicts we experience (ASCCC OERI, 2023). Blame, or trying to place responsibility for the conflict on another person, is primarily only effective in making the other party feel defensive.

Manipulation: This unproductive conflict strategy includes one party being extremely charming and even generous to help sway the conflict outcome in their direction (ASCCC OERI, 2023). For example, Ian wants to buy a new surfboard. To soften up his wife, Lily, for the big purchase, he makes her favourite dinner and brings home a bouquet of roses, thinking that she won't say no after he was so "considerate." However, if Lily finds out that Ian was merely being nice to gain an advantage, this may harm the trust in their relationship over the long run (ASCCC OERI, 2023).

Labelling: This occurs when you assign negative terms to the other person's behaviour (ASCCC OERI, 2023). We can do this internally by just thinking about it in our heads, externally by sharing our labels with others, or by labelling the other person during our interaction. Not only can labels be extremely hurtful, but when we use labels to assign meaning to the behaviour of other people, we begin to view those people through the labels. For example, Marwan works up the courage to tell his father that he do not want to go into the family business, but instead would like to go to college (ASCCC OERI, 2023). His father, who is extremely disappointed, responds by telling Marwan that he are "ungrateful," "selfish," and a "bad son."

Apologies and concessions: The most common of the remedial strategies, an apology is the most straightforward means by which to admit responsibility, express regret, and seek forgiveness. Apologies are most effective if provided in a timely manner and involve a self-disclosure. Those that occur after the discovery of a transgression by another party are much less effective. Though apologies can range from a simple, "I'm sorry," to more elaborate forms, offenders are most successful when they offering a more complex apology to match the seriousness of the transgression.

Excuses and justifications: Rather than accepting responsibility for a transgression through an apology, a transgressor who explains *why* they engaged in the behaviour is engaging in excuses or justifications. Although excuses and justifications aim to minimize the blame on the transgressor, both address blame minimization from completely opposite perspectives. Excuses attempt to minimize blame by focusing on a transgressor's inability to control their actions (e.g., "How would I have known my ex-girlfriend was going to be at the party") or displace blame on a third party (e.g., "I went to lunch with my ex-girlfriend because I didn't want to hurt her feelings."). Conversely, a justification minimizes blame by suggesting that actions surrounding the transgression were justified or that the transgression was not severe. For example, a transgressor may justify having lunch with a past romantic interest by suggesting to their current partner that the lunch meeting was of no major consequence (e.g., "We are just friends").

Refusals: When making a refusal, a transgressor claims no blame for the perceived transgression. This is a departure from apologies and excuses or justifications, which involve varying degrees of blame acceptance. In the case of a refusal, the transgressor believes that they have not done anything wrong. Such a situation points out the complexity of relational transgressions. The perceptions of both partners must be taken into account when recognizing and addressing transgressions. For example, Li and Sally have just started to date but have not addressed whether they are mutually exclusive. When Li finds out that Sally has been on a date with someone else, he confronts Sally. Sally may engage in refusal of blame because Li and Sally had not explicitly decided whether they were mutually exclusive. The problem with these situations is that the transgressor shows no sensitivity to the offended party. As such, the offended person is less likely to exhibit empathy, which is key for forgiveness. As such, refusals tend to aggravate situations rather than serve as a meaningful repair strategy.

Appeasement and positivity: Appeasement is used to offset hurtful behaviour through the transgressor ingratiating themselves in ways such as promising never to commit the hurtful act or being overly kind to their partner. Appeasement may elicit greater empathy from the offended party through soothing strategies exhibited by the transgressor (e.g., complimenting, being more attentive, spending more time together). However, the danger of appeasement is the risk that the actions of the transgressor will be viewed as being artificial. For example, sending your partner flowers every day to make up for an infidelity you have committed may be viewed as downplaying the severity of the transgression if the sending of flowers is not coupled with other soothing strategies that have greater immediacy.

Avoidance and evasion: Avoidance involves the transgressor making conscious efforts to ignore the transgression and similar in nature to silencing. Avoidance can be effective after an apology is sought and forgiveness is granted by minimizing discussion around unpleasant subjects once closure has been obtained. However, total avoidance of a transgression where the hurt of the offended person is not recognized and forgiveness is not granted can result in further problems in the future.

Culture and Conflict

Culture is an important context to consider when studying conflict, and recent research has called into question some of the assumptions of the five conflict management styles discussed so far, which were formulated with a Western bias (Oetzel et al., 2008). For example, although the avoiding style of conflict has been cast as negative, with a low concern for self and others or as a lose-lose outcome, research has found that participants in Canada, the United States, Germany, China, and Japan all viewed avoiding strategies as demonstrating a concern for others. While there are some generalizations we can make about culture and conflict, it is better to look at more specific patterns of how interpersonal communication and conflict management are related. We can better understand some of the cultural differences in conflict management by further examining the concept of **face**.

What does it mean to "save face"? This saying generally refers to preventing embarrassment or preserving our reputation or image, which is similar to the concept of face in interpersonal and intercultural communication. You may remember that our face is a reflection of the self that we desire to put out into the world, and **facework** refers to the communicative strategies we employ to project, maintain, or repair our face or to maintain, repair, or challenge another's face. **Face negotiation theory** argues that people in all cultures negotiate face through communication encounters and that cultural factors influence how we engage in facework, especially in conflict situations (Oetzel et al., 2003). These cultural factors influence whether we are more concerned with **self-face** or **other-face** and what conflict management strategies we might use. One key cultural influence on face negotiation is the distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

The distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures is an important dimension across which all cultures vary. **Individualistic cultures** such as Canada, the United States, and most of Europe emphasize individual identity over group identity and encourage competition and self-reliance. **Collectivistic cultures** like Taiwan, Colombia, China, Japan, Vietnam, and Peru value in-group identity over individual identity and conformity to social norms of the in-group (Dsilva & Whyte, 1998). However, within the larger cultures, individuals will vary in the degree to which they view themselves as part of a group or as a separate individual, which is called **self-construal**. **Independent self-construal** indicates a perception of the self as an individual with unique feelings, thoughts, and motivations. **Interdependent self-construal** indicates a perception of the self as interrelated with others (Oetzel et al., 2003). Not surprisingly, people from individualistic cultures are more likely to have higher levels of independent self-construal, and people from collectivistic cultures are more likely to have higher levels of interdependent self-construal. Self-construal and individualistic or collectivistic cultural orientations affect how people engage in facework and the conflict management styles they employ.

Self-construal alone does not have a direct effect on conflict style, but it does affect face concerns, with independent self-construal favouring self-face concerns and interdependent self-construal favouring other-face concerns. There are specific facework strategies for different conflict management styles, and these strategies correspond to self-face concerns or other-face concerns:

- **Accommodating:** Giving in (self-face concern)
- **Avoiding:** Pretending that conflict does not exist (other-face concern)
- **Competing:** Defending your position, persuading (self-face concern)
- **Collaborating:** Apologizing, having a private discussion, and remaining calm (other-face concern)

(Oetzel et al., 2008)

Research done on college students in Germany, Japan, China, Canada, and the United States found that those with independent self-construal were more likely to engage in competing, and those with interdependent self-construal were more likely to engage in avoiding or collaborating (Oetzel et al., 2003). In general, this research found that members of collectivistic cultures were more likely to use the avoiding style of conflict management and less likely to use the integrating or competing styles of conflict management than were members of individualistic cultures.

The following examples bring together facework strategies, cultural orientations, and conflict management styles:

- A person from an individualistic culture may be more likely to engage in competing as a conflict management strategy if they are directly confronted, which may be an attempt to defend their reputation (self-face concern).
- A person in a collectivistic culture may be more likely to engage in avoiding or accommodating in order not to embarrass or anger the person confronting them (other-face concern) or out of concern that their reaction could reflect

negatively on their family or cultural group (other-face concern).

Although these distinctions are useful for categorizing large-scale cultural patterns, it is important not to essentialize or arbitrarily group countries together because there are measurable differences within cultures. For example, expressing one's emotions was seen as demonstrating a low concern for other-face in Japan, but this was not so in China, which shows there is variety between similarly collectivistic cultures. Culture always adds layers of complexity to any communication phenomenon, but experiencing and learning from other cultures also enriches our lives.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Of the five conflict management strategies, is there one that you use more often than others? Why or why not? Do you think people are predisposed to one style over the others based on their personality or other characteristics? If so, what personality traits do you think would lead a person to each style?
2. Review the example of D'Shaun and Rosa. If you were in their situation, what do you think the best style to use would be and why?

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6.4 Handling Conflict Better

Identifying Conflict Patterns

As mentioned, much of the research on conflict patterns has been done on couples in romantic relationships, but the concepts and findings are applicable to other types of relationships. So far in this chapter, we have already looked at some common causes of conflict and conflict management styles and behaviours. Next, we will look at four common **triggers** for conflict viewed from the perspective of oneself as the communicator and what can be done to avoid them in your own communication with others. The four common triggers for conflict are **criticism**, **demand**, **cumulative annoyance**, and **rejection** (Jacobson et al., 2000). We will discuss each of these and then strategies you can use to avoid them. These strategies can also be used to decrease, or resolve conflict, in other situations as well.

We all know from experience that **criticism**, or comments that evaluate another person's personality, behaviour, appearance, or life choices, can lead to conflict. Comments do not have to be meant as criticism to be perceived as such. If Gary comes home from college for the weekend and his mom says, "Looks like you put on a few pounds," she may view this as a statement of fact based on observation. Gary, however, may take the comment personally and respond negatively back to his mom, starting a conflict that will last for the rest of his visit. A simple but useful strategy to manage the trigger of criticism is to follow the old adage, "Think before you speak." In many cases, there are alternative ways to phrase things so they are taken less personally, or we may determine that our comment doesn't need to be spoken at all. The majority of the thoughts that we have about another person's physical appearance, whether positive or negative, do not need to be verbalized. Ask yourself, "What is my motivation for making this comment?" and "Do I have anything to lose by *not* making this comment?" If your underlying reasons for asking are valid, perhaps there is another way to phrase your observation. If Gary's mom is worried about his eating habits and health, she could wait until they're eating dinner and ask him how he likes the food choices at school and what he usually eats.

Demands also frequently trigger conflict, especially if the demand is viewed as unfair or irrelevant. It's important to note that demands rephrased as questions may still be perceived as demands. Tone of voice and context are important factors here. When you were younger, you may have asked a parent, teacher, or elder for something and heard back, "Ask nicely." As with criticism, thinking before you speak and before you respond can help manage demands and minimize conflict. Demands are sometimes met with withdrawal rather than a verbal response. If you are doing the demanding, remember that a higher level of information exchange may make your demand clearer or more reasonable to the other person. If you are being demanded of, responding calmly and expressing your thoughts and feelings are likely more effective than withdrawing, which may escalate the conflict.

Cumulative annoyance is a building of frustration or anger that occurs over time, eventually resulting in a conflict interaction. For example, your friend shows up late to drive you to class three times in a row. You didn't say anything the previous times, but on the third time you say, "You're late again! If you can't get here on time, I'll find another way to get to class." Cumulative annoyance can build up like a pressure cooker, and as it builds up, the intensity of the conflict also builds. Criticism and demands can also play into cumulative annoyance. We have all probably let critical or demanding comments slide, but if they continue, it becomes difficult to hold back, and most of us have a breaking point. The problem here is that all the other incidents come back to your mind as you confront the other person, which usually intensifies the conflict. You've likely been surprised when someone has blown up at you because of cumulative annoyance or when someone you have blown up at didn't know there was a problem building. A good strategy for managing cumulative annoyance is to monitor your level of annoyance and occasionally let some steam out of the pressure cooker by processing through your frustration with a third party or directly addressing what is bothering you with the source.

No one likes the feeling of rejection. **Rejection** can lead to conflict when one person's comments or behaviours are perceived as ignoring or invalidating the other person. Vulnerability is a component of any close relationship. When we care about someone, we verbally or nonverbally communicate. We may tell our best friend that we miss them or plan a home-cooked meal for our partner who is working late. The vulnerability that underlies these actions comes from the possibility that our relational partner will not notice or appreciate them. When someone feels exposed or rejected, they often respond with anger to mask their hurt, which ignites a conflict. Managing feelings of rejection is difficult because it is so personal, but controlling the impulse to assume that your relational partner is rejecting you and engaging in communication rather than reflexive reaction can help put things in perspective. If your partner doesn't get excited about the meal you planned and cooked, it could be because they are physically or mentally tired after a long day. The concepts discussed in Chapter 2 can be useful here; for example, **perception checking**, taking inventory of your attributions, and engaging in information exchange to help determine how each person is punctuating the conflict are useful ways of managing all four of the triggers we've discussed.

Serial Arguing

Interpersonal conflict may take the form of **serial arguing**, which is a repeated pattern of disagreement over an issue. Serial arguments do not necessarily indicate negative or troubled relationships, but any kind of patterned conflict is worth paying attention to. There are three patterns that occur with serial arguing: **repeating**, **mutual hostility**, and **arguing with assurances** (Johnson & Roloff, 2000).

The first pattern of serial arguing is **repeating**, which means reminding the other person of your complaint—that is, what you want them to start or stop doing. The pattern may continue if the other person repeats their response to your reminder. For example, if Marita reminds Kate that she doesn't appreciate her sarcastic tone, and Kate responds, "I'm soooo sorry, I forgot how perfect you are," then the reminder has failed to effect the desired change. A predictable pattern of complaint like this leads participants to view the conflict as irresolvable.

The second pattern of serial arguing is **mutual hostility**, which occurs when the frustration of repeated conflict leads to negative emotions and increases the likelihood of verbal aggression. Again, a predictable pattern of hostility makes the conflict seem irresolvable and may lead to relationship deterioration.

Whereas the first two patterns of serial arguing entail an increase in pressure on the participants in the conflict, the third pattern offers some relief. If people in an interpersonal conflict offer **verbal assurances** of their commitment to the relationship, then the problems associated with the other two patterns may be improved. Even though the conflict may not be solved in the interaction, the verbal assurances of commitment imply that there is a willingness to work on solving the conflict in the future, which provides a sense of stability that can benefit the relationship. Although serial arguing is not necessarily bad within a relationship, if the pattern becomes more of a vicious cycle, it can lead to alienation, polarization, and an overall toxic climate, and the problem may seem so irresolvable that people feel trapped and terminate the relationship (Jacobson et al., 2000). There are some negative but common conflict reactions we can monitor and try to avoid, which may also help prevent serial arguing.

Conflict Pitfalls

Two common **conflict pitfalls** are one-upping and mindreading (Gottman, 1994). **One-upping** is a quick reaction to communication from another person that escalates the conflict. If Samar comes home late from work and Nicki says, “I wish you would call when you’re going to be late,” and Sam responds, “I wish you would get off my back,” the reaction has escalated the conflict. **Mindreading** is communication in which one person attributes something to the other using generalizations. If Samar says, “You don’t care whether I come home at all or not!” she is presuming to know Nicki’s thoughts and feelings. Nicki is likely to respond defensively, perhaps saying, “You don’t know how I’m feeling!” One-upping and mindreading are often reactions that are more reflexive than deliberate. Nicki may have received bad news and was eager to get support from Samar when she arrived home. Although Samar perceives Nicki’s comment as criticism and justifies her comments as a reaction to Nicki’s behaviour, Nicki’s comment could actually be a sign of their closeness, in that Nicki appreciates Samar’s emotional support. Samar could have said, “I know, I’m sorry, I was on my cellphone for the past hour with a client who had a lot of problems to work out.” Taking a moment to respond mindfully rather than reacting with a knee-jerk reflex can lead to information exchange, which could deescalate the conflict.

De-escalating Conflict

Validating the person with whom you are in conflict can be an effective way to de-escalate conflict. Although avoiding or retreating may seem like the best option at the moment, one of the key negative traits found in married couples’ conflicts was **withdrawal**. Often validation can be as simple as demonstrating good listening skills discussed earlier in this book by making eye contact and giving verbal and nonverbal back-channel cues like saying “Mmm-hmm” or nodding your head (Gottman, 1994). This doesn’t mean that you have to give up your own side in a conflict or that you agree with what the other person is saying; rather, you are hearing the other person out, which validates them and may also give you some more information about the conflict that could minimize the likelihood of a reaction rather than a response.

As with all the aspects of communication competence we have discussed so far, you cannot expect that everyone you interact with will have the same knowledge of communication. But it often only takes one person with conflict management skills to make an interaction more effective. Remember that it’s not the quantity of conflict that determines a relationship’s success, it’s how the conflict is managed, and one person’s competent response can de-escalate a conflict. Now we will turn to a discussion of negotiation steps and skills as a more structured way to manage conflict.

Negotiating

We negotiate daily. We may negotiate with an instructor to make up a missed assignment or with our friends to plan activities for the weekend. **Negotiation** in interpersonal conflict refers to the process of attempting to change or influence conditions within a relationship. The negotiation skills discussed here can be adapted to all types of relational contexts, from romantic partners to co-workers. The stages of negotiating are **pre-negotiation**, **opening**, **exploration**, **bargaining**, and **settlement** (Hargie, 2011).

In the **pre-negotiation stage**, you want to prepare for the encounter. If possible, let the other person know you would like to talk to them and preview the topic, so they will also have the opportunity to prepare. Although it may seem awkward to “set a date” to talk about a conflict, if the other person feels like they were blindsided, their reaction could be negative. Make your preview simple and non-threatening by saying something like, "I've noticed that we've been arguing a lot about who does what chores around the house. Can we sit down and talk tomorrow when we both get home from class?" Obviously, it won't always be feasible to set a date if the conflict needs to be handled immediately because the consequences are immediate or if you or the other person has limited availability. In that case, you can still prepare, but make sure you allow time for the other person to digest and respond. During this stage, you also want to figure out your goals for the interaction by reviewing your instrumental, relational, and self-presentation goals. Is getting something done, preserving the relationship, or presenting yourself in a certain way the most important? For example, you may highly rank the instrumental goal of having a clean house, the relational goal of having pleasant interactions with your roommate, or the self-presentation goal of appearing nice and cooperative. Whether your roommate is your best friend from high school or a stranger the school matched you up with could determine the importance of your relational and self-presentation goals. At this point, your goal analysis may lead you away from negotiation—avoiding can be an appropriate and effective conflict management strategy. If you decide to proceed with the negotiation, you will want to determine your ideal outcome and your bottom line or the point at which you decide to break off the negotiation. It's very important that you realize there is a range between your ideal and your bottom line, and that remaining flexible is key to a successful negotiation—remember that by using collaboration, a new solution could be found that you didn't think of.

