



Relationships: Communicating about what you really need

When we're feeling abundance in our lives, there tends to be very little conflict, and things tend to flow. However, when we're feeling a scarcity, and a lack of the things we need and want, then everything in the relationship seems hard. It can be challenging to figure out how to ask for what we need, we may fear our requests will be turned down. It can be easy to get defensive or "stingy" when other people ask for what they need, and it can be easy to resent the other person for not intuitively perceiving and meeting our needs.

I describe below a process for communicating with others (your partner, co-workers, family, anyone really...) about what you need, why you need it, and concrete ways they can help you. It can be very helpful for sorting out issues between you, and helping you work together as allies, rather than feeling like you're competing to have your needs met.

Four Steps of Compassionate Communication

1. OBSERVING. Observe what is actually happening.

- Do not include any judgment, evaluation, or assumptions about their intentions.
- An easy way to check if this is an "unarguable truth" is to ask: is this something I can feel in my body? See with my eyes? Hear with my ears? Would anyone else be able to see the same thing I "see"? Would a video camera see it?

2. FEELING. Identify the core feeling this thing brings up for you.

- Anger? Fear? Sadness?
- Those are the core emotions, and most things come down to that. If you want to use other more specific words, like outraged, terrified, or bummed out, that's fine. But try not to bring judgments into your description of your feelings. For example, saying you feel "victimized" implies that the other person meant to victimize you...
- Take responsibility for feeling that way. (We cannot control other people's actions... we can and do make choices about how we respond to those actions.)

3. NEEDING. Figure out what your need is that brought up that feeling for you.

- Don't think yet about concrete actions, think about basic needs: do you need to feel respected? Valued? Safe? In control? Nurtured? Trusted? Supported?

4. REQUESTING. Formulate a request based on observations, feelings, and needs.

- Make your request as specific as you can. And make sure it is something that would be possible for your partner to do.
- Avoid giving demands, where they must do exactly as you say, "or else" (or else you'll blame them, judge them, lay a guilt trip on them). The goal is loving cooperation, not forced compliance.
- They can respond to your request by agreeing to do it, or it is also acceptable for them to turn it down. If they do, then you can change your request and ask again, or you can ask someone else for support meeting your need.

Example 1

The Complaint – What you may want to say is: “You never think to check if the baby’s diaper needs to be changed. You always expect me to keep track of it.” Here’s what you say instead:

Appreciation: “I appreciate that whenever I ask you to change a diaper, you do so willingly.” (Although Appreciation is not one of the four steps, it never hurts to start on a positive note!)

Observing: “While we were together for the whole day on Saturday, I did not see you ever check the baby’s diaper to see if he needed changing.”

Feeling: “I sometimes feel angry, or overburdened, when I feel like I’m the only one who takes responsibility for keeping track of the baby’s needs.”

Needing: “I need to feel like I have support from you in remembering all the responsibilities of parenting, not just helping me when I specifically ask you to.”

Requesting: “This weekend could you be the one who checks the diaper issue?”

Example 2:

Complaint – “He gets to go play soccer with his buddies every Tuesday. I never get to go out.”

Appreciation: “I appreciate that we’re able to spend almost every evening together as a family.”

Observing: “You play soccer every Tuesday. But I haven’t been out with my friends in months.”

Feeling: “I sometimes feel lonely for my friends, and feel resentful of your time away.”

Needing: “I need to feel like I can see my friends sometimes too.”

Requesting: “Next Sunday, can you watch the baby while I have brunch with my friends?”

Figuring Out What You Need

Sometimes when we feel needy, we’re not even sure what we need! We just know that something important is missing, or is going wrong. One way to pinpoint unmet needs is to look for recurrent conflicts or chronic complaints. Think about comments you make which start with “you always,” “you never”, “why can’t you”, and “why don’t you.” When you’ve collected a list of complaints, get a clean piece of paper. Then, transform each complaint into a simple statement about how you feel and what you really need, using the steps above. This will probably show you what is most important to you. Then you can prioritize your requests. (And, when you make the request, you’re clearer about why you need it. It’s easier for your partner to be your ally when they understand not just what you are asking for, but also why it’s important to you.)

What If Someone Turns Down Your Request?

Sometimes, no matter how clearly you state your needs and feelings, and no matter how simple your request, someone will turn it down. (Or say they will do something, and not follow through.) What do you do in this case? Try to understand things from their perspective – ask them to use the four step process to describe their own needs. Then you can choose to: Adjust your request until it’s something they can commit to. Ask them for other ideas for ways to meet your underlying need. Make the request of someone else. Or figure out some other solution. If what you requested is really something you need, keep looking for a way to get that need met.

Ideas from Jennifer Louden’s Couples Comfort Book, Marshall Rosenberg’s Center for Non-Violent Communication, www.cnvc.org, Kathlyn and Gay Hendricks’ Conscious Heart, and Harville Hendrix, Getting the Love you Want.

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