

Effective Communication – Improving Your Social Skills

Building good relationships with other people can greatly reduce stress and anxiety in your life. In fact, improving your social support is linked to better mental health in general, since having good friends can act as a “buffer” for feelings of anxiety and low mood. This is especially true if you are socially anxious and desperately want to make friends, but are either too fearful to do so or are unsure about how to reach out to others. As a result of these anxious feelings, you may even be avoiding social situations.

Unfortunately, one of the consequences of avoiding social situations is that you never have the opportunity to:

- **build up your confidence interacting with others, or**
- **develop strong communication skills** that would increase the chance for successful relationships!

For example, if you are afraid of going to parties or asking someone out on a date, your lack of confidence and experience will make it even MORE difficult to know how to handle these situations (like what to wear, what to say, etc...). Often, people have the necessary skills, but lack the confidence to use them. Either way, practice will increase your confidence and improve your communication skills.

Why are communication skills important?

Communication skills are the key to developing (and keeping!) friendships and to building a strong social support network. They also help you take care of your own needs, while being respectful of the needs of others. People aren't born with good communication skills; like any other skill, they are learned through trial and error and repeated practice!

Three areas of communication that you may want to practice are:

- Nonverbal Communication
- Conversation Skills
- Assertiveness

Note: Of course, there are many aspects to effective communication, and you may want more specific help in certain areas (for example, learning how to deal with conflict, presentation skills, giving feedback, etc...). For more specific help, please see the “Recommended Readings” list at the end of this module.

Nonverbal Communication

A large part of what we communicate to each other is nonverbal. What you say to people with your eyes or your body language is just as powerful as what you say with words. When you feel anxious, you might behave in ways that are designed to avoid communicating with others. For example, you may avoid eye contact or speak very softly. In other words, you are trying *not* to communicate, likely to avoid being judged negatively by others. However, your body language and tone of voice does communicate powerful messages to others about your:

- Emotional state (e.g., impatience, fear)
- Attitude towards the listener (e.g., submissiveness, contempt)
- Knowledge of the topic
- Honesty (do you have a secret agenda?)

Thus, if you are avoiding eye contact, standing far away from others, and speaking quietly, you are likely communicating, “Stay away from me!” or “Don’t talk to me!” Chances are, this is not the message that you want to send. Below are some steps that can help you get started in identifying any deficits and improving your non-verbal skills.

Step 1: Identifying Your Trouble Spots

To get started, ask yourself a few questions:

- Do I have trouble maintaining eye contact when talking with others?
- Do I smile too much because of nervousness? Too little?
- Do I slouch?
- Do I keep my head down?
- Do I speak with a timid voice?
- Do I speak too quickly when I am anxious?
- Do I cross my arms and legs?

Some of the nonverbal behaviours you may want to pay attention to are:

- Posture (e.g., head up and alert, leaning forward)
- Movement and gestures (e.g., keeping arms uncrossed)
- Physical distance (e.g., standing closer when talking to others)
- Eye contact (e.g., making appropriate eye contact when talking)
- Facial expression (e.g., smiling warmly)
- Volume of Voice (speaking at a volume easily heard)
- Tone of Voice (e.g., speaking with a confident tone)



Note: Many of the above examples are culturally related. For example, in Western societies, it is generally accepted that frequent eye contact while listening, and looking away slightly more often while speaking, are appropriate.

Step 2: Experiment with and Practice Non-Verbal Skills

- Try to practise only one skill at a time, so you can make sure you have mastered it before moving on to the next skill.
- You may want to ask a trusted friend or relative to give you some feedback on your non-verbal behaviour. This feedback can be very useful, as we often do not really know how we appear to others.
- If you are able to, it may be useful to videotape yourself having a conversation, and note what your body language may be communicating. Once you have identified a couple of trouble spots, practice the appropriate body language.
- You can also practise your new nonverbal skills in front of a mirror.
- Once you have gained a little confidence and practise using nonverbal communication skills at home, try it out in real interactions. It is a good idea to start small by talking to clerks, tellers, and cashiers at stores for example. Try increasing the amount of eye contact you make when talking with others; smile more, and pay attention to the reactions of others. For example, is the bank teller friendlier or more chatty when you give her more eye contact and smile more?