In the **opening stage** of the negotiation, you want to set the tone for the interaction because the other person will be likely to reciprocate. Generally, it is good to be cooperative and pleasant, which can help open the door for collaboration. You also want to establish common ground by bringing up overlapping interests and using "we" language. It would not be useful to open the negotiation with "You're such a slob! Didn't your mom ever teach you how to take care of yourself?" Instead, you might open the negotiation by making small talk about classes that day, then move into the issue at hand. You could set a good tone and establish common ground by saying, "We both put a lot of work into setting up and decorating our space, but now that classes have started, I've noticed that we're really busy and some chores are not getting done." With some planning and a simple opening like that, you can move into the next stage of negotiation.

There should be a high level of information exchange in the **exploration stage**. The overarching goal in this stage is to get a panoramic view of the conflict by sharing your perspective and listening to the other person. In this stage, you will likely learn how the other person is punctuating the conflict. Although you may have been mulling over the mess for a few days, your roommate may just now become aware of the conflict. They may also inform you that they usually clean on Sundays but didn't get to last week because they unexpectedly had to visit their parents. The information that you gather here may clarify the situation enough to end the conflict and cease negotiation. If negotiation continues, the information will be key as you move into the bargaining stage.

The **bargaining stage** is where you make proposals and concessions. The proposal you make should be informed by what you learned in the exploration stage. Flexibility is important here because you may have to revise your ideal outcome and bottom line based on new information. If your plan was to have a big cleaning day every Thursday, you may now want to propose that your roommate clean on Sunday while you clean on Wednesday. You want to make sure your opening proposal is reasonable and not presented as an ultimatum. "I don't ever want to see a dish left in the sink" is different from "When dishes are left in the sink too long, they stink and get gross. Can we agree to not leave any dishes in the sink overnight?" Through the proposals you make, you could end up with a win-win situation. If there are areas of disagreement, however, you may have to make concessions or compromise, which can be a partial win or a partial loss. If you hate doing dishes but don't mind emptying the trash and recycling, you could propose assigning those chores based on preference. If you both hate doing dishes, you could propose that each person be responsible for washing their own dishes right after they use them. If you really hate dishes and have some extra money, you could propose using disposable (and hopefully recyclable) dishes, cups, and utensils.

In the **settlement stage,** you want to decide on one of the proposals, then summarize the chosen proposal and any related concessions. It is possible that each party can have a different view of the agreed-upon solution. If your roommate thinks you are cleaning the bathroom every other day, and you plan to clean it on Wednesdays, then there could be future conflict. You could summarize and ask for confirmation by saying, "So, it looks like I'll be in charge of the trash and recycling, and you'll load and unload the dishwasher. Then I'll do a general cleaning on Wednesdays, and you'll do the same on Sundays. Is that right?" Lastly, you'll need to follow up on the solution to make sure it's working for both parties. If your roommate goes home again next Sunday and doesn't get around to cleaning, you may need to go back to the exploration or bargaining stage.

Forgiveness

Individuals tend to experience a wide array of complex emotions following a relational transgression. These emotions are shown to have utility as an initial coping mechanism. For example, fear can result in a protective orientation following a serious transgression, sadness results in contemplation and reflection, and disgust causes us to repel from the source. However, beyond the initial situation, these emotions can be detrimental to one's mental and physical state. As a result, **forgiveness** is viewed as a more productive means of dealing with a transgression, along with engaging the one who committed the transgression.

Forgiving is not the act of excusing or condoning. Rather, it is the process whereby negative emotions are transformed into positive emotions for the purpose of bringing emotional normalcy to a relationship. In order to achieve this transformation, the offended party must forgo retribution and claims for retribution.

Dimensions of Forgiveness

The link between reconciliation and forgiveness involves exploring two dimensions of forgiveness: **intrapsychic** and **interpersonal**. The **intrapsychic dimension** relates to the cognitive processes and interpretations associated with a transgression (that is, a person's internal state), whereas **interpersonal forgiveness** is the interaction between relational partners. Total forgiveness is defined as including both the intrapsychic and interpersonal components to bring about a return to the conditions prior to the transgression. To only change one's internal state is **silent forgiveness**, and only having interpersonal interaction is considered **hollow forgiveness**.

However, some scholars contend that these two dimensions (intrapsychic and interpersonal) are independent because the complex nature associated with forgiveness involves variations of both dimensions. For example, a partner may not relinquish negative emotions yet choose to remain in the relationship because of other factors (e.g., children or financial concerns). Conversely, a person may grant forgiveness and release all the negative emotions directed towards their partner but exit the relationship because trust cannot be restored. Given this complexity, research has explored whether the transformation of negative emotions to positive emotions eliminates the negative effect associated with a given offence. The conclusions drawn from this research suggest that no correlation exists between forgiveness and unforgiveness. Put simply, although forgiveness may be granted for a given transgression, the negative effect may not be reduced by a corresponding amount.

Predictors of Forgiveness

McCullough et al. (1998) outlined the predictors of forgiveness into four broad categories:

- Personality traits of both partners
- Relationship quality
- Nature of the transgression
- Social-cognitive variables

We will discuss these predictors of forgiveness below; they are illustrated in Image 6.7.

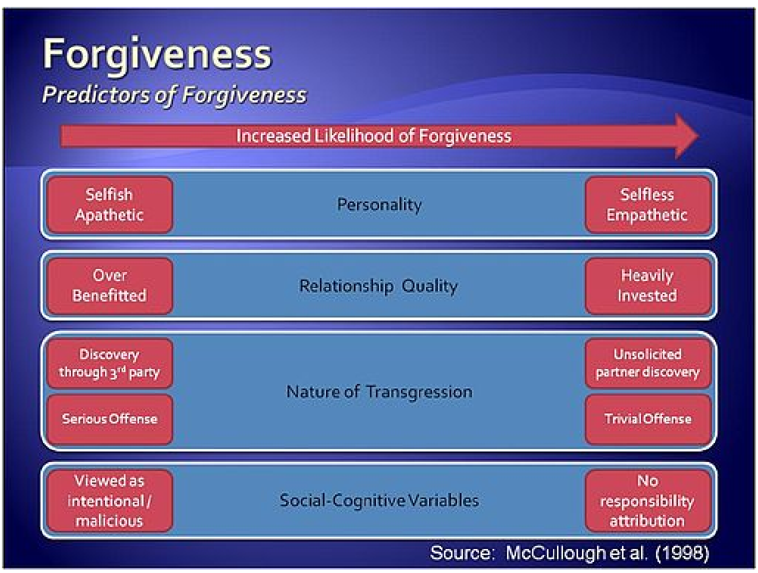

Image 6.7

Personality Traits of Both Partners

Forgivingness is defined as one's general tendency to forgive transgressions. However, this tendency differs from forgiveness, which is a response associated with a specific transgression. The characteristics of the forgiving personality as described by Emmons (2000) are as the following:

- Does not seek revenge; effectively regulates the negative effect
- Strong desire for a relationship free of conflict
- Shows empathy towards the offender
- Does not personalize the hurt associated with the transgression

In terms of personality traits, **agreeableness** and **neuroticism** (that is, instability, anxiousness, and aggression) show consistency in predicting forgivingness and forgiveness. Because forgiveness requires one to discard any desire for revenge, a vengeful personality tends to not offer forgiveness and may continue to harbour feelings of vengeance long after the transgression occurred.

It has also been shown that agreeableness is inversely correlated with motivations for revenge and avoidance, and positively correlated with benevolence. A person who demonstrates the personality trait of agreeableness is prone to forgiveness and has a general disposition of forgivingness. Conversely, neuroticism was positively correlated with avoidance and vengefulness but negatively correlated with benevolence. Consequently, a neurotic personality is less likely to forgive or to have a disposition of forgivingness.

Although the personality traits of the offended person have a predictive value of forgiveness, the personality of the offender also has an effect on whether forgiveness is offered. Offenders who show sincerity when seeking forgiveness and are persuasive in downplaying the impact of the transgression will have a positive effect on whether the offended party will offer forgiveness. Narcissistic personalities, for example, may be categorized as persuasive transgressors. The narcissist will downplay their transgressions, seeing themselves as perfect and seeking to save face at all costs. Such a dynamic suggests that personality determinants of forgiveness may involve not only the personality of the offended person, but also that of the offender.

Relationship Quality

The quality of a relationship between offended and offending partners can affect whether forgiveness is both sought and given. In essence, the more invested someone is in a relationship, the more prone that person is to minimize the hurt associated with transgressions and seek reconciliation.

McCullough et al. (1998) provides seven reasons for why someone in a relationship will seek to forgive:

1. Has a high level investment in the relationship (e.g., children, joint finances)
2. Views the relationship as a long-term commitment
3. Has many common interests with their partner
4. Is selfless in regard to their partner
5. Is willing to take the viewpoint of their partner (has empathy)
6. Assumes that the motives of their partner are in the best interests of the relationship (e.g., criticism is taken as constructive feedback)
7. Is willing to apologize for transgressions

Relationship maintenance activities are a critical component to maintaining high-quality relationships. While being heavily invested tends to lead to forgiveness, a person may be in a skewed relationship where the partner who is heavily invested is actually under-benefitted. This leads to one partner being over-benefitted, meaning they are likely to take the relationship for granted and will not be as prone to exhibit relationship repair behaviours. As such, being mindful of the quality of a relationship will best position partners to address transgressions through a stronger willingness to forgive and seek to normalize the relationship.

Another relationship factor that affects forgiveness is the history of past conflict. If past conflicts ended badly (i.e., reconciliation or forgiveness was either not achieved or was only achieved after much conflict), partners will be less willing to seek out or offer forgiveness. Maintaining a balanced relationship in which neither partner is over- or under-benefitted has a positive effect on relationship quality and the tendency to forgive. In that same vein, a partner is are more likely to offer forgiveness if their partner had recently forgiven them for a transgression. However, if a transgression is repeated, resentment begins to build, which has an adverse effect on the offended partner's desire to offer forgiveness.

Nature of the Transgression

The most notable feature of a transgression to have an effect on forgiveness is the seriousness of the offence. Some transgressions are perceived as being so serious that they are considered unforgivable. To counter the negative effect associated with a severe transgression, the offender may engage in repair strategies to lessen the perceived hurt. The offender's communication immediately following a transgression has the greatest predictive value on whether forgiveness will be granted.

Consequently, offenders who immediately apologize, take responsibility, and show remorse have the greatest chance of obtaining forgiveness from their partner. Further, self-disclosure of a transgression yields much greater results than if a partner is informed of the transgression through a third party. By taking responsibility for one's actions and being forthright through self-disclosure of an offence, partners may actually form closer bonds from the reconciliation associated with a serious transgression.

Social-Cognitive Variables

Attributions of responsibility for a given transgression may have an adverse effect on forgiveness. Specifically, if a transgression is viewed as intentional or malicious, the offended partner is less likely to feel empathy and forgive. Based on the notion that forgiveness is driven primarily by empathy, the offender must accept responsibility and seek forgiveness immediately following the transgression because apologies have been shown to elicit empathy from the offended partner. The resulting feelings of empathy in the offended partner may allow them to better relate to the guilt and loneliness their partner may feel as a result of the transgression. In this state of mind, the offended partner is more likely to seek to normalize the relationship through granting forgiveness and restoring closeness with their partner.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Of the conflict triggers discussed (criticism, demands, cumulative annoyance, and rejection), which one do you find most often triggers a negative reaction from you? What strategies could you use to better manage the trigger and more effectively manage conflict?
2. Apply the stages of negotiation to a situation that

currently requires negotiation in your life, one from the past, or any imaginary situation.

3. Forgiveness can be a complicated process. Consider a situation where either you were forgiven or you forgave someone else. Relate that situation to the theory above with reference to predictors of forgiveness. Were the predictors true?

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6.5 Conflict Management Strategies

As already discussed, conflict is inevitable and is not inherently negative. A key part of developing interpersonal **communication competence** involves being able to effectively manage the conflict you will encounter in all your relationships. One key part of handling conflict better is to notice patterns of conflict in specific relationships and to generally have an idea of what causes you to react negatively and what your reactions usually are.

Conflict Management Strategies

Many of the strategies discussed below have been previously mentioned in this book, but they warrant another mention because they can help you manage conflict in a positive manner. As an introduction, watch the video, which explores the concept of confidence in conflict.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=1154#oembed-1

(TEDx Talks, 2017)

Defensiveness versus Supportiveness

Jack Gibb discussed defensive and supportive communication interactions as part of his analysis of conflict management. Defensive communication is characterized by control, evaluation, and judgements, whereas supportive communication focuses on the points and not personalities. When we feel judged or criticized, our ability to listen can be diminished, and we may only hear the negative message. By choosing to focus on the message instead of the messenger, we can keep the discussion supportive and professional.

Face-Detracting and Face-Saving

Communication is not competition. Communication is the sharing of understanding and meaning, but does everyone always share equally? People struggle for control, limit access to resources and information as part of territorial displays, and otherwise use the process of communication to engage in competition. People also use communication for collaboration. Both competition and collaboration can be observed in communication interactions, but there are two concepts central to both: face-detracting and face-saving strategies.

Face-detracting strategies involve messages or statements that take away from the respect, integrity, or credibility of a person, whereas **face-saving strategies** protect credibility and separate the message from the messenger. For example, you might say that "Sales were down this quarter" without specifically noting who was responsible—sales were simply down. If, however, you ask, "How does the sales manager explain the decline in sales?" you have specifically connected an individual to the negative news. Although we may want to specifically connect tasks and job responsibilities to individuals and departments, in terms of language, each strategy has distinct results.

Face-detracting strategies often produce a defensive communication climate, inhibit listening, and allow for little room for collaboration. To save face is to raise the issue while preserving a supportive climate, allowing room in the conversation for constructive discussions and problem-solving. By using a face-saving strategy to shift the emphasis from the individual to the issue, we avoid power struggles and personalities, providing each other with space to save face (Donohue & Kolt, 1992).

Empathy

Communication involves not only the words we write or speak, but how and when we write or say them. The way we communicate also carries meaning, and empathy for the individual involves attending to this aspect of interaction. **Empathetic listening,** as discussed in previous chapters, involves listening to both the literal and implied meanings within a message. For example, the implied meaning might involve understanding what has led a person to feel this way. By paying attention to the feelings and emotions associated with content and information, we can build relationships and address conflict more constructively. In management, negotiating conflict is a common task, and empathy is one strategy to consider when attempting to resolve issues.

Managing Your Emotions

Have you ever "seen red" or perceived a situation through rage, anger, or frustration? Then you know that you cannot see or think clearly when you are experiencing strong emotions. There will be times in the work environment when emotions run high. Your awareness of them can help you clear your mind and choose to wait until the moment has passed to tackle the challenge.

"Never speak or make a decision in anger" is one common saying that holds true, but not all emotions involve fear, anger, or frustration. A job loss can be a sort of professional death for many, and the sense of loss can be profound. The loss of a colleague to a layoff while you retain your position can bring both pain and relief, as well as survivor's guilt. Emotions can be contagious in the workplace, and fear of the unknown can influence people to act in irrational ways. The wise business communicator can recognize when emotions are on edge in themselves or others and choose to wait to communicate, problem solve, or negotiate until after the moment has passed.

Listen Without Interrupting

If you are the receiver in a communication exchange, start by listening without interruption. **Interruptions** can be both internal and external, and warrant further discussion. If the sender of the message starts to discuss a point, and you immediately start debating the point in your mind, you are paying attention to yourself and what you think they said or are going to say instead of the message that is actually being communicated. An **internal interruption** such as this gives rise to misunderstandings and may cause you to miss valuable information that you need to understand to address the issue at hand.

External interruptions may involve attempts to get a word in edgewise and may change the course of the conversation. Let the other person speak while you listen, and if you need to take notes to focus your thoughts, take clear notes of what is said, also noting points to revisit later. External interruptions can also take the form of a telephone ringing, a "text message has arrived" chime, or a co-worker dropping by in the middle of a conversation.

Image 6.8

As an effective communicator, you know all too well the importance of considering the context and climate of a communication interaction when approaching a delicate subject such as an evaluation or criticism. Choose a time and place free from interruption. The place should be outside the common space where there may be many observers. Turn off your cellphone. Choose face-to-face communication instead of an impersonal email. By providing a space free of interruption, you are displaying respect for the individual and the information.

Determine the Speaker's Intent

People want to know what is coming and generally dislike surprises, particularly when the context is something like an evaluation. If you are on the receiving end, you may need to ask a clarifying question if it doesn't count as an interruption. You may also need to take notes and write down questions that come to mind so you can address them when it is your turn to speak. If you are the person giving the evaluation, be clear and positive in your opening and lead with praise. You you should be able to find one positive point, even if it is only that the employee consistently shows up to work on time, to highlight before transitioning to a performance issue.

Indicate that You Are Listening

In mainstream North American culture, eye contact is a signal that you are listening and paying attention to the person speaking. Take notes, nod your head, or lean forward to display interest and listening. Regardless of whether you are the employee receiving the criticism or the supervisor delivering it, displaying listening behaviour engenders a positive climate that helps mitigate the challenge of negative news or constructive criticism.

Paraphrase

Restate the main points to paraphrase what has been discussed. This verbal display allows for clarification and acknowledges receipt of the message. Summarize the main points and consider the steps you will take to correct the situation, if necessary. If none come to mind or if you are nervous and are having a hard time thinking clearly, state out loud the main point and ask if you can provide solution steps and strategies at a later date. You can request a follow-up meeting if appropriate or indicate that you will respond in writing via email to provide the additional information.

If you are the employer, restate the main points to ensure that the message was received because not everyone hears everything that is said or discussed the first time it is presented. Stress can impair listening, and paraphrasing the main points can help address this common response.

Learn from Experience

Every communication interaction provides an opportunity for learning if you choose to see it. Sometimes the lessons are situational and may not apply in future contexts. Other times, the lessons learned may serve you well across your professional career. Taking notes for yourself to clarify your thoughts, much like journalling, serve to document and help you see the situation more clearly.

Recognize that some aspects of communication are intentional and may communicate meaning, even if it is hard to understand. Also, know that some aspects of communication are unintentional and may not imply meaning or design. People make mistakes. They say things they should not have said. Emotions are revealed that are not always rational and are not always associated with the current context. A challenging morning at home can spill over into the workday, and someone's bad mood may have nothing to do with you.

Try to distinguish between what you can control and what you cannot, and always choose professionalism.

Understanding Cultural Influences

As already mentioned, the strongest cultural factor that influences your conflict approach is whether you belong to an individualistic or collectivistic culture (Ting-Toomey, 2012). People raised in collectivistic cultures often view direct communication regarding conflict as a personal attack and consequently are more likely to manage conflict through avoidance or accommodation. From a collectivistic perspective, the underlying goal in a conflict is not the preservation and manifestation of individual rights and attributes, but rather the preservation of relationships. In this approach, individual rights are superseded by group interest.

The predominant perspective of individualism is to have one's own ideas and act according to the courage of one's convictions. Any perceived constraint on individual freedom is likely to pose immediate problems and require a response. Typically, the most appropriate response in a conflict situation involves a direct or honest expression of one's ideas. People from individualistic cultures feel comfortable agreeing to disagree and don't generally see such clashes as personal affronts (Ting-Toomey, 2012). They are more likely to assert their own position in a conflict, rather than seeking compromise or accommodation.

