



Communications

When the Old Ways Aren't Working

In their earliest years, infants and children are right up front with communicating their feelings. They cry when they're hurting and laugh when they're happy.

Anger, frustration, confusion, fear — every feeling is out there in the open.

But as we grow up, through many complicated and sometimes confusing scenarios, we learn to rein in our emotional displays. Often it becomes clear that talking about feelings isn't the best idea either. Communicating what we really feel can cause conflict, possible explosions. Consequently, over time, we develop communication defenses to protect ourselves.

Substituting anger for fear, blaming for anger, denial for sadness and brusqueness for hurt, defense becomes the style of communication until any and all signs of vulnerability are masked over, boarded up and sealed shut.

Some of the ways used to block honest communication include:

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| ■ blaming others | ■ placating | ■ denying responsibility |
| ■ creating guilt | ■ criticizing | ■ becoming angry or abusive |
| ■ making excuses | ■ withholding | ■ bringing up the past |
| ■ ignoring problems | ■ minimizing and downplaying | |
| ■ defensiveness | ■ refusing to talk (the silent treatment) | |

By adopting defenses that protect them, partners avoid communicating their most intimate thoughts and feelings. Ironically, it is this very vulnerable expression of oneself that allows people to connect as human beings.

It may seem a long, long way from that early vulnerability and honesty to the defended place that blocks true communication. So how can a person get back home again? As always, slowly and one thing at a time. "The change of one simple behavior can affect other behaviors and thus change many things," said Jean Baer.

The first thing to accept is that trying to change the other person's behavior is not the way to change our own. Personal change, as always, belongs with us. In order to reach down beneath all that paint and sealing tape that keeps us from expressing our own feelings, we must both let go and accept.

Let go of the blaming, the posturing, the excusing and the placating. Let go of all the "other" directed defenses that keep you separate. Accept the hurt, the sadness, the fear, the pain and the vulnerability that accompanies them. Accept responsibility for your own feelings. Claim them and own them.

One way to begin is to look under the habitual response—the need to blame or defend—to what's beneath the feeling.

• **Before the first reaction, pause and listen** to the truth that speaks below the surface.

• **Acknowledge any fear** by prefacing what you really want to say with, "I'm afraid to say this because ..." and state what scares you.

• **Practice telling your true feelings** with a safe person, a neutral friend or your counselor or therapist.

Fear is natural. Honest, real communication that opens the door for intimacy requires effort and courage. Take heart. Ask for help when you need it. You don't have to do it alone. In fact, true communication happens only when there is both a sender and a receiver. *

10 Things to say to your partner

What do you want for dinner? and Did you take out the trash? may be two of the most frequently made comments, one partner to another, but in order to maintain intimate and loving communication in their relationship, couples may need to become more intentional in the messages they give one another. Try these.

1. Thank you for ... people need to be acknowledged and appreciated for what they do. Not just for the things they're asked to do, but just because.

2. Would you please ... expecting your partner to read your mind is expecting the impossible. Say what you want and need. Be specific.

3. How do you feel about ... asking, then listening to your partner's response, withholding judgment or any need to try to change the feelings.

4. I feel ... claiming and stating your feelings and telling the truth. Notice the difference between "I think" and "I feel" statements.

5. I'm sorry ... admitting mistakes and apologizing for them is taking responsibility for your actions.

6. I forgive you ... accepting apologies for mistakes your partner makes is a way of letting go of resentments and keeping relationships in the present.

7. What I appreciate about you is ... shining the light on your partner's qualities is good for both of you.

8. What I hear you saying ... listen, really listen, and let your partner know he/she has been heard.

9. I agree with you because ... validating your partner's point of view and perspective helps him/her feel heard and understood.

10. I love you ... find your own variations on the words; you can't say them too often. *

A Letter From Christopher Ann Vallier LCSW, JD



Welcome to the Spring issue of Vitality. This is a time of lengthening days and gathering warmth, a season associated with renewal and rebirth — a time for trying new things and welcoming change.

Spring is also associated with cleaning out, getting rid of that which doesn't work anymore or doesn't serve us. While some might look in closets and attics, garages and basements, in this newsletter, we look at behaviors, attitudes and beliefs.

The front page article describes some communications styles that may have developed over time but aren't effective in voicing how we really feel or in creating intimacy in our relationships. And, this issue's quiz gives attention to managing anger so that it becomes constructive rather than destructive.

