

***This article is adapted from an article that appeared in Homeschooling Today Magazine Nov/Dec96**

Why Some People Don't Talk

By Dale Simpson

Relationships really are the things that make life go, and to have relationship skills is to be equipped for a productive life. Let's look at a few things that keep us from initiating communication to others. These are problems of omission rather than commission. See if any of these blocks apply to you and ask yourself what you would like to see changed in your style of communication.

Inability to Identify the Inner Life

For many people, identifying what they feel and what to talk about in relationships is difficult or sometimes even impossible. Their awareness of the inner life is so restricted that they cannot effectively share no matter how willing the other person is to hear it. We see in the counseling office many people who long to have a mate who will talk to them and who will converse about the details of life. Sadly, they go unfulfilled because the person simply doesn't know how to talk about the inside life.

Some people have the additional problem of not connecting well to other people. They seem detached from normal life experiences most of us seek and enjoy through relationships. These people are very much loners and their problem goes much deeper than just being unable to identify feelings. Their deepest problem is the inability to make healthy social bonds. For the person who has these deep-seated deficits, it is extremely difficult to change them in the adult years since they have to build in skills on top of a fundamental style of experiencing the world. For people more connected in relationships but unaware of their feelings, a significant amount of change can occur with patient and targeted interventions.

Fear and shyness

All of us come into this world completely dependent upon others to help us survive. This state lasts for quite some time. All of us are capable of feeling deep fear and terror. All of us experience various forms of pain, loss, and frustration in life. Many people restrict how much they share with others because their coping mechanisms anticipate pain and disappointment. This pattern reflects the idea that it is better not to take a chance on getting hurt than it is to risk it. The pattern is often because the person has experienced painful rejection or emotional neglect by key figures. Families where children are raised with respect and interest in their life, produce an adult who assumes these relationships are possible and that sharing leads to a positive payoff. Those who are criticized or judged for what they reveal learn that shame and rejection are too painful a price to pay and they anticipate that revealing themselves leads to something bad.

In a similar way, those who are raised to feel guilty when they feel something different than their parents or when they are upset with their parents often learn to inhibit expressing feelings. Many parents cannot tolerate a child's difference or the fact that they get occasionally angry with the

parent. It is worth noting that this learned inhibition doesn't make the feelings go away. It simply causes feelings to get confused and one is unable to sort out one's experience and what to do with normal emotions.

Minimizing Problems

For many people the idea of sharing feelings just doesn't seem relevant. Self disclosure doesn't appear helpful or practical to these folks. The domain of emotions and expressing them to someone who cares is not an option even considered. It would be to some people like having a problem with your car engine and deciding to go to college as a solution. It simply seems irrelevant.

Unfortunately, people who believe this are wrong. It is very relevant to talk about their feelings, particularly with women. As John Gray says in his book *Men are From Mars and Women are From Venus*, women as a group tend to work out their stress through talking about their feelings (and some men do too). Many men don't realize that this is the thing their wives are wanting but instead the man tries to solve the problem or even becomes critical of the problem itself.

Anger

When we are angry, we rarely want to reveal the truth of what we feel but rather we are tempted to act it out in some way to hurt the other person. For many people anger makes them want to hide and shut down, inhibiting all forms of expression. Either way, sharing does not occur in angry settings nearly as well as when other emotions are available. Having said this, one can still learn to share in a healthy and godly way when feeling any emotion, including anger. What are some of the specific things we can do to improve our sharing and communication?

a. Make identifying and expressing the inner life an important goal for you. This inner life is where the color and richness, the very fabric of life. If we do not express our feelings we make people assume or guess things about us which is a terrible mistake. By minimizing the importance of expressing feelings we give the message that knowing us thoroughly is not a part of the relationship and that produces only superficial experiences in life. That would be analogous to eating cake and ice cream as your primary source of food, year after year, decade after decade. You may not die from it but you are going to have nutritional deficits that will catch up to you and produce symptoms.

b. Commit to the importance of positive communication. We need to regularly communicate affirming statements so that when negative things come up we have a context of many more positive things to cushion what we have to say. It is the liver sandwich approach: two tasty pieces of bread with nice mayonnaise and mustard (positive comments) surrounding the slab of liver (unpleasant comments). It makes it much more tolerable.

c. Consider developing the habit of saying "I feel" rather than "You make me feel." This method gives information without blaming. Also, make requests so others don't have to read your mind. In a similar way, be sure you let others know that their sharing with you is valuable.

d. Decide to take managed risks with others -- Try deepening relationships with those who appear to be relatively healthy and able to accept people. For those who continue to give spiritual platitudes or who cannot accept feelings, one needs to limit how deeply we go based upon the others ability to go deeper. But even with that, people can grow and you may want to try furthering the relationship at a later date.

e. Reflect upon the communication styles in the family in which you grew up. Look at how similar yours is and how it is different. What things do you want to keep? What patterns do you want to change for the next generation? Identify one thing you can do to help the next generation's communication.

g. Do you have at least a few close friends you trust with your inner life? If you do, be sure to maintain them and be thankful for this gift. If not, what could you do to begin a process that will lead to making a few close friends? Do we need these people in our lives or is this optional?

h. Would you try to use analogies, word pictures, and metaphors to communicate? These can be as useful as an adjustable wrench, as helpful as a caring doctor, and effective as a, well, you figure it out. Jesus even spoke in parables to maximize the levels of meaning to a truth.

Life is a long journey and communication skills are part of our survival gear. Be sure you check your backpack periodically and make additions where needed.

Dale Simpson, PhD, is the father of five grown children. As a practicing psychologist for more than 36 years, he has counseled children, teens, adults and couples and is currently practicing in Venice, Florida. Dr. Simpson was a co-founder and publisher of Homeschooling Today Magazine, wrote a column called Inside the Family for the magazine, served as a featured speaker at numerous state homeschooling and parenting conferences, and is the publisher of Learning for Life Press. A Study in Wisdom, Homeschooling for Life, The Easy to Make Paper Airplane Book, and the **Think It, Feel It, Say It Board Game** are published by Learning for Life Press. Sign up for our free newsletter and also drop by for free articles on family life. www.learningforlifepress.com

You may republish this as long as you show author credit and include our webpage.