Gudykunst and Kim (2003) suggest that if you are **an individualist in a dispute with a collectivist**, you should consider the following:

- Recognize that collectivists may prefer to have a third party mediate the conflict so that those in conflict can manage their disagreement without direct confrontation to preserve relational harmony.
- Use more indirect verbal messages.
- Let go of the situation if the other person does not recognize that the conflict exists or does not want to deal with it.

If you are **a collectivist in conflict with someone from an individualistic culture**, the following guidelines may help:

- Recognize that individualists often separate conflicts from people. It's not personal.
- Use an assertive style filled with "I" messages, and be direct by

candidly stating your opinions and feelings.
- Manage conflicts even if you would rather avoid them.

Effective conflict resolution serves all parties and preserves harmony. In cross-cultural situations, many scholars advocate the use of face negotiation techniques, as outlined below.

Face Negotiation Theory

Face negotiation theory, already discussed in this chapter, states that people in all cultures share the need to maintain and negotiate face. Some cultures—and individuals—tend to be more concerned with self-face, which is often associated with individualism. Individualistic cultures prefer a direct way of addressing conflicts, a dominating style, or, optimally, a collaborating approach. Addressing a conflict directly is something that particular cultures or people may prefer to avoid. Conflict resolution, in this case, may become confrontational, potentially leading to a loss of face for the other party. Collectivists—cultures or individuals—tend to be more concerned with other-face and may prefer an indirect approach, using subtle or unspoken means of dealing with conflict (avoiding, withdrawing, compromising) so as not to challenge the face of the other.

Conflict face negotiation theory recommends a four-skills approach to managing conflict across cultures:

1. **Mindful listening:** Pay special attention to the cultural and personal assumptions being expressed in the conflict interaction. Paraphrase verbal and nonverbal content and the emotional meaning of the other party's message to check for accurate interpretation.
2. **Mindful reframing:** This is another face-honouring skill that requires the creation of alternative contexts to shape our understanding of the conflict behaviour.

3. **Collaborative dialogue:** This is an exchange of dialogue that is oriented fully in the present moment and builds on mindful listening and mindful reframing to practise communicating with different linguistic or contextual resources.
4. **Culture-based conflict resolution steps:** This seven-step conflict resolution model guides conflicting groups to identify the background of a problem, analyze the cultural assumptions and underlying values of a person in a conflict situation, and promotes ways to achieve harmony and share a common goal.The process entails asking yourself the following questions:

    - What is my cultural and personal assessment of the problem?
    - Why did I form this assessment and what is the source of this assessment?
    - What are the underlying assumptions or values that drive my assessment?
    - How do I know my assumptions are relative or valid in this conflict context?
    - What reasons might I have for maintaining or changing my underlying conflict premise?
    - How should I change my cultural or personal premises into a direction that promotes deeper intercultural understanding?
    - How should I adapt on both verbal and nonverbal conflict style levels in order to display facework-sensitive behaviours and to facilitate a productive common-interest outcome?

    (Ting-Toomey, 2012; Fisher-Yoshida, 2005; Mezirow, 2000)

Assertive Communication

When we communicate assertively, we are stating our interpersonal needs clearly and directly while respecting the other person's needs in the relationship (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). As such, this an effective conflict management strategy that we can use. However, there is a clear distinction between aggressive communication and assertive communication. While both types are focused on the self and one's own needs, only assertive communication is also focused on the others' needs (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). Assertive communication is not easy, and balancing needs in relationships is not easy. Assertive communication is a key component when talking about conflict within relationships because it allows us to better meet the relational needs of both partners and strengthen our relationships. Strategies to help you build assertive communication skills are outlined below (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

Image 6.9

Ways to Assert Yourself

"I" Statements – Owning your Voice

We have already discussed the use of "I" statements; however, they are also an integral part of handling and decreasing, conflict (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). "I" statements directly express your thoughts, needs, feelings, and experiences to the people around you and allow your to take responsibility for your experiences.

Table 6.2. "I" Statements vs. "You" Statements

“I” Statements	“You” Statements
I think I am unappreciated.	You don’t care about me.
I need some help.	You are a freeloader and never help.
I felt angry …	You made me feel …
It makes me sad to be left out.	You never invite me out with your friends.

Watch out for those fake "I" statements that so regularly sneak into our conversations—"I feel you …" and "I think you …" are actually hidden "You" statements. They place blame on the other person in the relationship and avoid responsibility for thoughts, feelings, and actions (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

Asking Great Questions

The key to asking really great questions is being a really great listener (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). If you are actively listening, you will recognize what information you are missing or what you need clarification for. Some basic types of questions you should understand and master are discussed below (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

There is a general distinction made between **open-ended questions**, questions that likely require some thought and more than a yes or no answer, and **close-ended questions,** questions that only require a specific answer or a yes or no answer (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). This is an important distinction to understand and remember. In the context of managing conflict, open-ended questions are used to gather information, and close-ended questions are used to clarify the concepts or ideas you have heard (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

Watch out for **leading questions**, which provide a direction or answer for someone to agree or disagree with (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). An example would be, "So, you are going to vote for _____ for president, aren't you?" or "What they did is unbelievable, don't you agree?" These questions can easily be turned into information gathering questions: "Who are you going to vote for this year?" or "What do you think about their behaviour?"

Framing and Reframing

In communication, **framing** is essentially the act of intentionally setting the stage for the conversation you want to have (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). To frame a conversation, you express why you want to engage in the topic, what your intent is, and what you hope the outcome might be for resolving the conflict, as well as the impact or importance of your relationship. When you frame a conversation, you remove the need for the other person to assume what your intentions and motives are or why you are bringing the topic up right now (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

Image 6.10

There are many ways to frame a conversation; here are a few ideas for how to frame a conversation effectively:

- **Ask about timing:**
  - "I have been wanting to connect with you to discuss _____. Would now be a good time?" (If the answer is no, take a minute to schedule a better time to talk.)
- **Share why's, concerns, and intentions:**
  - "I'm bringing this up because I want us and this project to be successful, and I'm concerned that we are missing something."
  - "My intention is to share my thoughts with you, but I don't have any expectations that you do anything about them."
- **Frame a boundary:**
  - "I can see this isn't a good time to talk, so I'd like to set up a time that works better."
  - "I appreciate you thinking of me for this project. I'm currently working on _____, which means, unfortunately, I can't do both and have to say no to your request."

(Maricopa Community College District, 2016)

Framing sets the stage for the rest of the conversation to unfold. A little bit of framing goes a long way in helping conversations be more productive and helping to manage some of the conflicts that can happen when people have to make assumptions about "why" and conversation or conflict is happening (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

Framing happens at the beginning of a conversation, whereas **reframing** happens when things get off track and you need to bring a conversation back on topic (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). In a conversation, reframing helps us see more of what is going on, helps us focus on the larger picture or our end goals, and helps to defuse tense situations (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

Reframing can be used in the following ways to manage conflict:

- To defuse inflammatory language
- To recast negative statements into neutral or positive ones
- To refocus attention
- To acknowledge strong emotions in a productive manner
- To translate communication so that it is more likely to be heard and acknowledged by other parties
- To re-contextualize the dispute and provide a broader perspective

(Maricopa Community College District, 2016)

Table 6.3. Examples of Reframing Statements

Original Statement	Reframed Statement
“You misinterpret everything.”	“We must be misunderstanding each other. Can you help me understand what you meant?”
“I am fed up with your negative response to everything that is proposed.”	“I agree. Let’s focus on finding a solution and move away from negativity.”
“Can we just keep talking about this one detail?”	“If you are okay with it, can we make sure we have the big picture figured out before focusing on details? Maybe the details will become clearer then.”
“That seems really petty! Can you believe that keeps happening?”	“That sounds irritating. What do you need to move past this moment and look for a solution?”

(Maricopa Community College District, 2016)

Developing Assertive Messages

Boundaries

When we speak about being assertive, we often talk about drawing or holding our **boundaries** (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). In a physical space, boundaries are easy to identify, such as a fence, stop signs, or a door. Boundaries in our social experiences are not as easy to identify but are just as real and important as physical boundaries. Fences and doors tell us where it is safe to go and how to behave. The same is true when we assert our social boundaries. You can think of them as the invisible fences or doors we create in our lives. Asserting our social boundaries tells those around us what is and is not acceptable in our interaction—they are the guidelines and rules we give people around us for how we want our relationship with them to look (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

A basic act of being assertive is simply saying no. Saying no without using little white lies or justifying why you are saying it takes some practice (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). Have you ever been invited out with friends but didn't want to go? Did you make something up, saying, "I'm busy," when really you just don't want to go out? Being assertive in that situation looks like "I really appreciate the offer, and I hope you invite me in the future, but now I just need some 'me' time."

Decreasing Defensiveness

One of the ways we can decrease the possibility of the receiver becoming defensive and instead demonstrating support is to focus on describing our feelings rather than evaluating the people causing the problem we have (Maricopa Community College District, 2016). When we describe our feelings, we begin by giving our relational partner insight into the specific emotion we are experiencing. Then we tell them which specific behaviour is causing us to feel the way we do. Next, we provide two possible reasons or interpretations of why they might be exhibiting the behaviour we do not like. Finally, we conclude by explaining the consequences that their behaviour will have on our relationship if it continues. Throughout your communication of "I" messages, you must be sure you are helping your partner, friend, or family member maintain their positive and negative face. We do not want to threaten either one during our interaction (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

The following four-part "I" statement formula can help you decrease defensiveness and help the other person maintain face:

1. **Feeling:** Clearly explain your feelings using the construction **"I feel _ _ _ _ _."** This must be a feeling. Stating "I feel you are lazy" will not have the intended effect. Refer back to the Feelings Wheel in Chapter 5 for examples.
2. **Observed behaviour:** Describe the other person's behaviour using the construction **" … when you _ _ _ _ _."** This is not a blaming statement. "I feel angry when you are a jerk" is not helpful. The purpose of this part of the formula is to state an observation. State what you actually observed with no judgement.
3. **Interpretations:** Give TWO possible interpretations of why the other person may have behaved the way they did. Maybe they don't realize what they are doing? Maybe they are just tired? Maybe they are too focused on their own problems? Remember that we like our positive and negative faces to remain unthreatened. Stating two interpretations is key so you don't appear as though you know what motivates another person. You aren't a mind reader, so don't pretend to be. Try

using the construction: **"I'm not sure if you _____ or ______."**

4. **Consequences:** When another person's behaviour starts to negatively affect you, you might notice that the behaviour of others does, in fact, have consequences for you and your relationship. In this last part of your "I" statements, explain how the other person's behaviour is impacting you and how it might change your relationship. Are you going to have to change the way you interact with them, or will you have to use protective strategies to maintain your sanity? Use these constructions to communicate the consequences: **"If this keeps happening, I might need to _____"** OR **"I might have to start _____ to feel better about our relationship"** OR **"I think I should _____ from now on."**

(Maricopa Community College District, 2016)

Consider this—maybe you've asked your romantic partner to pick their socks up from the floor, but they still leave their socks all over the house. You don't want to be aggressive and shout at them, but you are feeling overwhelmed and frustrated. You can use "I" statements during these times.

Here is a possible four-part series of "I" statements to use with your relational partner who can't seem to get their socks into the hamper (or laundry basket):

> I feel frustrated (feeling) when I see your socks all over our room (observed behaviour). I'm not sure whether you are tired or just think I have time to pick them up (interpretations). If this keeps happening, I would like to you do your own laundry (consequences).
>
> (Maricopa Community College District, 2016).

The Six-Step Assertion Process

Imagine that you know it's time to draw a boundary with someone close to you—you've thought long and hard about what is important to you, and you know what you want to say. So, what do you do now? The six-step assertion process is a good way to handle it.

Robert Bolton (1979) gives us the following process for delivering our assertion:

1. **Preparation:** In the preparation stage, you spend time before you enter into a conversation with the other person reflecting on what is important for you to convey. Consider the contextual elements of the communication situation, develop your message, and prepare yourself for the process and for active listening.
2. **Deliver the message:** Share your assertive message.
3. **Silence:** Allow the other person time to process what you have just said. Sometimes after we assert ourselves, we want to justify ourselves or jump in when there is silence because it can be awkward and uncomfortable. Take a deep breath while they consider what you have just said; they may have not considered the topic before this very moment.
4. **Active listening:** Once the person responds to your assertion, your job is to reflect back on what their response is. This response could be defensive, it could be off track from your original topic, or they could shut down. Actively listening to the other person will likely be the last thing you want to do, so make sure to prepare for this part of the process as much as you can in the preparation step.
5. **Recycle steps 2 to 4 as necessary:** You will likely have to reassert yourself, provide more silence, and actively listen a few times before you can move into the final step in the process. This part of the process allows you and the other person to really understand each other and to be on the same

page.

6. **Focus on a solution:** In conflict, we often jump to this step *without* taking the time to go through steps 1 to 5. Only focus on a solution after you have understood the other person, they have understood you, and you are both ready and capable of focusing on a solution.

(Maricopa Community College District, 2016)

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Which of the conflict management strategies do you already use? Which ones do you see yourself using in the future? Why?
2. Which conflict management strategy do you feel you are less likely to use? Why?
3. Think of a past situation where an assertive message would have helped the outcome? Practise making an assertive message for that situation.

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6.6 Review

Review

Use the following review activities to assess your knowledge of the material in this chapter. These activities, along with the questions found throughout the chapter, should provide a thorough assessment of your understanding of conflict in our relationships.

Matching Review

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=1158#h5p-11

Review Quiz

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=1158#h5p-12

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CHAPTER VII

COMMUNICATION IN ACTION

7.1 Introduction to Communication in Action

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to

1. Use the critical listening, critical thinking, and critical ignoring three-step strategy
2. Describe how to relay information in a clear, organized ,and concise manner
3. Discuss methods of enhancing your public speaking skills
4. Discuss strategies for improving digital communication and citizenship
5. Describe group problem-solving strategies
6. Discuss strategies for obtaining information during a conversation

Chapter Overview

This book has so far covered specific areas of communication and introduced communication strategies that use those specific skills. This chapter will introduce you to communication strategies that combine several areas of communication skills. The strategies in this chapter are not all-inclusive—there are many more to learn. These strategies have been selected because they combine the communication skills covered in the book, can be learned using this book, and are appropriate for professional settings. Many advanced communication strategies require extra training beyond the scope of this book, which specialized post-secondary programs and professional settings can provide. Each strategy in this chapter includes a suggested circumstance for its use in a professional setting. However, you are encouraged to think beyond the examples provided and consider employing any of the strategies to enhance communication competence and interpersonal relationships in any setting, professional and personal alike.

7.2 Critical Thinking

This page discusses **critical thinking**—**when** to use it, **what** strategies to use, **why** it's important for communication, and **how** to employ the strategies.

When

Imagine someone asked you to share the best way to approach a colleague about a behaviour that is bothering them. What would you say? How did you come to your response? If you asked and someone told you their answer, what would you think or feel about their response? How did you come to the reaction you had to their response? Recalling the role of perception from an earlier chapter, we know that our communication is always shaped by a perspective we hold based on our experiences. What happens when you don't know the answer or you don't like the option someone else provided? How do you re-approach the question to come up with a response? When searching for information on how to answer a question, how do we select the best information? Communication competence is achieved by the ability to pay critical attention to how information is being perceived, selected, and communicated by ourselves and others. This is especially challenging in increasingly diverse, complex, and information-filled environments.

What

So, what are our strategies? In reality, there are many different strategies to critically attend to the messages we send and receive. In this section, we will explore a three-strategy approach: **critical listening**, **critical thinking**, and **critical ignoring**.

Why

In the scenario above in which a co-worker asks you to share the best way to approach a colleague about a behaviour that is bothering them, what would your immediate response be? Your immediate response might be an effective solution, but that's not what we're trying to figure out. Whatever your immediate response was, we want to learn to employ strategies to actively seek other possible solutions and explore them in depth. Your immediate response to the question may also indicate your own bias, which is what we want to avoid when choosing and communicating a response. **Bias** is "an outlook … based on a personal and sometimes unreasoned judgement and/or an instance of such prejudice" (Merriam-Webster, 2023a). Perhaps you consciously recall personal experiences of how you've approached co-workers in the past, and your immediate response has been shaped by those experiences. Your response is biased because it is based on personal experience. Sometimes we are consciously aware of our bias when we communicate; however, implicit bias can also exist. **Implicit bias** is "a bias or prejudice that is present but not consciously held or recognized" (Merriam-Webster, 2023b). Shaping our response according to our experiences is natural and helps us make decisions quickly. At the same time, relying only on our own experiences limits us to the options we already know.

If competent communication is our goal, competent communicators can understand, choose from, and perform a wide range of behaviours (Adler et al., 2021, pp. 16–19). Knowing about conscious and implicit bias, we can start to listen to ourselves and others communicate and possibly become consciously aware. Listening to all communication can help us become more reasoned communicators and allow us to connect better with others as we acknowledge diverse perspectives alongside our own. Bias can turn into reason when more information is gathered, other possible solutions are identified, and all the information is analyzed to determine a reasoned response or action.

Ultimately, using strategies to critically attend to information helps us to do the following:

- Challenge our assumptions
- Avoid information overload
- Avoid the communication of biased or irrelevant information
- Develop an understanding of and empathy for different perspectives
- Explore options to make an informed decision
- Connect with diverse audiences.

How

Strategy 1: Critical Listening

Many different ways of listening are described in literature. Three listening types are commonly discussed:

1. **Informational listening**

2. **Comprehensive and evaluative listening**

3. **Empathic listening**

Each type of listening serves a different purpose, can be used in isolation or simultaneously, and can help us perceive, select and/or evaluate information to use orally or in writing. Each of the listening styles can be used when attending to external information being given to us and can also serve as an introspective approach to listening to ourselves.

Informational listening involves gathering new information and facts, then identifying key points. This is followed by recording the information so that we can access it later by committing it to memory and/or taking physical notes.

Comprehensive and evaluative listening is a combination of listening styles that does not attempt to decide if information is right or wrong. Instead, this listening style determines the main message the information is trying to send and how similar or different the information is to our existing knowledge and beliefs. It is through this listening style that we decide what we have learned. This process is an active approach that uses the following steps;

- Seeks to understand and organize the information gathered; uses paraphrasing and questioning communication skills
- Seeks to align the new information with what we already know or believe

Empathic listening is an active listening style that seeks to identify and understand the feelings and emotions behind the information being presented. You may ask questions, gently requesting that the speaker discuss their feelings and emotions. You will also use paraphrasing, and seek clarification to help understand whether you have truly heard the other person's perspective. This listening style helps to create connection and trust between the listener and speaker.

Consider the following scenario: Your workplace team is trying to decide whether cellphones should be banned whenever interactions with clients take place. The discussion has been raised several times and there are many different opinions and perspectives on the question.