Say April and almost everybody thinks taxes. Taxes and procrastination go together like spring showers and muddy feet. One is inevitable and the other creates a mess. And, along with both (taxes and procrastination, that is) comes stress. The stories on page three focus on ways to deal with procrastination and avoid some of the stress that accompanies not only paying taxes, but dealing with money matters in general.

Just as the seasons affect the earth, we are affected by our own internal "seasons." Finding and maintaining balance throughout these seasons is the key to a healthy, more peaceful and joyous life. The story on page four offers some ideas on how to accomplish this.

Feel free to share this issue of Vitality with others. Your questions and comments are always welcome.

Best wishes for a Spring of warmth and renewal.

How Well Do You Manage Anger?



Like other emotions, anger itself is neither bad nor good. It's the behavior that follows the feeling that can be harmful or destructive. And, while anger is typically associated with aggression or violence, anger can be constructive, too. It can be the wind that blows a needed change through your life. Take the following quiz to find out if you use your anger to help or harm you.

Yes No

1. When I'm feeling anger, I'm aware of certain physical responses in my body and mental signals in my mind.
2. Rather than striking out verbally or physically when I feel angry, I take a few deep breaths and pause before I react.
3. I realize that sometimes my anger is not based on the current situation, but that I am responding to something in my life that is unresolved.
4. When I feel angry, I don't try to bury, minimize or discount my feelings. I acknowledge my emotions.
5. Rather than blaming someone else for my anger, I take responsibility for my feelings.
6. I work on understanding what provokes my anger so I can develop techniques for managing it.
7. I use techniques such as writing an unsent letter to who or what I feel angry about, putting all my feelings down on paper without holding back. I never send these letters.
8. I also use physical outlets for my angry feelings such as exercise, housework, or other kinds of physical expressions. I stomp my feet, or close myself in my car and yell or beat up my pillow.
9. When I'm angry with someone, I talk to him/her about it. I make clear, specific "I" statements: "I'm angry because _____." I stay with the single issue that has caused my anger.
10. I try to put myself in the other person's shoes. I realize that I am wrong sometimes and acknowledge when I am.
11. I find a neutral person I can talk to about my anger. Sometimes we role-play the situation, and sometimes he/she just listens while I talk it out.
12. I try to avoid or eliminate annoyances and nuisances so that they don't progress to anger. (Broken screen doors, long lines at the bank, loud music, rush hour traffic)
13. I never become physically or emotionally threatening, or physically or emotionally abusive.
14. I use relaxation techniques such as deep-breathing exercises or imagery-focusing to help diffuse my anger.
15. I let go of the past and don't drag along resentments that can start brush fires.
16. I understand the world is sometimes unfair, unjust and out of my control. I do what I can to change the things I can and accept the things I can't.
17. I recognize when I need help managing my anger, and ask for it.

Scoring: Give yourself one point for every Yes response.

15-17: Congratulations. You have good anger management skills, and use them.

11-14: Though you may know the skills it takes to manage anger, you need some practice.

10 or less: You would benefit from training and education in anger management skills and techniques.

If you have any questions about this anger quiz, or would like to talk about managing your own anger, please don't hesitate to call. ✱

Procrastination — Everyone Talks About It, But Nobody Does Anything

Imagine the space this article fills as blank.

Imagine the time it might have taken someone who procrastinates to 1) think about doing the article, 2) put it on a list of “to dos,” 3) talk about doing it, 4) promise himself he would start it tomorrow, 5) promise himself he would definitely start it tomorrow, 6) promise ... well, you get the point.

As the deadline for the article draws near (it’s midnight the night before the article is due), imagine the stress the writer must feel as he brews a pot of coffee and sets himself up for a couple of hours to research the topic, organize the information, create an outline, come up with a dynamite opening line, write the article, rewrite the article, print it out and rewrite it one more time. And, of course, the whole time he’s beating himself up for waiting so long to start and telling himself he’s no good at this job anyway, the article will be a bust.



This is procrastination in full, weedy flower. Delay. Broken promises and unfulfilled expectations. Feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. Worry. Fear. Stress. Overwork and probably not as good an end product as the writer would have produced if he’d tackled the job in a timely, professional manner.

Procrastination isn’t good for anyone, anytime. So why do so many do it? The more difficult, inconvenient or scary the task is perceived, the more procrastinators procrastinate. They come up with semi-convincing self-talk that makes the delay appear reasonable, but in the end it’s a self-defeating behavior that causes all sorts of problems, not the least of which is stress.