Conversation Skills

One of the biggest challenges for someone with social anxiety is starting conversations and keeping them going. It is normal to struggle a bit when you are trying to make small talk, because it is not always easy to think of things to say. This is especially true when feeling anxious! On the other hand, some anxious people talk too much, which can have a negative impression on others.

Step 1: Identifying Your Trouble Spots

Below are some questions that you may want to ask yourself to identify the areas you want to work on:

- Do I have trouble starting conversations?
- Do I quickly run out of things to say?
- Do I tend to say “yes”, nod, and try to keep other people talking to avoid having to talk?
- Am I reluctant to talk about myself?
- Do I talk too much when I’m nervous?

Tips for Starting a Conversation:

- Start a conversation by saying something general and not too personal, for example talk about the weather (“Gorgeous day, isn’t it?”), pay a compliment (“That sweater looks great on you”), make an observation (“I noticed that you were reading a book on sailing, do you have a boat?”), or introduce yourself (“I don’t think we have met, I’m...”).
- You don’t need to say anything extremely witty. It’s better to be sincere and genuine.
- Once you have talked for a while, especially if you have known the person for some time, it might be appropriate to move on to more personal topics, for example, relationships, family matters, personal feelings, spiritual beliefs etc...
- Remember to pay attention to your nonverbal behaviour - make eye contact and speak loudly enough that others can hear you!

Tips for Keeping a Conversation Going:

- Remember that a conversation is a two-way street – don't talk too little, or too much! As much as possible, try to contribute to about one-half of the conversation when speaking one on one.
- Disclose some personal information about yourself, such as your weekend activities, your favourite hockey team, or a hobby or interest. Personal information does not need to be "too personal"; you can start with giving your opinion about movies and books, or talking about things that you like doing.
- Try to show a little vulnerability: it can even be OK to admit that you are a bit nervous (for example, "I never know what to say to break the ice", or "I'm always so nervous at parties where I hardly know anyone"). However, take care – sometimes disclosing too much too soon can put others off.
- Ask questions about the other person, but when you are first getting to know someone, take care not to ask questions that are too personal. Appropriate questions might be to ask about their weekend activities, their preferences, or their opinion about something you said. For example, "How do you like that new restaurant?"
- Try to ask open-ended questions rather than close-ended questions. A close-ended question is one that is answered by a few words, such as yes or no, for example, "Do you like your job?" In contrast, an open-ended question elicits much more detail; for example, "How did you get into your line of work?"



Remember: People generally like to talk about themselves, especially if the other person is showing genuine interest.

Tips for Ending a Conversation:

- Remember, all conversations end sometime – don't feel rejected or become anxious as a conversation nears its end! Running out of things to talk about doesn't mean you are a failure or that you are boring.
- Think of a graceful way to end the conversation. For example, you can say that you need to refill your drink, catch up with another person at a party, get back to work, or you can promise to continue the conversation at a later time or date (for example, "Hope we'll have a chance chat again" or "Let's have lunch together soon!")

Step 2: Experiment with and Practise Your Conversation Skills

The next time you have an opportunity to practise starting or ending a conversation, try breaking some of your normal patterns. For example, if you tend not to speak about yourself, try to share your thoughts and feelings a bit more, and see what happens. Or, if you tend to wait for the other person to end the conversation, try a graceful exit yourself first.

Below are a few suggestions for some practice situations:

- **Speak to a stranger:** For example, at a bus stop, in an elevator, or waiting in line.
- **Talk to your neighbours:** For example, about the weather or something going on in the neighbourhood.
- **Interact with co-workers:** For example, chat with co-workers on your coffee break or in the staffroom at lunch.
- **Have friends over for a get-together:** For example, invite a co-worker or acquaintance over, meet someone for coffee, or throw a birthday party for a relative. Make sure you interact with your guests!
- **Try giving a compliment:** Resolve to give at least two compliments each day – preferably ones that you would not normally give. But remember to always be sincere: only pay a compliment to someone if you truly believe what you are saying.