When you ask yourself the question, listen to your own reaction and internal communication. When you imagine this discussion taking place with your workplace team, imagine the range of opinions and perspectives. When you imagine yourself doing any kind of research to gather information about the topic, imagine the information you might find.

How would you use each of the listening styles above? Imagine the possible information you might gather from each listening style. Imagine the possible emotions and feelings that may need to be managed. What might be the benefits and challenges from using each listening style?

Gathering information is usually the first step in any situation that requires critically attending to information, but it doesn't end there, and you may revisit the critical listening strategy at any point in your approach. Nonetheless, after gathering information, you'll need to do something with it, and there may be a lot of information to sort through. This is where the next two strategies come into play.

Strategy 2: Critical Thinking

The concept of **critical thinking** does not have a single definition; instead, definitions range from simple to complex but capture a common theme of analyzing information to gain a better understanding.

Here are a few definitions to consider:

- Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action (Foundation for

Critical Thinking, 2019).

- For some, critical thinking has a lot to do with understanding one's own perspective and those of others.
- Critical thinking is the mental process involved in processing information for the purpose of problem solving, decision making, and thinking critically (Drew, 2023).
- Critical thinking is the means of assessing the accuracy, authenticity, plausibility, or sufficiency of all information (Beyer 1995).
- Critical thinking is developing the ability to think in alignment with the original idea or different from the original idea.

Not surprisingly, several **critical-thinking models or frameworks** are commonly used. Each approaches the process of analyzing and understanding information in a different way and for a different purpose. Some examples of critical-thinking models are listed in the table below.

Table 7.1. Examples of Critical-Thinking Models or Frameworks

Critical Thinking Model	Purpose of the Model
Bloom's Taxonomy (Vanderpool & Robinson, 2017)	Doing sequential activities to master the skills of critical thinking
Three-Stage Method: Description – Analysis – Critical Evaluation (Page 4) (Plymouth University, 2010)	Systematically finding the best solution to a problem.
Something's Up! Model (Apedaile & NorQuest College Centre for Intercultural Education, 2015)	Exploring how I and/or others are looking at a problem; especially useful for diverse groups
PROACT Technique (Hammond et al., 1999)	Determining the urgency and impact of solving the problem
Mental Models (Crockett, 2021)	Engaging in a particular aspect or lens of critical thinking to generate ideas and perspectives

Consider the previous scenario where your workplace team is trying to decide whether cellphones should be banned whenever interactions with clients take place. The discussion has been raised several times, and there are many different opinions and perspectives on the question. Choose one or two of the critical-thinking models in the table above to explore and click on the links. Use the steps in each model to answer the question "Should cellphones be banned whenever interactions with clients take place?"

In their own unique way, each model will ask you to gather more information from sources of information such as books, articles, or other people. You will then compare and analyze the information and perspectives you gather, considering possible courses of action and their possible outcomes and impacts. This gathering, sorting, and analyzing of information is essential to making a final decision based on reason instead of personal bias. However, as you may have already felt, the process can be overwhelming if there are a lot of facts, perspectives, and resulting options and consequences. We can understand why personal bias becomes the more attractive and easily accessible option.

Strategy 3: Critical Ignoring

The third and find strategy in moving towards communication competence, **critical ignoring**, helps us navigate the sea of information and decide what to keep and what to discard. As you consider your own response and that of others to the question "Should cellphones be banned whenever interactions with clients take place?" you may think of some strong opinionated responses that might be communicated or find some compelling evidence for or against the issue when you research the topic. The degree to which you feel overwhelmed by the information indicates your natural capacity for taking in information, and you may have already started to ignore some of the information you have come across.

This means you are already engaging in **critical ignoring**, which is choosing what to ignore, learning how to resist misleading information, and deciding where to invest your attention (Kozyreva et al., 2023). You may now be asking how critical ignoring is not biased. Critical ignoring is not biased because the choice of what information is ignored is based on assessing the quality of the information and is not based on personal opinions and perspectives. Note that although critical ignoring is designed for online sources of information, it is possible to apply the same approach to human sources of information.

The following three steps are involved in critical ignoring:

1. **Self-nudging:** This is ignoring temptations by removing them. For example, you know that a particular website or social media platform tends to post a lot of information that grabs your attention but isn't usually helpful because of its lack of objective facts and supporting evidence. You turn off notifications from these sources or remove them. Then you turn your attention to the high-quality sources of information that usually do provide information that stands up to reason. Self-nudging provides a sense of control, enabling you to access the best sources of information in diverse and complex environments.
2. **Lateral reading:** This is determining how trustworthy a source and its information is by investigating the background of the website and author, and by comparing the information across a wide variety of sources. For example, you click on an article with an attention-grabbing title that is connected to a problem you've recently been discussing with colleagues. The information sounds excellent and helpful, but how to be sure? Investigating the author of the article reveals that they have credentials and experience related to the topic. A

close look at the organization that runs the website reveals that they are selling one of the products mentioned in the article, which casts doubt on the quality of the information. Last but not least, you search for other articles on the same topic, and almost all the articles from different sources agree with the information presented in the original article. You assess the article's information to be of reasonable quality and forward it to your colleagues to consider. Lateral reading is initially time consuming, but with practice, it can develop into a quick and easy method of investing in the highest-quality information.

3. **Do not feed the trolls—ignoring malicious actors:** This involves learning how to ignore the people who spread misinformation or harass others using multiple platforms, or those who create debate or argument where there is none to be had. Because online statements can be emotionally charged, deliberately personal, or polarizing, we as humans tend to have just as emotional a response, and it is difficult not to react or try to defend the cause or individual being attacked. "Feeding the trolls" by directly engaging with them is tempting but ultimately has the same effect as feeding ourselves a good breakfast—it provides the necessary fuel for growth and regeneration. Instead of feeding the trolls, do not respond directly, block and report them to the platform where they are making statements, and then seek support from your close social group or professionals.

(Kozyreva et al., 2023)

Consider the previous scenario where your workplace team is trying to decide whether cellphones should be banned whenever interactions with clients take place. If you followed the first two steps, **critical listening** and **critical thinking**, you now have a lot of information to sort through. There may be many different opinions and perspectives on the question, and perhaps you found a few published articles. Next comes the third and final step, **critical ignoring**, to narrow down the information that really helps to answer the question.

As you reflect on the information you gather when exploring any topic or question, this three-strategy approach will help you manage the information and come to a reasonable course of action.

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Consider the following questions (Stevenson, 2023) and choose one that you would like to use to work through the three-step critical-thinking strategy you've read about on this page:
    - Does humanity have the right to colonize other planets?
    - Should we aim to rehabilitate prisoners or should we just punish them for their crimes?
    - Would public health care be better than private?
    - Should more be done to protect children on social media?

2. Use the **critical listening, critical thinking**, and **critical ignoring** three-step strategy.
    - What response to the original question did you come up with?
    - List and describe at least three key points that helped determine your final response as a

result of using the three-step strategy.

Attribution

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7.3 Relaying Information

This page discusses **relaying information**—**when** to use it, **what** strategies to use, **why** it is important for communication, and **how** to employ the strategies.

When

Sharing information is a basic function of all professional roles. Professionals share information with individuals and/or groups of clients or colleagues, with other organizations, and with the community. Sharing information requires verbal and nonverbal communication skills, as well as critical-thinking skills. Information can be shared formally, such as a formal announcement to a team, or informally such as when your supervisor asks you for an opinion on a new technology. Information can also be shared through various channels, including face-to-face verbal communication, in writing, through visuals in a presentation, or online in a videoconference or social media post. No matter the audience, the formality, or the channel, the content of the message must be organized, concise, and clear if people are to receive our intended message.

What

On this page, we will explore two strategies for making our message in any situation organized, concise, and clear:

1. Creating an outline
2. Using the SMART structure

Why

Workplaces are complex—efficiency relies on effective communication and time needs to be used effectively. Each professional role has a job, and professionals can't spend infinite amounts of time relaying or receiving information. We often don't have a lot of time to receive the information that is necessary to make our decisions, and we don't always know what information our audience needs to make theirs. Improving our communication skills to be organized, clear, and concise allows a team and organization to run effectively. We must train ourselves to continuously organize and structure the information we receive and deliver. Practising using the following strategies takes time and patience. However, after this practice, organized, concise, and clear communication will become something we easily do out of habit.

How

Strategy 1: Creating an Outline

Chances are that we have all developed some bad habits when it comes to relaying information. Swiping, thumb typing, or otherwise spewing words onto a screen or verbally to a colleague is just too easy. How often do you edit or refine your message before you hit Send? How often do you stop to organize and consider your thoughts before speaking to someone?

In the workplace, this method of delivering information is risky. Simply typing or saying whatever comes to mind produces rambling messages that frustrate or confuse the recipient. Time will often be wasted clarifying or revisiting ideas. Investing time in an outline will improve the clarity, flow, and brevity of your message. Outlining forces you to use critical thinking first, which helps you identify your core message and remove any unnecessary information.

On this page are three common approaches to outlining: 1) the **top-down approach**, 2) **mind mapping**, and 3) the **bottom-up approach**. None is better than the others; use whichever technique works best for you, but use one of them. In addition to the information you'll include, you must also consider the time you have to deliver the message. Without an outline, your message is like a trip without an itinerary: fun for you, maybe, but maddeningly hard for your audience to follow.

1) Top-Down Approach

Image 7.1

Top-down outlining works well when you already know the main subtopics you want to address. The top-down outline allows you to organize the ideas you know you need to include in your message. Ideas are arranged in a logical order, often numerically. There is always an introductory idea and a concluding idea. After arranging them in a logical order, you then develop each idea with supporting information.

An example of a top-down outline:

You are the Occupational Health and Safety representative in your department. Your supervisor has asked you to develop a 15-minute presentation for the next staff meeting to explain a new procedure to the team and will be asking you to present the same information in a one-on-one orientation with all future new employees. They would like you to explain the procedure, who they can contact for support, and when and why it's needed. You use your critical-thinking skills to determine the following top-down outline (Table 7.2) for your 15-minute timeframe.

Table 7.2. Example of a Top-Down Outline

Main Idea	Supporting Information	Time Allotted to Relay the Information
Introduction	• New safety policies will come into effect at the end of this month. Part of the new safety policies is a new procedure we have to follow when a person gets hurt at work.	0.5 minutes
Why we have a new procedure	• The new safety policies have changed because new laws have been passed. • The company is responding to increased safety risks in the post-pandemic era.	0.5 minutes
What the new procedure is	• Identify the injury • Report the injury verbally and in writing • Document the plan and outcome	5 minutes

When to use the new procedure	• When to use it • When not to use it • Risks of not using it	5 minutes
Sources for more information and support	• Policy and procedure manual updated sections (physical and digital versions) • The Occupational Health and Safety representative • Human Resources department	1 minute
Time for questions		3 minutes

2) Mind Mapping

Mind mapping is great when you want to visually associate and/or explore multiple aspects of a topic or concept. If your ideas are not fully developed, or if you're more of a visual thinker, you may prefer a mind map to a formal outline. After creating the mind map, you can then make decisions about the logical flow of ideas when presenting the information to your audience.

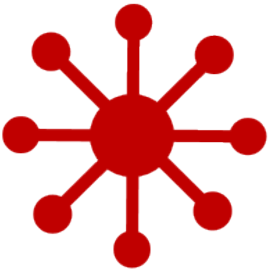

Image 7.2

Steps to creating a mind map style outline:

1. Write your main idea in the centre of a blank page. This strategy gives you room to branch out in all directions.
2. Identify subcategories of the main idea and assign each one a **keyword**. Single words are more powerful and memorable. Choosing a single word forces you to think clearly and concisely.
3. Draw **branches** from your central image with labels for the subcategories. Draw sub-branches for the conceptual components of each category. Use colour.
4. Expand your subcategories with more branches and keywords. This will allow you to further refine your ideas.
5. Draw **curved** branches. Straight lines feel mechanical, whereas curved lines feel organic. You want your mind map to feel like a living, breathing organism.
6. Add **images** to the branches and sub-branches if you're more

visual. Pictures capture ideas more succinctly and creatively than words do.

Example of a mind map–style outline, based on the same scenario as above:

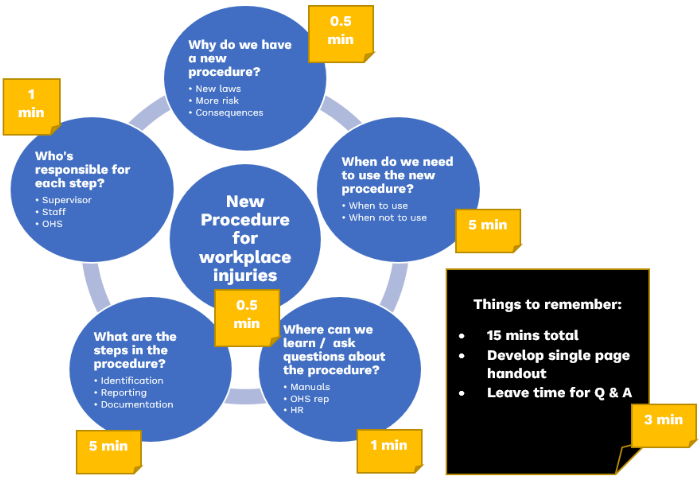

Image 7.3

3) Bottom-Up Approach

Bottom-up outlining is essential when you have lots of information but need to impose structure and direction. A wonderful antidote for writer's block, bottom-up outlining can be used when writing alone or in a group.

Image 7.4

Follow these three steps:

1. **Brainstorm:** Think about your idea and write down whatever comes to mind. Don't hold back. Capture all the facts, keywords, concepts, stories, analogies, diagrams, and related ideas you can think of.
2. **Cluster:** Next, look for patterns in your brainstormed list. Group related items together. Make clusters of meaning and stay open to new ideas. Notice any unusual associations between facts.
3. **Sequence:** Finally, look at your clusters and sequence them in the way that will best achieve your purpose. Your sequence must be logical, and different organizing logics demand different sequences.

Table 7.3. Example of Bottom-Up Approach

Brainstorm	Cluster (words in parentheses indicate clusters)	Sequence

We have had new safety policies come into effect at the end of this month. Part of the new safety policies is a new procedure we have to follow when a person gets hurt at work.

Steps to the procedure (Identification, Reporting, Documentation).

The company is responding to increased safety risks in the post-pandemic era.

The new safety policies have changed because new laws have been passed.

When and when not to use the procedure

Risks of not using it.

Staff can review the Policy and Procedure manual or talk to the Occupational Health and Safety representative (me) and the Human Resources department.

15 minutes to deliver the information above.

Suitable for delivering to individuals or groups.

Include time for questions and discussion.

New safety policies will come into effect at the end of this month. Part of the new safety policies is a new procedure we need to follow when a person gets hurt at work. **(Introduction)**

The new safety policies have changed because new laws have been passed. **(Why)**

Steps to the procedure (Identification, Reporting, Documentation) **(What)**

The company is responding to increased safety risks in the post-pandemic era. **(Why)**

When and when not to use the procedure. **(When)**

Risks of not using it. **(When)**

Staff can review the Policy and Procedure manual or talk to the Occupational Health and Safety representative (me) and the Human Resources department. **(Sources for staff support)**

15 minutes to deliver the information above. **(Considerations)**

Suitable for delivering to individuals or groups. **(Considerations)**

Include time for questions and discussion. **(Considerations)**

1) Introduction

New safety policies come into effect at the end of this month. Part of the new safety policies is a new procedure we need to follow when a person gets hurt at work.

(0.5 *minutes*)

2) Why we have a new procedure

- The company is responding to increased safety risks in the post-pandemic era.
- The new safety policies have changed because new laws have been passed.

(0.5 minutes)

- When to use it
- When not to use it
- Risks of not using it

(5 *minutes*)

5) Sources for more information and support

- Policy and Procedure manual updated sections (physical and digital versions)
- Occupational Health and Safety

After you clarify and arrange your content using one of the above outlining strategies, refine your message by using the next strategy, the **SMART structure**.

Strategy 2: Applying the SMART Structure

In previous classes, you may have learned a three-part approach to writing an essay to deliver your ideas: introduction, body, and conclusion. In the workplace, after creating the outline for your information, use the **SMART structure** to determine how you will deliver the information to your audience. The SMART structure modifies the essay-writing approach to create a more workplace-oriented outline designed to engage the audience to attend to the information being shared. The SMART structure expands the "introduction" part by specifying three subparts: an attention getter, a key point, and an agenda. Then the body and conclusion are renamed to create an easily remembered acronym for the strategy: the SMART structure.

SMART is an acronym for …

- **Story:** Why should your audience spend precious time and attention on your message? This is the first question you must answer. Hook your audience by starting with a story, a shocking statistic, or a surprising observation, but keep it brief and make it relevant—no gimmicks, please. If you tell the story at the start and never mention it again, it's gratuitous. Some communicators "bookend" their message by returning to their opening story at the end of the message. This creates symmetry and closure. Better still is to incorporate multiple touchpoints to your story throughout the message.
- **Main idea:** Be bold and deliberate by stating your key point up front. Don't "bury the lead," a phrase journalists use when the central idea of the article appears anywhere other than the first paragraph. In professional settings, the audience wants

the core message immediately, especially when it's a recommendation.

- **Agenda:** An old public-speaking tip states that you should "tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em" at the beginning of a speech. This concept is crucial to professional communication. Your agenda previews the body of your message—usually in one sentence—and prepares the reader for the main points you're going to make.
- **Reasons:** Your reasons are the meat of your message—your main points supported by solid evidence and logic. Keep in mind the Rule of Three (see Table 7.4 below for an example) to ensure that your message is simple and memorable.
- **Task:** Professional communication always ends with a task. What should the audience do based on your message? Your closing should not only summarize the information, but also identify next steps, if appropriate.

The table below uses the same example as above to create an outline using the SMART structure.

Table 7.4. Scenario Example with SMART Structure

Story	In the last three years, there has been a 150% increase in absenteeism, and we have had no way to properly document it. This leads to staff and supervisors not being able to account for lost wages and a decrease in services. This can impact our jobs and client services. There are now new laws in place, and therefore, new safety policies will come into effect at the end of this month. Part of the new safety policies is a new procedure that we need to follow when a person gets hurt at work. **(1 minute)**
Main idea	Starting at the end of the month, there will be a new three-step process for documenting workplace injuries. **(0.5 minutes)**
Agenda	I'm going to explain the procedure and staff responsibilities for implementing the procedure. **(0.5 minutes)**
Reasons	1. When to use the procedure, and when not to use the procedure 2. The steps in the new procedure are 1) identify the injury, 2) report the injury verbally and in writing, and 3) document the plan and outcome 3. Risks of not using the procedure **(9 minutes)**
Task	To increase our efficiency and ensure staff well-being, all staff need to do the following: 1. Ask any questions you may have during the remainder of this meeting. 2. Review the whole procedure in the updated sections of the Policy and Procedure manual (physical and digital versions), and sign off where appropriate. 3. Seek support whenever needed from the Occupational Health and Safety representative (me) and/or the Human Resources department. **(4 minutes)**

In summary, don't leave your message at risk of not being received and your audience wondering hopelessly about the meaning of your message. Create an outline to organize and sequence your ideas.