Following are a few remedies to overcome procrastination:

- 1. Set priorities.** Make a list of things that need to be done in order of their importance.
- 2. Break tasks into parts.** The “Swiss cheese” approach to getting any major project completed is to break it apart and work on one piece at a time.
- 3. Set goals.** Decide what you want and what needs to happen to get it. Be specific. Create a realistic timetable.
- 4. Use positive self-talk.**
- 5. Replace excuses** with rational, realistic thinking.
- 6. Realize there is no such thing as perfection.** Begin the thing knowing it can never be done perfectly. You’ll do your best. You always do.
- 7. Commit.** Make a contract with yourself. Tell a friend or co-worker or family member your plan. Ask for help when you need it.
- 8. Get organized.** Have the right tools and equipment to do the job. Make lists. Keep a schedule.
- 9. Think small.** Don’t let the whole of the project overwhelm you. Stay in the present and do what you are doing.
- 10. Reward yourself.** Often and generously for accomplishing the smallest of tasks. Celebrate. Pat yourself on the back. Enjoy your accomplishment.

Like many other self-defeating behaviors, procrastination can be overcome. The place to begin is where you are. The time to start is now. *

Sure Signs of Spring Taxes, Stress and Procrastination

A recent CNN news story went like this:

“U.S. taxpayers sent off a deluge of 44 million income tax returns to the Internal Revenue Service [April 15] in an annual rite of procrastination more predictable than spring itself.”

But while one of every five taxpayers waits until the last week to mail a return, feeling the burn of procrastination to the very end, those who get at the task in plenty of time, with an organized, detailed system that would warm the heart of any IRS agent, still experience a natural stress that comes with the process.

For many people, the necessary dealing with money issues in general causes stress. Add to it a hated and feared task that involves interaction with an organization that has a reputation for no mercy, and you’ve got Spring-time stress that hits a high mark on a scale that includes Christmas shopping, moving and term papers.

No wonder so many procrastinate. There are ways to cope with the stress that comes with filing taxes, or dealing with money matters in general. Most importantly, don’t put your head in the sand. Be current, realistic and honest with yourself in all your financial affairs.

- Keep accurate records and receipts.
 - Make timely entries into a record keeping system that works for you (this doesn’t include shoe boxes and paper bags). Dozens of inexpensive, simple and user-friendly accounting programs are available for home computers.
 - Ask for professional advice and use it.
 - Create budgets and spending plans that fit your lifestyle. There are a number of good books available on this subject, too.
- And when it comes to dealing with tax issues, the best advice from CPA Gregory M. Yulish, is “just hold your nose and do it.” *

Maintaining Balance is an Inside and Outside Job

If trying to maintain balance in your life makes you sometimes feel like you're working without a net in the Circus of Life while the crowd below holds their breath in anticipation of a slip, you're not alone. These days almost all of us have so many demands placed on our time and energy, life can feel like a three-ring circus. And if you're not up there on the tightrope, you're down on the ground in the midst of tigers and lions, in charge of keeping a couple of dozen plates spinning in air.

Maintaining balance isn't easy. It requires holding steady with the many responsibilities that are a normal and everyday part of life: home, family, friends and work, while at the same time recognizing and fulfilling personal needs and wants. Finding and maintaining balance when life can be so complicated and demanding is both an inside and outside job.

Inside: Only you can take care of yourself

Consider how well you take care of yourself, both physically and emotionally.

- Do you eat healthfully and exercise regularly?
- Do you get check-ups and take preventative precautions? Do you set aside

personal, quiet time for yourself? Do you make time to enjoy nature and art, filling yourself up again and again?

Outside: Reaching outside yourself gives meaning

Think about how you reach outside



yourself for sharing and giving meaning to your life.

- Do you spend quality time with family and friends?
- Do you give back to life through your time, energy and experience? Contributing to the larger world provides connection and purpose.

Balance: The key to a rich and fulfilling life

To discover how well-balanced your life is, keep a log of how you spend your time. In a little notebook you can carry with you, write down the hours you spend under the broad headings: "for me" and "for others."

Also make notes of requests for your time (from family members, from co-workers or professional obligations). Include "requests" from your physical and emotional self: "I wish I could take time for a walk today." Or "Gee, I'd love to take a nap."

Also jot down your feelings about the time you're putting in. Do you resent the responsibilities at home? Do you feel like you never get to do what you want to do? Do you re-arrange your time, taking away from what you'd planned to do for yourself in order to do something for others?

How does that feel? Honestly?

After a week or two you can expect to have some pretty clear messages on where there is balance in your life and where there is not. You might also come to see what's important to you, and how you can make changes that will create a life of health, well-being and joy—a balanced life. ✧

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