Use the SMART structure to build your outline and guide the composition of your message:

1. Hook your audience with a **STORY**.
2. Clearly and powerfully state your **MAIN IDEA**.
3. List your **AGENDA**.
4. Develop your **REASONS**.
5. Close with your audience's **TASK**.

Relating Theory to Real Life

Imagine your future workplace and professional role.

1. Choose a common topic you might need to share information about with co-workers, clients, or other important partners in your line of work
2. List your audience.
3. Choose the environment (setting) in which to share your information
4. Create your outline using one of the three styles.
5. Using the SMART structure, plan how you will deliver the necessary information and message.
6. Practise your presentation with a colleague, friend, or family member, and/or record yourself on your phone and watch it back. Gather the following feedback;
    - Was the information organized?
    - Was the message concise?

- Was the delivery engaging?

7. Have the person "tell" the information back to you based on what they heard. Did they retell all the important points? Do they know what task(s) to complete?

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7.4 Public Speaking

This page discusses **public speaking**—**when** to use it, **what** strategies to use, **why** it's important for communication, and **how** to employ the strategies.

When

Public speaking is important in all professions and can be formal or informal. For example, you may deliver a formal presentation on a project at a conference to a group of professionals outside your organization. Or you may run a formal education session to teach a small group of colleagues about a work procedure you have been trained for with but is new to them. You might meet with clients every day and need to teach them about your services or a procedure or product they may need to use. Informally, you might want to bring up an issue in your workplace to the team and your supervisor has asked you to take 10 minutes at the next staff meeting to do so, or you may ask your colleagues to casually meet for 10 minutes at the start of the next work shift. These scenarios can also occur in a variety of environments, from in person at the office to online using a videoconference application such as Zoom to a larger auditorium-style room.

What

The **SMART structure** strategy from the previous section can be used to assemble the message you wish to deliver to an audience. In this section, we will explore three strategies for delivering your SMART structured content in a public speaking environment. We will discuss three strategies for effective public speaking:

1. **Reduce public speaking anxiety**
2. **Prepare**
3. **Use full body communication**

Why

When speaking in public, two issues commonly arise. The first issue is that **we deliver our message in the way we perceive to be best without taking our audience into consideration.** Doing so results in the audience becoming distracted and the communication being ineffective because the intended message is not received. When speaking in public both formally or informally, you are taking your content and delivering it to an audience through different communication channels, within different environments, and with different noise. Inevitably, you're going to need to consider your message and your own communication style and combine it with the diversity of communication styles in your audience and the environment.

Considering your audience is essential for effectively delivering your message, and the video below explains the following five reasons why:

1. **People learn best in 20-minute chunks.** That doesn't mean your presentation can only last 20 minutes; it means you must take breaks or use different 20-minute activities during the

time you have with your audience.

2. **Multiple sensory channels compete.** The best sense to appeal to when public speaking is visual, followed by auditory. Appealing to both senses can work if they are used in a complementary way, but they can also compete against each other, resulting in your intended message getting lost.
3. **What you say is only part of the message.** People react to your voice, stance, facial expressions, and hand movements.
4. If you want people to act, **you must call them to action.** Always conclude your message by being very specific about what you want your audience to do.
5. **People imitate your emotions and feel your feelings.** Your energy and passion are transferred to the audience. Your audience will match the level of engagement you show when delivering your message.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=1330#oembed-1

(Weinschenk, 2012)

The second issue that commonly arises is **the fear of public speaking.** If you feel fear, anxiety, or discomfort when confronted with the task of speaking in front of an audience, you are not alone. Research and polls consistently show that public speaking is among North Americans' top fears (Bodie, 2010). Yet, since we all have to engage in some form of public speaking, this is a fear that many people must face regularly. Effectively managing speaking anxiety has many positive effects on your speech. One major area that can improve with less anxiety is delivery. Although speaking anxiety is natural and normal, it can interfere with verbal and nonverbal delivery, which makes a speech less effective.

How

First, let's explore strategies that will allow you to effectively **reduce public speaking anxiety** and **connect to your audience** so that your intended message is effectively delivered.

Strategy 1: Reduce Public Speaking Anxiety

Many factors contribute to speaking anxiety, and there are many ways to address it. The list below offers 10 ways to reduce public speaking anxiety. Although not all the listed strategies are about communicating differently, each strategy can improve how effectively you communicate during a public speaking engagement.

1. Remember that you are not alone. Public speaking anxiety is common, so don't ignore it—confront it.
2. Remember that you can't literally "die of embarrassment." Audiences are forgiving and understanding.
3. Remember that it always feels worse than it looks.
4. Take deep breaths. Deep breathing releases endorphins, which naturally fight the adrenaline that causes anxiety.
5. Look the part. Dress professionally to enhance your confidence.
6. Channel your nervousness into positive energy and motivation.
7. Start your outline and research early. Better information equals higher confidence.
8. Practise and get feedback from a trusted source—don't just practise in front of your cat.

9. Visualize success through positive thinking.
10. Prepare, prepare, prepare! Practice is a speaker's best friend.

Now, let's explore the last two strategies to set yourself up for public speaking success: 2) **Prepare** and 3) **Use Full Body Communication.**

Strategy 2: Prepare

The following **five steps** are part of preparing for a successful public speaking experience:

1) Choose right setup in the right room

- People are sensitive to how full a room is. If you can, choose a venue that accommodates the expected number of guests without much room left over. Empty space can makes your turnout look lame and drains energy from your presentation.
- If you can't change the space, remove extra chairs and pull the remaining ones into a semi-circle. In a space with lots of extra chairs, people will naturally sit near the back or far apart from each other, so don't give them the option. Squeezing people into fewer chairs gets them talking to each other and increases the anticipation level in the room.
- Regardless of the size of the room, try to arrive early so you can shake hands and meet a few people. Thank them for being there. Ask them what they want to get out of the presentation. Don't let your nerves or your desire to pre-test the audio system prevent you from making a few friends before you start.
- If your audience is joining you virtually, you can set up your online environment just as easily, using the **LAMBS strategy** in Table 7.5 below.

Table 7.5. LAMBS Strategy

L = Lighting	People use their senses when processing information, and the most used sense is visual. Let people see your face. Use natural lighting, from the front. Reduce shadows and glare because they will distract from your face.
A = Audio	Your voice is the only vehicle for your message. Consider your microphone. Besides your voice, what is it picking up? Noises other than your voice will distract from your message.
M = Me	Think about how you show up on video. Consider the following two tips: 1) Mind your angle—think about how you would position yourself in person and do the same. Arrange it so that you are making eye contact and are at eye level and face-to-face with your audience. **Avoid** side angles because they are distracting. 2) Assume that the audience can see you whether or not you are the presenter or an audience member. Show that your attention is fully on the message being delivered.
B = Background	Consider what is behind you. You do want something that is nice to look at but not distracting. Make your background pleasant or make it neutral. Avoid a background that will spark conversation unless you are able to make it part of your presentation, and it will enhance the message you are trying to deliver. If you notice that people are distracted by your background, address it by talking about your background in a friendly conversation. This will foster a connection to your audience and naturally redirect your audience back to your intended message. You will connect best with the audience if your background is real, but you can also use a virtual background.
S = Speed	Consider your internet connection. Your video and sound, and therefore your message, will suffer tremendously if you have a poor internet connection. You can easily check your speed from any device by searching online for a free testing website called "Speed Test." Typically, a download speed of over 25 mbps is recommended for online presentations. Minimizing other devices or applications that are using your internet connection at the same time can help to improve your connection. Try to turn off as many devices and applications as possible for the duration of your online presentation. Although it is best practice to keep your video on so you can be face-to-face with your audience, if your internet connection is suffering, you could consider turning off your video while showing a different visual such as slides.

(Neff, 2023)

2) Check your tech

Technology is both a blessing and a curse in presentations. To help reduce the stress and increase your success, use the following technology checklist:

- If you are relying on slides or a microphone, arrive early enough to practise a bit and meet a few audience members before your speech.
- Bring extra cords and connectors, and/or test your Bluetooth.
- Bring a printed copy of your notes and slides just in case.
- Check the volume on the microphone and know how to change it.
- Test the house-provided remote control or bring your own.
- Have a backup plan in case your tech fails you completely; for example, prepare additional stories, participative exercises, or an artifact you need for a simple object lesson.

3) Push the podium aside

A podium is a good place to keep your water bottle, but don't hide behind it. People trust you more when they can see your whole body, and you'll be able to use the floor space to keep your audience's attention and make your points clear. Similarly, don't just stand beside the screen. Your slides and visual aids are there to support you, not the other way around.

4) Practise, practise, practise!

Three times—that's the magic number for confidence and success. Don't write your presentation word for word and try to memorize it—that approach uses a different part of your brain that's not as nimble. If you try to deliver a memorized speech and lose concentration or forget a word, your confidence will disappear in the middle of your delivery, and you'll have to go back to your notes and regroup.

If you have good notes and practise your whole talk three times in front of a co-worker (or even your smartphone's camera), your brain will have a solid but flexible framework. Practice also gives you an innate sense of timing, helping you know where to stretch or cut your content if needed.

5) Pay attention to your clothing and grooming

Arrive fresh, clean, and dressed one step above the audience average. Depending on the importance of the event and your own fashion awareness, asking for dress advice can be useful. Wrinkles, baggy knees, uneven hems, and stains are all distracting and reduce audience confidence.

For virtual presentations, you should still dress professionally—even if the audience cannot see your basketball shorts. Dressing professionally makes you feel professional, which will boost your confidence.

Strategy 3: Use Full Body Communication

When public speaking, how you use your body impacts how your message is heard and understood. To best connect to your audience in person or online, think about delivering your message in the same way you have a conversation and transfer those behaviours to the public speaking environment. Having a conversation with your audience feels much more connected and engaging than delivering information.

Consider these **five tips** for improving communication delivery and engaging your audience with your message.

1) Modulate your speaking rate, pitch, and volume

Your voice is a signature part of you, like your fingerprint, according to Dr. Wendy LeBorgne, a researcher and elite vocal coach. Strengthen your vocal signature by ensuring that your voice has good volume, pace, and clarity. Don't shy away from injecting feeling and expressiveness into your voice. Get feedback from peers on these features because what you hear inside your head isn't what your listeners hear.

Another option is to record a video of yourself to check your voice. Just as you need to keep your face and body mobile, keep your voice mobile, too. Vary the speed, volume, and intensity to match your message.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=1330#oembed-2

(TEDx Talks, 2018)

2) Avoid eye tricks

Your eyes are a crucial way to connect with your audience—to see and be seen by them. The problem is that when we're nervous, we tend to focus inward and become self-conscious. We look down at the floor or at the wall.

Remind yourself that the people in the audience generally want you to succeed. In the spirit of making your presentation a conversation, try to hold short mini-conversations with individual audience members. Look an audience member in the eyes, speak to them for three seconds, then repeat the same thing with someone in another part of the room, thus spreading your attention throughout the audience.

Eye contact during virtual presentations is a different matter. If you try to look at different individuals on your screen, no one will feel like you're looking at them. You need to keep your eyes on the camera. Attach a picture of smiling people right at camera level to remind you where to focus your gaze.

Unless you're delivering bad news or talking about a sombre topic, make sure your smile reaches your eyes. A twinkle in the eye will make your audience inclined to smile back and feel more positive about both your presentation and you.

3) Display congruent facial gestures

An authentic smile is one of a speaker's best resources. It doesn't have to be a big, toothy grin, but unless you're announcing a tragedy, try to look happy. A wry smile is fine if you're a dry-humour person.

Animate your face. A stiff, immobile expression is off-putting—even disturbing—to watch. The larger your audience, the more you need to exaggerate your expressions and move your eyes, eyebrows, and mouth with more emphasis than you might in a personal conversation.

Eyebrows may seem like an odd communication tool, but they're the first thing from the top of your head down that you can move to show expression. Raise them to show surprise or delight, draw them up together to emphasize a question, or furrow them to show concern or concentration. Whatever you do, remember that your eyebrows are frames for your eyes to draw people's attention.

4) Use purposeful hand gestures

Your hands are remarkably useful storytellers. They can nonverbally emphasize a trend by moving from the audience's lower left to upper right ("The quality of services has increased"). Spread them wide to demonstrate a concept ("We'll be spreading the task load more evenly among the teams"). Your hands can count out three points, put an end to an ineffective policy, or raise people to their feet for a stretch. The key is to use them purposefully to accompany the words coming out of your mouth.

When you're in a large space, go big or go home. Keep arm motions above your waist and away from your body. Don't flap your forearms near your body like you have tiny T-rex arms. Use large arm gestures, too.

5) Develop lower-body stillness

Great posture conveys confidence, so roll your shoulders back and allow your limbs to hang from that strong framework. Straighten your spine to pull your head up, too, which will make managing your arms and legs easier. Posture changes the hormones in your body, replacing stress with confidence.

When you've got some floor space, move deliberately within it to emphasize your points. For example, if you're talking about change over time, move from the audience's left to the right as you introduce the benefits of the change.

Avoid moving just to be moving. Walking back and forth on a single line with no reference to your content makes you look fidgety and unsure of yourself.

Practise a calm, neutral stance for those times in your presentation when you're not gesturing or moving purposefully—while you listen to a question or show a visual, for instance. When nervous, people exhibit repeated behaviours like pacing, flipping their hair back, or pulling a ring on and off. These subconscious tics are distracting to the audience.

A comfortable neutral stance consists of feet at shoulder width or a little narrower, with your hands hanging comfortably at your sides. Such a position will feel awkward at first, but keep practising. If your hands hang loosely at your sides, they will not distract the audience.

In the video below, Julian Treasure, author of the book *How to Be Heard*, offers guidance about how to use verbal and nonverbal communication to speak so that people want to listen.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=1330#oembed-3

(TED, 2014)

Table 7.6. Julian Treasure's Key Points

The seven deadly sins of speaking (0:00 min)	**How to speak powerfully and make change (starts at 2:53 min)**	**Using your voice to speak effectively (starts at 4:14 min)**	**Six exercises to warm up your voice (starts at 7:52 min)**
1. Gossip 2. Judging 3. Negativity 4. Complaining 5. Excuses 6. Lying 7. Dogmatism	Speak with … **H***onesty*—be clear and straight **A***uthenticity*—be yourself **I***ntegrity*—be your word **L***ove*—wish them well	*Register*—the depth of your voice *Timbre*—how your voice feels *Prosody*—how you use tone *Pace*—rate, pause, and/or silence *Pitch*—Low or high *Volume*—Soft, quiet, loud	1. Deep sigh 2. Ba ba ba 3. Bbbbbbbb (lips) 4. La la la la la 5. Rrrrrrrrr (tongue) 6. Weeeeawwww (high to low)(Curious? Watch the video!)

(TED, 2014)

These public speaking strategies are just three, but there are many more. These ones were chosen because they apply to the wide variety of public speaking situations you may face professionally. You may wish to do further research to see if there are strategies for specific environments and interactions that are unique to your profession.

Relating Theory to Real Life

Consider the strategies you have learned in this section, and watch *Make Body Language Your Superpower* to respond to the questions that follow.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://openeducationalberta.ca/communications/?p=1330#oembed-4

(Stanford Graduate School of Business, 2014)

1. How are the tips in the video similar or different from those in the **Prepare** and **Use Full Body Communication** strategies discussed in this section?

2. What types of body language can cause distraction?
3. When you see the examples of mistakes presenters make, how do you think the presenter felt? How would it make you feel? What strategies to reduce public speaking anxiety were employed to help the presenter keep going, and which would you employ in that situation?
4. How can the three strategies on this page apply to communicating information to a client, co-worker, or small group in situations **other than formal presentations** (for example, at a hotel reception desk or in the office)?
5. How have you developed empathy for yourself when presenting, for other people presenting to you, and for your audience?

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7.5 Electronic Communication

This page discusses **electronic communication**—**when** to use it, **what** strategies to use, **why** it's important for communication, and **how** to employ the strategies.

When

Digital communication happens every day, multiple times a day, in the workplace and in your personal life. Your workplace will have digital communication policies, and unwritten socially constructed norms define appropriate use of digital communication. Your workplace and personal digital communication will most certainly cross paths. **Digital citizenship** is an important concept and can be defined as the appropriate use of the internet, computers, and any other digital devices. Knowing and using digital communication ethics and etiquette is part of professionalism in the workplace.

What

This section will explore three strategies for effective digital communication and citizenship. The first is **netiquette**, the second is **email etiquette**, and the third is **digital footprint management**.

Why

What you say, whether in person, on the phone, or online, can define what people think about you. When you have a job, what you say represents you and your employer. Relationships can either build or tear down you and the company you work for. One bad situation or comment can instantly change what someone thinks about you. If they do not have a good relationship with you, that may make them wonder what it will be like working with your employer or your co-workers (Department of Communication, ISU, 2016a).

How you say things also matters. Some studies suggest that today's college graduates are less literate than they were a decade ago thanks to the rise of **textspeak** (communicating in brief text messages, at irregular intervals, using abbreviations such as *lol* and *ttyl*, and emojis) and the formatting limitations of many social media sites (Appignani et al., n.d.; Graff, 2017; Mallows & Lister, 2016). For people born before the 1990s, standard education included rigorous schooling on grammar and spelling. Once spellcheck became popular, the emphasis on language rules lessened. By the mid-1990s, as students everywhere began carrying computers with them to class, research shows a decrease in spelling and grammar skills. Many, but not all, people consider spelling and grammar trivial factors in their ability to communicate (Perry et al., 2018). Unfortunately, this view is not shared by everyone.

Moreover, Thurlow (2017) points out that although younger employees might not realize it, co-workers consider proper spelling to be a primary factor in message clarity, even when they can understand the intended meaning. More importantly, older workers are equally inclined to consider literacy skills to be a critical reflection of overall job competence, meaning that use of textspeak in a formal work environment could possibly lead to job termination (Thurlow, 2017). Most alarmingly, research also shows that in the healthcare field, people have died as a result of workers misunderstanding one another because of their use of textspeak on the job (Head et al., 2011).

Humans seek interaction personally and professionally, and this has led to new ways to interact; however, caution is warranted when engaging in social media online. Many employers use social media as another way to review your qualifications, determine your level of professionalism, and evaluate how well you will represent their company and brand (Department of Communication, ISU, 2016a).

According to Jobvite (2021), 71% of employers agree that reviewing social media profiles is an effective way to screen applicants, 55% of hiring managers have found social media content that caused them not to hire an applicant, 78% of recruiters recommend using social media cautiously even after being hired, and 21% of hiring managers say they are unlikely to consider an applicant who has no social media presence.

According to the Department of Communication at Indiana State University (2016a), it is imperative that you remain cautious about what you post or share on your social media accounts. Even if you have protected your privacy settings and are managing your online identity, it is easy to forget that people may connect through you to your friends or family who have public pages or follow posts you are tagged in. You need to be in control of your self-promotion and personal branding online. It is important to monitor what you post, what you repost, and how you respond to posts.

Never talk badly about your place of employment online. If you have a bad day or have a disagreement with your boss or co-workers, do not lash out online; anyone can see your post, and this could easily cost you your job or a future one. Employers do not want to hire an employee who will talk negatively about their company online versus addressing a grievance through proper channels such as the human resources department.

When using social media, remember a few simple cautions:

1. Not everything is as it appears. Individuals may not be who they represent themselves to be.
2. The words you write and the images you send, regardless of how much you trust the recipient, may become public and can remain online forever.
3. Always consider what you access and what you post, as well as how it represents you and your employer, even if you think others cannot know where you work or who you are.
4. Be aware that internet service providers (ISPs) are required by law to archive information concerning the use and traffic of information, and this information can become available under subpoena.

(Department of Communication, ISU, 2016a)

How

Three strategies for effective digital communication and citizenship include **netiquette**, **email etiquette**, and **digital footprint management**.

Strategy 1: Netiquette

Netiquette refers to etiquette—the protocols and norms for communication—on the internet. The following facts and tips will help you with the concept of netiquette:

- When digital communication tools are used in the workplace, they need to convey professionalism and respect.
- Whatever digital device you use, written communication in the form of brief messages—texting—is common and useful for short exchanges and is a convenient way to stay connected

with others when talking on the phone would be cumbersome.

- Texting is not useful for long or complicated messages, and careful consideration should be given to the audience.
- If you are unsure whether texting is appropriate, enquire in an email or phone call and use the method of contact provided or preferred.
- Electronic mail, usually called email, has largely replaced print. Email can be very useful for messages that have slightly more content than a text message, but it is still best used for fairly brief messages.
- Emails may be informal in personal contexts, but business communication requires attention to detail, an awareness that your email reflects you and your company, and a professional tone so that it may be forwarded to a third party, if needed.
- Know your recipient; although "? % dsct" may be an understandable way to ask a close associate what the proper discount is to offer a certain customer, if you are sending a text to your boss, it might be wiser to write, "What % discount does the customer get on a $1K order?"
- Let others set the tone. If you are unsure of the level of professionalism, adapt according to the tone they set.
- Anticipate unintentional misinterpretation. Texting often uses symbols and codes to represent thoughts, ideas, and emotions. Given the complexity of communication and the useful but limited tool of texting, be aware of its limitations and do your best to prevent misinterpretation with brief messages.
- Contacting someone too frequently can border on harassment. Texting is a tool. Use it when appropriate, but don't abuse it.
- Unplug yourself once in a while. Do you feel constantly connected? Do you feel lost or "out of it" if you don't have your cellphone and can't connect to people, even for 15 minutes? Sometimes being unavailable for a time can be healthy—do everything in moderation, including texting.
- Don't text and drive. Research shows that the likelihood of an accident increases dramatically if the driver is texting behind

the wheel. Being in an accident while conducting company business would reflect poorly on your judgement as well as on your employer.

Strategy 2: Email Etiquette

The following tips will help you with email-specific etiquette in a professional setting:

- Proper salutations should demonstrate respect and help avoid mix-ups in case a message is accidentally sent to the wrong recipient. For example, use a salutation like “Dear Ms. X” when communicating with someone outside the company (external) or “Hi Barry” with a co-worker you know well (internal).
- Subject lines should be clear, brief, and specific. This helps the recipient understand the essence of the message. For example, “Proposal attached” or “Your question of July 10, 2023.”
- Close with a signature. Identify yourself by creating a signature block that contains your name and business contact information.
- Avoid using all caps. Capital letters are used on the internet to communicate emphatic emotion or shouting and are considered rude.
- Avoid abbreviations. An email is not a text message, and your audience may not find your wit cause to ROTFLOL (roll on the floor laughing out loud).
- Make proper use of acronyms. You may understand that COO stands for Chief Operating Officer, but it may mean other things to different people.
- Be brief. Omit unnecessary words.
- Use a clear format. Include line breaks between sentences or divide your message into brief paragraphs for ease of reading. A good email should get to the point and conclude in three or fewer small paragraphs .

- Reread, revise, and review. Catch and correct spelling and grammar mistakes before you press Send. It will take more time and effort to undo the problems caused by a hasty, poorly written email than to get it right the first time.
- Know the difference between CC and BCC. CC stands for "carbon copy"; it will send an original copy of the email to all parties addressed and CC'd. Use this when you want someone to know that a conversation has occurred without them needing to add input. BCC stands for "blind carbon copy" and will send a copy of the email but conceal the names of the people being messaged. You might use this when you are working with a group and need to send an email to the group members as well as your instructor or boss without the group members knowing. This allows your professor or boss to be aware of the conversation between you and the rest of the group without the group members knowing that your professor or boss is being messaged about the conversation. At work, this can be used when communicating with a customer directly while informing your superior without the customer being aware.
- Email the recipient ahead of time if you are going to attach large files (audio and visual files are often quite large) to ensure that you don't exceed the recipient's mailbox limit or trigger the spam filter. It also lets the other person know that the files are coming in case they get lost in transit.
- Test links. If you include a link, test it to make sure it works.
- Give feedback or follow up on your emails. If you don't get a response in 24 hours, email or call the recipient. Spam filters may have intercepted your message, so your recipient may never have received it.
- Reply promptly. Beware of making an emotional response—never reply in anger—but make a habit of replying to all emails within 24 hours, even if only to say that you will provide the requested information at a later date.
- Use "Reply All" sparingly. Do not send your reply to everyone

who received the initial email unless your message absolutely needs to be read by the entire group.

Let's look at two examples of a workplace email. The first example is an email template. The second example is a letter written for a specific situation and audience.

Email Template

Subject: Welcome to [your agency's name]

Email content:

Dear [person's name],

Thank you for opening an account with _____ [your agency's name].

You can manage your account in the "My Account" section of the site when you sign in or by calling us.

Thank you for your interest in _____ [your agency's name]. We look forward to doing business with you.

Name of sender, job title, credentials
ABC Agency
www.ABCAgency.com
Phone: (345) 666-7777

Letter Example

Subject: Welcome to ABC Agency

Email content:

Dear Ms. Yvgeny,

Thank you for making an appointment at ABC Agency for Monday, June 19, 2023, at 11:30 a.m.

Please arrive at your appointment 15 minutes early and bring one piece of government-issued identification such as a driver's licence or passport.

If you have any questions, or to manage your appointment, please login to the "My Account" section of our website, or call us directly.

Thank you for your interest in ABC Agency. We look forward to your visit.

Molly Stravados, Coordinator
ABC Agency
www.ABCAgency.com
Tel: (345) 666-7777

Strategy 3: Managing Your Digital Footprint

In this day and age, it is difficult *not* to have created your own digital footprint. We have social media accounts, are linked to websites we visit, or appear in an organization's posted data. As we are about to learn, future employers are likely interested in what they find out about us through our digital footprint. It is important to supervise your digital footprint to manage the impression it makes, and this strategy reviews key ways to do so.

Ultimately, when creating and maintaining your professional identity, you must be clear and consistent in your communication to establish and demonstrate a strong work ethic and make sure that you present yourself in a positive way. Being consistent demonstrates accountability and dependability, letting people know what they can expect from you and that they can count on you (Department of Communication, ISU, 2016a).

The quality of potential employees' online presence has become a key factor for many hiring managers. Make sure your digital footprint is an asset and not a liability by following the steps in Table 7.7 to analyze and improve it.

Table 7.7. Steps to Managing Your Digital Footprint

Steps	Explanation
Google yourself	Just searching your name from your own laptop on your favourite browser isn't enough. Your laptop knows you too well and will return only targeted results. Use a private or incognito window to make sure your search results are similar to what an employer will see when searching your name. Get a friend or mentor to look over the search results and let you know what makes a good impression and what raises a red flag.
Clean it up	Undertake a social media "clean-up." Go through all your social media accounts and delete anything that is inappropriate or does not shed the best light on who you are. If you have posts from middle school, delete them. Delete any posts that portray topics and views that are no longer relevant or in line with who you are today and what you stand for. This helps keep your social media accounts cohesive, well-rounded, and true to the person you have evolved into, not the person you might have been along the way.
Crowd out the bad with the good	If you've got dodgy content floating around out there, your best strategy for pushing it down the page in searches is to crowd it out with good content over time. Having a single obsession can also leave a bad impression. If the only thing you ever post about is sports or anime, use the following year to round out your online presence by making regular, interesting, and useful posts on a variety of subjects on the most-used social media platforms.
Link to your industry	Search online for your desired future workplace. Review their digital footprint. What impression do they make on you? Do they list their organizational values, mission, and vision? How does what they portray online align with what you portray online? This may indicate some changes you may want to consider to your digital footprint. Also create a LinkedIn profile to connect to individuals and companies in your industry.

(Dixon et al., 2022)

Facts to consider when managing your digital footprint:

1. According to the recruiters surveyed in the 2021 *Recruiter Nation Report* (Jobvite, 2021), the biggest social media turnoffs are the following:
    - Spelling and grammar errors – 45%
    - Marijuana references – 40%
    - Alcohol consumption references – 39%
    - Political posts – 30%
    - Showing skin – 24%
2. Listed here from highest to lowest are the platforms and the percentage of recruiters who use the platform for recruiting (Jobvite, 2021):
    - Facebook – 68%
    - LinkedIn – 65%
    - Twitter – 48%
    - Instagram – 46%
    - YouTube – 35%
    - TikTok – 16%
3. The functional equivalent of your internet resumé, a LinkedIn profile will be one of the first stops for a hiring manager looking to see how you present yourself. A carefully crafted LinkedIn profile gives you a strong professional presence online. Make your profile work for you by using the following steps:
    - Create an all-star profile (Lainez, 2020)
    - Avoid the ten worst LinkedIn profile mistakes (Petherick, 2022)
    - Publish regularly on LinkedIn (here's a student example.) (Kemsley, 2016)

- Network it up (How to Network on LinkedIn)! (LinkedIn, 2013)
- Make connecting easy (How To Create a LinkedIn Badge) (Tillman, 2018)

Relating Theory to Real Life

1. Spend some time creating an outline of the professional image you want.
2. Google yourself and look at your profile in all the social media platforms you use. Describe your online image. Have a trusted person also look and describe what online image they see.
3. Make a list of steps you need to take to create an online image that aligns with your desired professional image. Plan to achieve your desired online image and include a timeframe.
4. Open the last email and text message conversation you had with a professional contact.
    - Did the email or text message conversation follow the netiquette guidelines?
    - Did the email follow email etiquette guidelines?

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7.6 Problem Solving in Groups

This page discusses **problem solving in groups**—**when** to use it, **what** strategies to use, **why** it's important for communication, and **how** to employ the strategies.

When

All groups of individuals, be it in the home, school, or workplace, sometimes need to come together to make decisions. The problem-solving process involves thoughts, discussions, actions, and decisions that occur from the first consideration of a problematic situation to the goal. The problems that workplace groups face are varied, but some common problems include budgeting, raising funds, planning events, addressing customer or citizen complaints, creating or adapting products or services to fit needs, supporting members, and raising awareness about issues or causes.

The decision-making process may seem like it should be simple and straightforward but, in reality, it rarely is. People can actively disagree or agree to avoid conflict, ultimately leaving unsatisfied regardless of the outcome achieved. "Groupthink" can also happen, where in the process of trying to achieve consensus, people set aside their own personal beliefs and adopt what they believe to be the opinion of the rest of the group (Cherry, 2022), often sacrificing the best solution as well as their own satisfaction. When trying to problem solve, a mindful approach by the group can streamline the process, allowing the best solution not only for the initial problem, but also for the team and its members.

What

We will explore two strategies to group problem solving. The first strategy is to **examine key considerations**, and the second is to engage in a structured **group problem-solving process**.

Why

Problems of all sorts have **three common components**:

1. **An undesirable situation:** Even though it may only be a vague idea, there is a drive to better the undesirable situation. The vague idea may develop into a more precise goal that can be achieved, even though solutions have not yet been generated.
2. **A desired situation:** When conditions are desirable, there isn't a problem.
3. **Obstacles between undesirable and desired situations:** These are things that stand in the way between the current situation and the group's goal of addressing it. This component of a problem requires the most work, and it is where decision making occurs. Some examples of obstacles include limited funding, resources, personnel, time, or information. Obstacles can also take the form of people who are working against the group, including individuals who are resistant to change or anyone who disagrees or agrees too readily.

(Adams & Galanes, 2009)

Discussion of these three elements of a problem helps the group tailor its problem-solving process because each problem will vary. Although these three general elements are present in each problem, the group should also address the specific characteristics of the problem.

In any workplace, the team makes decisions in an effort to carry out their services. A high-performance team is one that achieves desired outcomes by consistently working together with purpose and shared vision, optimizing the abilities of each member.

According to Fonseca (2023), high-performance teams have the following characteristics:

1. **Leading with trust and respect for one another:** Committing to act and communicate with trust and respect puts value on different perspectives. It allows each team member to bring their ideas forward and facilitates difficult discussions and transparent communication.
2. **Clear and aligned goals:** Committing to the goal and each person's task in accomplishing that goal allows the team to remain focused and connected.
3. **Well-defined roles and responsibilities:** Roles and responsibilities are created with diversity and purpose in mind. Everyone knows and commits to what they need to do and when they need to do it.
4. **Collaboration:** This is characterized by a high level of participation and engagement by all members. Questions, ideas, and feedback are regularly shared and encouraged. Responsibility for outcomes is shared by the team.
5. **Flexibility:** When the team focuses on the goal and regularly asks "Why am I/are we doing this?" the team can adapt and shift as needed. Team members can make decisions based on an assessment of priorities instead of tasks. Teams encourage each other in the face of change, which can be uncomfortable

even for high-functioning teams.

6. **Learning is engrained in the team's culture:** The team desires to achieve goals, and thereby equally desires the development of the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to achieve those goals. Professional development is seen as proactive, and mistakes are seen as a normal part of the process. Feedback is a priority for team members. Meaningful reflection on mistakes is seen as an opportunity to maximize growth.

Structured group problem-solving strategies, such as the ones we are about to explore, are a method to becoming a high-performance team and maintaining a high level of achievement. Structured strategies allow the problem to be defined and aligned with team goals and the team members' voices to meaningfully contribute to the outcome.

How

Strategy 1: Examine Key Considerations

When a problem arises, it should be given careful consideration. Five common and important characteristics to consider are task difficulty, number of possible solutions, group member interest in problem, group member familiarity with problem, and the need for solution acceptance (Adams & Galanes, 2009).

1. **Task difficulty:** Difficult tasks are also typically more complex. As a group, spend time researching and discussing a difficult and complex task to develop a shared foundational knowledge of what it will take to resolve the problem. At times, group members may need to do research and bring points to a meeting. Knowing all the key factors to solving a problem sets

the stage for success in the next steps.

2. **Number of possible solutions:** There are usually multiple ways to solve a problem or achieve a goal, but some situations have more potential solutions than others. In some situations, you may be more bound by rules and regulations in your agency or laws in your area, so solutions are ultimately limited. However, you may also have a problem or goal that must be achieved but that no one has ever faced before or where the resources have never been as limited. Group decisions in these situations are often made more complex by the number of solutions.
3. **Group member interest in the problem:** When group members are interested in a problem, they will be more engaged and invested with the problem-solving process and in finding a quality solution. Groups with high interest in and knowledge about a problem may want more freedom to develop and implement solutions, whereas groups with low interest may prefer a leader who provides structure and direction.
4. **Group familiarity with the problem:** Some groups encounter a problem regularly, whereas other problems are more unique or unexpected. When group members aren't familiar with a problem, they will need to do background research on what similar groups have done and may also need to bring in outside experts.
5. **Need for solution acceptance:** In this step, groups must consider how many people their decision will affect and, in turn, who needs to "buy in" to the solution for it to be successfully implemented. Some groups have many external partners to whom the success of a solution depends. Other groups are answerable only to themselves. Groups will want to brainstorm and then poll those who will be affected by the solution. Groups may want to do a pilot implementation to see how people react. Imposing an excellent solution that doesn't have buy-in from all involved can still lead to failure.

Strategy 2: Group Problem-Solving Process

As you read through the steps in the problem-solving process, think about how you can apply what we have learned regarding the general and specific elements of problems. Although you may think that some of the following steps are logical things to do when faced with a problem, remember that a deliberate and systematic approach to problem solving has been shown to benefit group functioning and performance.

Although a deliberate approach is the conscious habit of a high-performance team, it is especially beneficial for groups that do not have an established history of working together and will only be able to meet occasionally. When thinking about how to implement the steps, the group should complete each step of the process, but it is not necessary for the steps to happen in exact order, and enough time should be set aside for each step. Individualizing the experience for your group and being flexible will allow for team engagement and ultimately result in the best decision being made.

Step 1. Define the Problem

Define the problem by considering the previously mentioned three elements shared by every problem: **1) the current undesirable situation**, **2) the desired situation**, and **3) obstacles in the way** (Adams & Galanes, 2009). At this stage, group members share what they know about the current situation without proposing solutions or evaluating the information. Here are some good questions to ask during this stage:

- What is the current difficulty?
- How did we come to know that the difficulty exists?
- Who or what is involved?
- Why is it meaningful, urgent, or important?
- What have the effects been so far?
- What, if any, elements of the difficulty require clarification?

At the end of this stage, the group should be able to compose a single sentence that summarizes the problem, called a **problem statement**. Note that in the examples below, it is not all about addressing negative issues. Positive issues require problem solving, too. Problem solving is really about bridging a gap that exists between the undesirable and the desired situations. When writing a problem statement, avoid wording in the problem statement or question that hints at potential solutions.

Examples of problem statements:

- Our agency is chronically understaffed in front-line roles.
- We need to make changes to manage the increase in demand for our services.
- The fundraising events have gone well, and other organizations want us to teach them how to do it.
- We are required to use a new software to conduct our business, and the software doesn't do some of the key tasks that our current software does.
- Our customers frequently come to their appointments unprepared.

Step 2. Analyze the Problem

During this step, the group should analyze the problem and the group's relationship to the problem. Whereas the first step involved exploring the "What" related to the problem, this step focuses on the "Why." At this stage, group members can discuss the potential causes of the difficulty. They may also want to begin setting out an agenda or timeline for the problem-solving process, looking forward to the other steps. To fully analyze the problem, the group can discuss the five common problem variables discussed earlier.

Once the problem has been analyzed, the group can pose a problem question that will guide the group as it generates possible solutions. Let's use the following problem statement to illustrate this step. The initial problem statement was "Our customers frequently come to their appointments unprepared." After analyzing the problem, the problem question that will guide the discussion of possible solutions is "How can we provide the right information, at the right time, to the right person so our appointments are efficient for everyone?"

As you can see, the problem question is more complex than the problem statement because the group has moved on to more in-depth discussion of the problem in this step.

Step 3. Generate Possible Solutions

During this step, group members generate possible solutions to the problem. Again, solutions should not be evaluated at this point, only proposed and clarified. The question should be "What *could* we do to address this problem?" not "What *should* we do to address it?" It is perfectly fine for a group member to question another person's idea by asking something like "What do you mean?" or "Could you explain your reasoning more?"

Discussions at this stage may reveal a need to return to the previous steps to better define or more fully analyze the problem. Because many problems are multifaceted, it is necessary for group members to generate solutions for each part of the problem separately, making sure to have multiple solutions for each part. Stopping the solution-generating process prematurely can lead to groupthink.

For the problem question previously posed, the group would need to break down the problem question and generate solutions for each part of the problem. Generating possible solutions can be done just among group members, but seeking input from others can also be valuable. Let's build on the problem question generated in Step 2: "How can we provide the right information, at the right time, to the right person so our appointments are efficient for everyone?" Possible solutions for the first part of the problem (the '"right" information) may include time, location, pre-preparation, things to bring, and so on. Possible solutions for the second part of the problem (the "right" time) may include after initial contact, weekly, and so on. Possible solutions for the third part of the problem (the "right" person) may include a designated staff member, client, caregiver, and so on. Last but not least, possible solutions to the final part of the problem (appointments are efficient for everyone) may require further analysis and consultation with all group members and indivuals outside the group to ask them for ideas on possible solutions.

Step 4. Evaluate Solutions

During this step, solutions can be critically evaluated based on their credibility, completeness, and worth. Once the number of potential solutions has been narrowed down based on obvious differences in relevance and/or merit, the group should analyze each solution based on its potential effects, both harmful and helpful.

Groups that are required to report the rationale for their decisions or whose decisions may be subject to public scrutiny would be wise to make a set list of criteria for evaluating each solution. Additionally, solutions can be evaluated based on how well they fit with the group's charge and the abilities of the group. To do this, group members may ask, "Does this solution live up to the original purpose or mission of the group?" and "Can the solution actually be implemented with our current resources and connections?" and "How will this solution be supported, funded, enforced, and assessed?" Group members will need to employ effective critical-thinking and listening skills.

Decision making is part of the larger process of problem solving and plays a prominent role in this step. Although there are several fairly similar models for problem solving, groups can use a variety of decision-making techniques. For example, to narrow the list of proposed solutions, group members may make a decision by majority vote, by weighing the pros and cons, or by discussing them until a consensus is reached. There are also more complex decision-making models like the critical-thinking models discussed earlier in this chapter. Once a final decision is reached, the group leader or facilitator should confirm that the group is in agreement. It may be beneficial to let the group break for a while or even to delay the final decision until a later meeting to allow people time to evaluate the decision outside the group context.

Step 5. Implement and Assess the Solution

Implementing the solution requires some advanced planning and should not be rushed unless the group is operating under strict time restraints or if delay may lead to some kind of harm. Although some solutions can be implemented immediately, others may take days, months, or years. As was noted earlier, it may be beneficial for the group to poll those who will be affected by the solution as to their opinion about it or even to do a pilot test to observe the effectiveness of the solution and how people react to it. Before implementation, the group should also determine how and when they will assess the effectiveness of the solution by asking, "How will we know if the solution is working or not?" Since solution assessment will vary based on whether or not the group is disbanded after implementation, the group should also consider the following questions:

- If the group is disbanded after implementation, who will be responsible for assessing the solution?
- If the solution fails, will the same group reconvene or will a new group be formed?

Once a solution has been reached and the group has the "green light" to implement it, implementation should proceed deliberately and cautiously, ensuring that all possible consequences are considered and addressed as needed.

Certain elements of the solution may need to be delegated to various people both inside and outside the group. Group members may also be assigned to implement a particular part of the solution based on their role in the decision making or because it connects to their area of expertise. Likewise, group members may be tasked with publicizing the solution or "selling" it to those outside the group. Lastly, the group should consider its future. In some cases, the group will get to decide whether it will stay together and continue working on other tasks or whether it will disband. In other cases, outside forces may determine the group's fate.

In some cases, you may need to dive deeper into a problem or look at the problem using a much different lenses to understand or solve it. Consider some of the strategies for critical listening, critical thinking, and critical ignoring discussed in another section of this chapter.

Although the problem-solving strategies given above need time and practice to learn, become proficient in, and become habit, the efforts are worthwhile because it will result in decisions that are made based on sound information and team input.

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Key Terms

Chapter 1

- **Encoding** is the process of turning thoughts into communication by the sender of the information.
- **Decoding** is the process of turning communication into thoughts by those that receive the information from others.
- **Channel** is a sensory route on which a message travels.
- **Content dimension** refers to the content within a message.
- **Relational dimension** includes the existing interpersonal history and type of relationship we have with a person.
- **Physical needs** include needs that keep our bodies and minds functioning.
- **Instrumental needs** include needs that help us get things done in our day-to-day lives and achieve short- and long-term goals.
- **Relational needs** include needs that help us maintain social bonds and interpersonal relationships.
- **Identity needs** include our need to present ourselves to others and be thought of in particular and desired ways.
- **Sender** is someone who encodes and sends a message to a receiver through a particular channel.
- **Receiver** is the recipient of a message and must decode (interpret) messages in ways that are meaningful for them.
- **Message** is the particular meaning or content the sender wishes the receiver to understand.
- **Noise** is anything that interferes with the sending or receiving of a message.
- **External noise** is environmental, such as a jackhammer outside

your apartment window or loud music in a nightclub.

- **Internal noise** includes *psychological factors* such as stress or nervousness or *physical factors* such as pain.
- The **linear model** (originally called the **mathematical model of communication**) serves as a basic model of communication and suggests that communication moves only in one direction from one source to another.
- The **transactional model** demonstrates that communication participants act as senders and receivers simultaneously, creating reality through their interactions.
- **Physical context** includes the environmental factors in a communication encounter.
- **Psychological context** includes the mental and emotional factors in a communication encounter.
- **Social context** refers to the stated rules or unstated norms that guide communication.
- **Norms** are social conventions that we pick up on through observation, practice, and trial and error.
- **Relational context** includes the previous interpersonal history and type of relationship we have with a person.
- **Cultural context** includes various aspects of identities such as race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and ability.
- **Intrapersonal communication** is communication with oneself using internal vocalization or reflective thinking.
- **Interpersonal communication** is communication between people whose lives mutually influence one another.
- **Group communication** is communication among three or more people interacting to achieve a shared goal.
- **Public communication** is a sender-focused form of communication in which one person is typically responsible for conveying information to an audience.
- **Mass communication** is transmitted to many people through print or electronic media.
- **Competent communication** refers to the knowledge of

effective and appropriate communication and the ability to use and adapt that knowledge in various contexts.

- **Stages of Communication Competence:**
    - **Stage 1: Unconscious incompetence:** Before you have built up a rich cognitive knowledge base of communication concepts and practiced and reflected on skills in a particular area, you may exhibit unconscious incompetence, which means you are not even aware that you are communicating in an incompetent manner.
    - **Stage 2: Conscious incompetence:** Once you learn more about communication and have a vocabulary for identifying concepts, you may find yourself exhibiting conscious incompetence. This is when you know what you should be doing, and you realize that you're not doing it as well as you could.
    - **Stage 3: Conscious competence:** As your skills increase, you may advance to conscious competence, meaning that you know you are communicating well in the moment, which will add to your bank of experiences to draw from in future interactions.
    - **Stage 4: Unconscious competence:** When you reach the stage of unconscious competence, you communicate successfully without straining to be competent.

Chapter 2

- **Perception** is the process of **selecting, organizing,** and **interpreting information.**
- **Selecting** is the first part of the perception process; we **focus our attention** on certain incoming sensory information.
- **Organizing** is the second part of the perception process and

involves **sorting** and **categorizing** the information we perceive based on innate and learned cognitive patterns.

- **Interpretation** is the third part of the perception process and is the point at which we **assign meaning** to our experiences using mental structures known as **schemata**.
- **Schemata** are like databases of stored, related information that we use to interpret new experiences; the singular form is **schema**.
- **Salience** is the degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context.
- **Vocal variety** is altering the rate, volume, and pitch of your voice.
- **Nonverbal adaptors,** the nervous movements we make to relieve anxiety, are acts such as pacing or twirling our hair and can be distracting.
- **Self-concept** refers to the overall idea of who a person thinks they are.
- The **looking-glass self,** also known as **reflected appraisal**, is how we see ourselves reflected in other people's reactions to us, then form our self-concept based on how we believe other people see us.
- **Social comparison theory** states that we describe and evaluate ourselves in terms of how we compare to other people.
- **Reference groups** are the groups we use for social comparison, and they typically change based on what we are evaluating.
- **Social comparison** is how we evaluate ourselves based on our similarities to and differences from others.
- **Self-esteem** refers to the judgements and evaluations we make about our self-concept.
- **Self-efficacy** refers to the judgements people make about their ability to perform a task in a specific context.
- **Self-discrepancy theory** states that people have beliefs about and expectations for their actual and potential selves that do not always match up with what they experience.
- The **actual self** consists of the attributes that you or someone

else believes you *actually* possess.

- The **ideal self** is made up of the attributes that you or someone else *would like you* to possess.
- The **ought self** consists of the attributes you or someone else believes you *should* possess.
- **Perceived self** is our subjective appraisal of personal qualities that we ascribe to ourselves.
- **Motivation** is the underlying force that drives us to do things.
- Being **intrinsically motivated** means that we want to do something for the love of doing it or for the resulting internal satisfaction.
- Being **extrinsically motivated** means that we do something to receive a reward or to avoid punishment.
- **Attributions** are links we make to identify the cause of a behaviour.
- **Self-enhancement bias** is often a cultural phenomenon and means that we tend to emphasize an individual's desirable qualities in comparison to other people,
- **Self-presentation**, also referred to as the **presenting self**, is the process of strategically concealing or revealing personal information to influence others' perceptions.
- **Prosocial self-presentation** entails behaviours that present a person as a role model and make the person more likeable and attractive.
- **Impression management** is a communication strategy that we use to influence how others view us.
- **Attribution** is our mind coming up with an explanation for what is happening.
- **Internal attributions** connect the cause of behaviours to personal aspects such as personality traits.
- **External attributions** connect the cause of behaviours to situational factors.
- **Perceptual error** occurs when we do not judge others, things, or situations fairly and accurately.
- **Fundamental attribution error** is our tendency to explain

others' behaviours using internal rather than external attributions.

- **Confirmation bias** results from finding evidence and support for already-held beliefs, even if that evidence doesn't actually exist.
- **Self-serving bias** occurs when our behaviour results in some form of failure or a negative outcome, and we attribute the cause to external factors and not internal ones.
- The **primacy effect** leads us to place more value on the first information we receive about a person.
- The **recency effect** leads us to put more weight on the most recent impression we have of a person's communication over earlier impressions.
- The **halo effect** occurs when initial positive perceptions lead us to view later interactions as positive.
- The **horn effect** occurs when initial negative perceptions lead us to view later interactions as negative.
- **Personality** refers to a person's general way of thinking, feeling, and behaving based on underlying motivations and impulses.
- **Self-fulfilling prophecies** are thoughts and action patterns in which a person's false belief triggers a behaviour that makes the initial false belief actually or seemingly come true.
- **Empathy** is the ability to share someone else's feelings, experiences, or emotions.
- **Sympathy** is the feeling that you are sorry and care about the trouble and misfortune of another person, but it places the person struggling in a place of judgement rather than in a place of understanding.
- **Stereotypes** are sets of beliefs that we develop about groups, which we then apply to individuals from that group.
- **Prejudice** is negative feelings or attitudes towards people based on their identity or identities.
- **Cognitive complexity** involves being able to construct different frameworks and perspectives for seeing an issue.

- **Perception checking** is a strategy to help us monitor our reactions to and perceptions about people and communication.
- The **pillow method** is beneficial when a situation is too complex for perception checking and works to increase cognitive complexity. This tool is used to help build empathy and understanding of others and their point of view. It involves viewing a situation from five positions (four sides and a middle), similar to a pillow, and enables you to gain understanding of an issue from various perspectives.

Chapter 3

- **Symbols** are something that stands in for or represents something else. They can be communicated verbally (e.g., speaking the word *hello*), in writing (e.g., putting the letters *H-E-L-L-O* together), or nonverbally (e.g., waving your hand back and forth as a greeting).
- **Codes** are culturally agreed on and ever-changing systems of symbols that help us organize, understand, and generate meaning.
- **Displacement** refers to being able to talk about events that are removed in space or time from a speaker and a situation.
- The **triangle of meaning** is a model of communication that indicates the relationship among a thought, a symbol, and a referent, and highlights the indirect relationship between the symbol and the referent.
    - The **thought** is a concept or idea that a person references.
    - The **symbol** is the word that represents the thought.
    - The **referent** is the object or idea to which the symbol refers.

- **Definitions** help us narrow the meaning of particular symbols, which also narrows a symbol's possible referents. They also provide more words (symbols) for which we must determine a referent.
- **Denotative meaning** refers to definitions that are accepted by the language group as a whole; that is, the dictionary definition of a word.
- **Polysemic words** are words with more than one meaning.
- **Equivocal language** is similar to polysemic words in that it includes words, expressions, and phrases that can have more than one accepted definition.
- **Monosemic words** have only one use in a language.
- **Connotation** refers to definitions that are rooted in emotion- or experience-based associations people have with a word.
- **Grammar** refers to the rules that govern how words are used to create phrases and sentences.
- **Phonetic rules** determine the way words or phrases are said; for example, how to pronounce words and where to place the emphasis.
- **Syntactic rules** dictate the way symbols can be arranged as opposed to the meanings of those symbols; for example, how words are organized in a sentence.
- **Semantic rules** govern the meaning of language as opposed to its structure; for example, what a given word means within a society rather than where it is placed in a sentence.
- **Pragmatic rules** help communicators understand how messages can be used and interpreted in a given context; for example, what a promise is and when to use it.
- **Neologisms** are newly coined or newly used words.
- **Slang** refers to new or adapted words that are specific to a group, context, and/or time period.
- **"We" language** includes the words *we*, *our*, and *us*, and can be used to promote a feeling of inclusion.
- "**I" language** can be useful when expressing thoughts, needs, and feelings because it leads us to "own" our expressions and

avoid the tendency to mistakenly attribute the cause of our thoughts, needs, and feelings to others.

- "**You" language** can lead people to become defensive and feel attacked, which can be divisive and result in feelings of interpersonal separation.
- **"But" statements** negate everything that was said before, even if it was positive or intentional, and should be avoided.
- The **Ladder of Abstraction** refers to the continuum of language from **concrete** to **abstract**.
- **Jargon** refers to specialized words used by a certain group or profession.
- **Partial messages** are missing a relevant type of expression and can lead to misunderstandings and conflict.
- **Whole messages** help keep lines of communication open, which can help build solid relationships.
- **Affective language** refers to language used to express a person's feelings and to create similar feelings in another person.
- **Similes** are a direct comparison of two things using the words *like* or *as*.
- **Metaphors** are an implicit comparison of two things that are not alike or are not typically associated; that is, the speaker says something *is* something else.
- **Personification** means attributing human qualities or the characteristics of other living things to non-human objects or abstract concepts.
- **Powerless language** is marked by hesitancy and distracts from the certainty of a statement.
- **Hedges** are words and phrases that try to minimize something; for example, "kinda," "I think," and "I'm kinda angry."
- **Hesitations** are words and phrases that create a short pause; for example, "uh," "ah," "um," and "Uh, can I talk to you about this?"
- **Tag questions** convert a statement into a question; for example, "It sure is hot today, *isn't it*?" and "You're coming with

me, *aren't you*?"

- **Polite forms** are words and phrases such as "please," "sir," "ma'am," and "Excuse me, sir."
- **Intensifiers** give force or emphasis to a statement; for example, "so," "very," and "I'm not really tired."
- **Disclaimers** deny something; for example, "I know this sounds ridiculous, but …"
- **Polarizing language** presents people, ideas, or situations as polar opposites.
- **Inferences** are conclusions based on thoughts or speculation but not on direct observation.
- **Facts** are conclusions based on direct observation or group consensus.
- **Judgements** are expressions of approval or disapproval that are subjective and not verifiable.
- The **receiving stage**, sometimes referred to as **attending**, is the first stage of the listening process and is the physical process of taking in information through both auditory and visual channels.
- The **interpreting stage**, sometime referred to as **understanding**, is the second stage of the listening process and is where we combine the visual and auditory information we receive and try to make meaning out of that information using **schemata**.
- The **recalling stage** is the third stage of the listening process and is the act of recalling or remembering information.
- The **evaluating stage** is the fourth stage of the listening process and involves making judgements about the information's credibility, completeness, and worth.
- The **responding stage** is the fifth stage of the listening process and involves sending verbal and nonverbal messages that indicate attentiveness and understanding or a lack thereof.
- **Environmental noise** interferes with the physiological aspects of hearing and can include other people talking, the traffic sounds, or music.

- **Psychological noise** interferes primarily with the cognitive processes of listening and can include stress and anger.
- **Short-term memory** is a mental storage capability that can retain stimuli for 20 seconds to one minute.
- **Long-term memory** is a mental storage capability to which stimuli in short-term memory can be transferred if the stimuli are connected to existing schemata and in which information can be stored indefinitely.
- **Working memory** is a temporarily accessed memory storage space that is activated during times of high cognitive demand.
- **Back-channel cues** are the verbal and nonverbal signals we send while someone is talking and can consist of verbal cues such as "uh-huh," "oh," and "right," or nonverbal cues like direct eye contact, head nods, and leaning forward.
- **Discriminative listening** is a focused type of listening that is primarily physiological and occurs mostly at the receiving stage of the listening process.
- **Informational listening** entails listening with the goal of comprehending and retaining information.
- **Critical listening** is listening with the goal of analyzing or evaluating a message based on information presented verbally and information that can be inferred from context.
- **Empathetic listening** is the most challenging form of listening and occurs when we try to understand or experience what a speaker is thinking or feeling.
- **People-oriented listeners** are concerned about the needs and feelings of others and may get distracted from a specific task or the content of a message in order to address feelings.
- **Action-oriented listeners** prefer well-organized, precise, and accurate information.
- **Content-oriented listeners** are analytic and enjoy processing complex messages.
- **Time-oriented listeners** are concerned with completing tasks and achieving goals.
- **Silent listening** occurs when a person says nothing.

- **Close-ended questions** are very specific and do not allow elaboration. They are direct and often result in a "yes" or "no" response or a list of possible responses that are provided.
- **Open-ended questions** allow for more elaboration by the person responding, and specific response options are not provided. These forms of questions generally result in more discussion.
- **Sincere questions** are posed to find a genuine answer.
- **Counterfeit questions** are disguised attempts to send a message, not to receive one.
- **Paraphrasing** is restating in your own words the message you think the speaker just sent.
- **Pseudo-listening** is pretending to listen and appear attentive but not listening to understand or interpret the information.
- **Selective listening** involves the listener selecting only the information they identify as relevant to their own needs or interests.
- **Insulated listening** involves ignoring or avoiding information and certain topics of conversation.
- **Defensive listening** occurs when the listener interprets the speaker's innocent comments as personal attacks.
- **Insensitive listening** involves focusing on information for its literal meaning and disregarding the other person's feelings and emotions.
- **Stage hogging** involves listening to express one's own ideas or interests and being the centre of attention.
- **Ambushing** is careful and attentive listening to collect information that can be used against the other person as an attack.
- **Multitasking** involves listening without full attention while attempting to complete more than one task at a time.
- **Active listening** refers to the process of pairing outwardly visible positive listening behaviours with positive cognitive listening practices.
- **Mental bracketing** refers to the process of intentionally

separating out intrusive or irrelevant thoughts that may distract you from listening.

- **Mirroring** refers to a listener's replication of the nonverbal signals of a speaker.
- **Low-context communication style** is one in which much of the meaning generated within an interaction comes from the verbal communication used rather than nonverbal or contextual cues.
- **High-context communication style** is one in which much of the meaning comes from nonverbal and contextual cues.
- **Monochronic cultures** favour a structured and commodified orientation towards time.
- **Polychronic cultures** favour a more flexible orientation towards time.
- The **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** states that language shapes our view of reality and our cultural patterns.
- **Communication accommodation theory** explores why and how people modify their communication to fit situational, social, cultural, and relational contexts.
- **Convergence** means that a person makes their communication more like another person's.
- **Divergence** means that a person uses communication to emphasize the differences between themself and their conversational partner.

Chapter 4

- **Paralanguage** is an aspect of nonverbal communication that is the vocalized but not verbal part of a spoken message, such as speaking rate, volume, and pitch.
- **Mixed messages** are messages in which verbal and nonverbal signals contradict each other.

- **Deception** is the intentional act of altering information to influence another person; it extends beyond lying to include concealing, omitting, or exaggerating information.
- **Tie signs** are nonverbal cues that communicate intimacy and signal a connection between two people.
- **Touch behaviours** are the most frequently used tie signs and can communicate much about a relationship based on the area being touched and the length of time and intensity of the touch.
- **Artifacts** are the objects and possessions that surround us and that also communicate our identities.
- **Kinesics** is the study of hand, arm, body, and face movements.
- **Adaptors** are touching behaviours and movements that indicate internal states typically related to arousal or anxiety.
- **Emblems** are gestures that have a specific, agreed-on meaning.
- **Illustrators** are gestures used to illustrate the verbal message they accompany.
- **Postures** include body positions such as standing, sitting, squatting, and lying down.
- **Oculesics** is a term for eye behaviours, including eye contact.
- **Haptics** refers to the study of communication by touch.
- **Vocalics** is the study of paralanguage, which includes the vocal qualities that go along with verbal messages, such as pitch, volume, rate, vocal quality, and verbal fillers.
- **Speaking rate** refers to how fast or slowly a person speaks, which can lead others to form impressions about our emotional state, credibility, and intelligence.
- **Verbal fillers** are sounds that fill gaps in our speech as we think about what to say next.
- **Proxemics** is the study of how space and distance influence communication.
- **Territoriality** is an innate drive to take up and defend spaces.
- **Chronemics** is the study of how time affects communication.
- **Biological time** refers to the rhythms of living things.
- **Personal time** refers to the ways in which individuals

experience time.

- **Physical time** refers to the fixed cycles of days, years, and seasons.
- A **nonverbal cluster** is the combinations of multiple types of nonverbal communication; for example, posture may be combined with a touch or eye behaviour.
- **Nonverbal congruence** refers to consistency among different nonverbal expressions within a cluster.
- **Mirroring** refers to the often-subconscious practice of using nonverbal cues in a way that matches those of others around us.
- **Emotional contagion** is the spread of emotion from one person to another.
- **Truth bias** leads us to believe that a person is telling the truth, especially if we know and like that person.
- **Lie bias** means we assume that people are lying more often than not.
- **Nonverbal leakage** refers to nonverbal behaviours that occur as we try to control the cognitive and physical changes that happen during states of cognitive and physical arousal.
- **Contact cultures** are cultural groups in which people stand closer together, engage in more eye contact, touch more frequently, and speak more loudly.

Chapter 5

- **Personal relationships** meet emotional, relational, and instrumental needs; they are intimate, close, and interdependent relationships such as those we have with best friends, partners, or immediate family.
- **Social relationships** are relationships that occasionally meet our needs but lack the closeness and interdependence of

personal relationships.

- **Knapp's relational model** has **10 established stages of interaction** that can help us understand how relationships come together and come apart:
    - **Initiating stage:** Individuals size each other up and try to present themselves favourably.
    - **Experimenting stage:** Individuals exchange basic information.
    - **Intensifying stage:** Individuals indicate that they would like or are open to more intimacy, and then wait for a signal of acceptance before proceeding further.
    - **Integrating stage:** Two people's identities and personalities merge and a sense of interdependence develops.
    - **Bonding stage:** A public ritual takes place that announces a formal commitment.
    - **Differentiating stage:** Individual differences present a challenge, and communicating these differences becomes the primary focus of the relationship.
    - **Circumscribing stage:** Communication decreases, and certain areas or subjects become restricted as individuals verbally close themselves off from each other.
    - **Stagnating stage:** The relationship may come to a standstill as individuals wait for the relationship to end.
    - **Avoiding stage:** Individuals intentionally avoid contact as a way to end the awkwardness that comes with stagnation, signalling that they want to close down the lines of communication.
    - **Terminating stage:** The end of a relationship; it can occur shortly after the initiating stage or after a 10- or 20-year relational history has been established.
- **Social exchange theory** entails weighing the costs and rewards in a given relationship
- An **equitable relationship** involves costs and rewards being balanced, which usually leads to a positive evaluation of the

relationship and satisfaction.

- **Interdependence** refers to the relationship between a person's well-being and their involvement in a particular relationship.
- **Intercultural communication competence (ICC)** is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in various cultural contexts.
- **Self-disclosure** is the purposeful disclosure of personal information to another person.
- **Social penetration theory** states that as we get to know someone, we engage in a reciprocal process of self-disclosure that changes in breadth and depth and affects how a relationship develops.
- **Depth** refers to how personal or sensitive the information we share is.
- **Breadth** refers to the range of topics discussed between individuals.
- **Social comparison theory** states that we evaluate ourselves based on how we compare with others.
- The **Johari window** is a theory of self disclosure the can be applied to a variety of interpersonal interactions in order to help us understand what parts of ourselves are open, hidden, blind, and unknown.
- **Self-focused reasons** for disclosure include having a sense of relief or catharsis, clarifying or correcting information, or seeking support.
- **Other-focused reasons** for disclosure include a sense of responsibility to inform or educate.
- **Primary emotions** are innate emotions that are experienced for short periods of time and appear rapidly, usually as a reaction to an outside stimulus; they are experienced similarly across cultures.
- **Secondary emotions** are not as innate as primary emotions and do not have a corresponding facial expression that makes them universally recognizable; these vary between cultures.
- **Mixed emotions** are two or more emotions experienced at the

same time; for example, you can be both joyful and sad at the same time.

- **Emotions** are our physical reactions to stimuli in the outside environment. They can be objectively measured by blood flow, brain activity, and nonverbal reactions to things because they are activated through neurotransmitters and hormones released by the brain.
- **Feelings** are the conscious experience of emotional reactions.
- **Emotional vocabulary** involves knowing different and varied words for one's emotions and being able to express them. The more specific we can be when we are verbally communicating our emotions, the less ambiguous they will be for the person decoding our message.
- **Debilitative emotions** are harmful and difficult emotions that detract from effective functioning.
- **Facilitative emotions** are emotions that contribute to our effective functioning.
- The **fallacy of perfection** is thinking we should be able to handle every situation perfectly with no room for error.
- The **fallacy of helplessness** is when people are convinced that powers beyond their control can determine their satisfaction or happiness.
- The **fallacy of catastrophic expectations** is when people work on the assumption that if something bad can possibly happen, it will.
- The **fallacy of overgeneralization** occurs when we base a belief on a limited amount of evidence and when we exaggerate shortcomings.
- **Display rules** are sociocultural norms that influence emotional expression.
- **Emotional intelligence (EQ)** refers to a form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions.
- **Self-awareness** refers to a person's ability to understand their

feelings from moment to moment.
- **Self-management** refers to our ability to manage our emotions and is dependent on our self-awareness.
- **Social awareness** is our ability to understand social cues that may affect others around us.
- **Relationship management** refers to our ability to communicate clearly, maintain good relationships with others, work well in teams, and manage conflict.

Chapter 6

- **Communication climate** is the overall feeling or emotional mood that is found between different people.
- **Content** is the substance of what is being communicated (the "what" of the message).
- **Relational dimensions** are not the actual thing being discussed and instead can reveal something about the relational dynamic existing between two people (the "who" of the message).
- **Face** refers to our self-image when communicating with others.
- **Confirming messages** result in **positive climates** that demonstrate our value and worth to those with whom we have a relationship.
- **Disconfirming messages** result in **negative climates**, which suggest someone is devalued and unimportant.
- **Recognition messages** can confirm or deny another person's existence.
- **Acknowledgment messages** go beyond recognizing another person's existence by confirming what they say or how they feel.
- **Endorsement messages** go one step further by recognizing a person's feelings as valid.

- An **impervious response** fails to acknowledge another person's communication attempt through either verbal or nonverbal channels; for example, failure to return phone calls, emails, and letters.
- An **interrupting response** involves one person starting to speak before the other person is finished.
- An **irrelevant response** is a comment that is completely unrelated to what the other person was just talking about, indicating that the listener wasn't really listening at all and therefore doesn't value what the speaker had to say.
- A **tangential response** acknowledges the speaker, but with a comment that steers the conversation in a different direction.
- An **impersonal response** is when the speaker offers a monologue of impersonal, intellectualized, and generalized statements that trivializes the other person's comments.
- An **ambiguous response** is a message with multiple meanings, and these meanings are highly abstract or may be a private joke to the speaker alone.
- An **incongruous response** communicates two messages that seem to conflict along the verbal and nonverbal channels.
- The **Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse** is a metaphor developed by couples therapist Dr. John Gottman that describes the counterproductive communication and behaviours that can predict relationship failure if left unchanged. It involves the following four "horsemen":
    - **Criticism** is an attack on another person that focuses on their defects rather than the actual issue or complaint.
    - **Defensiveness** is an automatic batting away of someone else's issue or complaint and is often a response to criticism. It demonstrates an unwillingness to take responsibility and accountability for one's own actions and includes the inability to listen and validate someone else's perspective.
    - **Contempt** is communicating to someone else an attitude of superiority and that you look down at them, implying

    - someone else is inferior, less than, or worthless. It is used to create a position of moral superiority.
    - **Stonewalling** is when a person shuts down interaction and stops responding to someone else. It is a form of defensiveness.
- **Metacognition** is thinking about our thinking.
- **Metacommunication** requires mindfully elevating awareness beyond the content level of communication, but also requires us to actually discuss aloud things such as needs and relational messages.
- **Mindfulness** refers to paying attention on purpose and being present.
- **Climate-centred message planning (CCMP)** refers to the conscious encoding (planning and forethought) involved in meeting communication goals.
- **Relational transgressions** occur when people violate implicit or explicit relational rules. These rule violations can be events, actions, or behaviours that violate relationship norms or rules.
- **Explicit rules** tend to be relationship-specific rules, such as those prompted by the bad habits of a partner or those that emerge from attempts to manage conflict.
- **Implicit rules** tend to be those rules that are accepted as cultural standards for proper relationship conduct.
- The **competing style** of conflict management indicates a high level of concern for self and a low level of concern for others. When we compete, we are striving to "win" the conflict, potentially at the expense or "loss" of the other person.
- The **avoiding style** of conflict management often indicates a low level of concern for self and a low level of concern for others, and no direct communication about the conflict takes place.
    - **Indirect strategies** of hinting and joking also fall under the avoiding style.
- The **accommodating style** of conflict management indicates a low level of concern for self and a high level of concern for

others, and is often viewed as **passive** or **submissive** in that someone complies with or obliges another person without providing personal input.

- The **compromising style** of conflict management shows a moderate level of concern for self and others, and may indicate that there is low investment in the conflict and/or the relationship. Even though we often hear that the best way to handle a conflict is to compromise, the compromising style isn't a win-win solution—it is a partial win-lose.
- The **collaborating style** of conflict management involves a high level of concern for self and others, and usually indicates investment in the conflict situation and the relationship. Although the collaborating style takes the most work in terms of communication competence, it ultimately leads to a win-win situation in which neither party has to make concessions because a mutually beneficial solution is discovered or created.
- **Passive-aggressive behaviour** is a way of dealing with conflict in which one person indirectly communicates their negative thoughts or feelings through nonverbal behaviours, such as not completing a task.
- **Crazymaking** is a form of **passive-aggressive behaviour** and often includes indirect attacks that are done unconsciously. Examples include the following:
    - The **Contract Tyrannizer** is a person who refuses to let a relationship change from the way it was. The roles, expectations, and beliefs about the relationship are set in stone and cannot ever be allowed to change.
    - The **Withholder** involves someone not being open and honest about something that is upsetting them. They instead punish their partner by withholding something else, such as affection, humour, or some form of courtesy.
    - The **Goat-Getter** is someone who does not share underlying resentments, but instead does little things to irritate others. This can take the form of not putting things away, playing music loudly, or when asked about their

behaviour, they deny it.

- The **Joker** is a person who does not talk about conflict, but instead makes jokes and avoids the topic when someone wants to discuss it. As a result, it is not possible to have a serious conversation with the person, and when pushed, their behaviour becomes worse, and they act in a similar way to the Goat-Getter.
- The **Benedict Arnold** uses sabotage to get back at someone else. This can even take the form of encouraging ridicule from others outside the situation or failing to defend someone from attack.
- **Beltlining** refers to a boxing move that involves hitting "below the belt." In terms of conflict, this metaphor refers to using intimate information against another person to cause hurt and anger.
- **Gunnysacking** is an imaginary bag we all carry into which we place unresolved conflicts or grievances over time. Holding onto the way things used to be can be like carrying a stone in your gunnysack and influence how you interpret your current context. Gunnysacking may be expressed by bringing up previous behaviours the other person has engaged in or previous arguments you felt were unresolved.
- **Silencers** are behaviours that stifle and silence conflict, such as crying, shouting, and heavy breathing.
- **Kitchen sinking** refers to bringing up past conflicts, even those that have been resolved, to gain leverage in a conflict.
- **Counterpunch** is a defensive response to conflict in which rather than responding to the initial topic of conflict, the other person reacts by sharing their own, often unrelated criticism.
- **Manipulation** is an unproductive conflict strategy that includes one party being extremely charming and even generous to help sway the conflict outcome in their

direction.

- **Blame** involves trying to place responsibility for the conflict on another person.
- **Labelling** occurs when you assign negative terms to another person's behaviour.
- **Self-construal** refers to the concept that individuals will vary in the degree to which they view themselves as part of the group or as a separate individual within a larger culture.
- **Criticism** is making comments that evaluate another person's personality, behaviour, appearance, or life choices, and may lead to conflict.
- **Cumulative annoyance** is a building of frustration or anger that occurs over time, eventually resulting in a conflict interaction.
- **Serial arguing** is a repeated pattern of disagreement over an issue.
- **One-upping** is a quick reaction to communication from another person that escalates the conflict.
- **Mindreading** is communication in which one person attributes something to another person using generalizations.
- **Negotiation** in interpersonal conflict refers to the process of attempting to change or influence conditions within a relationship.
- **Forgiving** is not the act of excusing or condoning, but rather, it is the process whereby negative emotions are transformed into positive emotions for the purpose of bringing emotional normalcy to a relationship.
- The **intrapsychic dimension** relates to the cognitive processes and interpretations associated with a transgression (i.e., one's internal state).
- **Interpersonal forgiveness** is the interaction between relational partners concerning forgiveness.
- **Facework** refers to the communicative strategies we employ to project, maintain, or repair our face or to maintain, repair, or challenge another person's face.

- **Face-detracting strategies** involve messages or statements that take away from the respect, integrity, or credibility of a person.
- **Face-saving strategies** shift the emphasis from the individual to the issue, avoiding power struggles and personalities, and providing the parties involved space to save face.
- **Face negotiation theory** argues that people in all cultures negotiate face through communication encounters and that cultural factors influence how we engage in facework, especially in conflict situations.
- **Framing** is the act of intentionally setting the stage for the conversation you want to have. In framing a conversation, you express why you want to engage in a particular topic, what your intent is, and what you hope the outcome will be for resolving the conflict, as well as the impact on and importance of your relationship.

Chapter 7

- **Informational listening** involves focusing listening on gathering new information and facts, and then identifying key points. This is then followed by recording the information so that we can access it later by committing it to memory or taking physical notes.
- **Comprehensive and evaluative listening** seeks to understand and organize the information we have gathered. Paraphrasing and questioning communication skills are used when seeking to align the new information with what we already know or believe.
- **Empathic listening** is active and seeks to identify and understand the feelings and emotions behind the information being presented.

- **Critical thinking** is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information gathered from or generated by observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication as a guide to belief and action.
- **Critical ignoring** helps us evaluate information and decide what to keep and what to discard.
- **Self-nudging** involves ignoring temptations by removing them.
- **Lateral reading** is used to determine how trustworthy a source and the information provided is by investigating the background of a website and its author, and by comparing the information across a wide variety of sources.
- The **top-down outline** is a way to organize the ideas you know you need to include in the message you want to convey. The ideas are arranged in a logical order, often numerically, and there is always an introductory idea and a concluding idea.
- **Mind mapping** is used to visually associate and/or explore multiple aspects of a topic or concept. If ideas are not fully developed or if a person is a visual thinker, they may prefer a mind map to a formal outline. After you create a mind map, you can then make decisions about the logical flow of ideas when presenting the information to your audience.
- **Bottom-up outlining** is essential when you have lots of information but need to impose structure and direction. This form of outlining is a great way to get over writer's block and can be done when writing alone or in a group.
- **SMART structure** is a way to determine how to deliver information to an audience. It stands for **S**tory, **M**ain idea, **A**genda, **R**easons, and **T**ask.
- **Digital citizenship** is the appropriate use of the internet, computers, and any other type of digital device.
- **Netiquette** refers to etiquette, or the protocols and norms, for communication on the internet.

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