Hint: If you are unsure, use a video or audiotape to practise. You might feel a little silly at first, but remember, you are just experimenting. Have fun with it!



Assertiveness

Assertive communication is the honest expression of one's own needs, wants, and feelings, while respecting those of the other person. When you communicate assertively, your manner is non-threatening and non-judgmental, and you take responsibility for your own actions.

If you are socially anxious, you may have some difficulty expressing your thoughts and feelings openly. Assertiveness skills can be difficult to learn, especially since being

assertive can mean holding yourself back from the way you would normally do things. For example, you may be afraid of conflict, always go along with the crowd, and avoid offering your opinions, and as a result have developed a **passive** communication style. Alternatively, you may aim to control and dominate others, and have developed an **aggressive** communication style.

However, an assertive communication style brings many benefits. For example, it can help you to relate to others more genuinely, with less anxiety and resentment. It also gives you more control over your life, and reduces feelings of helplessness. Furthermore, it allows OTHER people the right to live their lives.



Remember: Assertiveness is a learned skill, not a personality trait you are born with. It is what you *do*, not who you are.

To start, ask yourself the following questions to identify what area(s) to work on:

- Do I struggle to ask for what I want?
- Is it hard to state my opinion?
- Do I have trouble saying no?

Tips for Communicating Assertively:

- Many people find it hard to ask for what they want, feeling that they don't have the right to ask, or fearing the consequences of the request. For example, you may think, "What if he says no?" or "She would think I am rude for asking".
- When making a request, it can be helpful to start by saying something that shows that you understand the other person's situation. For example, "I know you probably have had a lot on your mind lately."
- Next, describe the situation and how you feel about it. For example, "This presentation is due next Friday and I am feeling pretty overwhelmed, and worried that I won't be able to get it done in time." It is important to talk about your feelings, and not to make accusations to others. For example, it is better to say, "I feel resentful when you show up late to meet me" than it is to say, "you are always late! You don't care about me!"
- Then, describe what you would like to see happen. Be as brief and positive as possible. For example, "I'd really like to figure out how we can share more of the work responsibilities."
- Last, tell the person what would happen if your request was honoured. How would you feel? Sometimes, you may want to add what you will do in return. For

example, “I would make sure to help make the slides for your presentation next week.”

- Many people have trouble expressing their views openly. Perhaps you wait for others to give their opinion first, and will share yours only if you happen to agree. Being assertive means being willing to state your opinion, even if others haven’t done so or if your opinion is different.
- Being assertive means that you “own” your opinion; that is, you take responsibility for your view; for example, “My personal view is that it was unfair for her to ask that of you.”
- Being assertive also means being willing to consider new information, and even changing your mind. However, it does not mean changing your mind just because others think differently.

Tips for Saying No

- Saying no can be difficult for you if you are usually more passive. However, if you are not able to say no to others, **you are not in charge of your own life!**
- When saying no, remember to use assertive body language (e.g., standing straight, eye contact, speaking loudly enough that the other person can hear).
- Before you speak, decide what your position is. For example, think about how you will say “no” to a request, such as, “I would like to help you out, but I already have quite a bit of work to get done this week.”
- Make sure to actually wait for the question, and don’t say “yes” before the other person even makes the request.
- Take care not to apologize, defend yourself, or make excuses for saying no when it is not necessary.
- If saying no right away is too difficult, practise telling someone, “I need to think about it” as a first step. This will help break the cycle of always saying yes, and will give you a chance to think about what you really want to do.



Remember: Everyone has the right to say no!

Step 2: Practise your New Assertiveness skill:

- First, think of a couple of past scenarios when you avoided giving your opinion or preference, saying no, or asking for what you wanted. How could you have handled the situation differently? What would be an assertive way to communicate in those situations?
- Practise saying your assertive statement out loud to yourself, to get used to it. For example, “Actually, I thought the movie dragged on a bit”, “Unfortunately, I can’t help you out next weekend”, or “I’d like the dishes done before nine o’clock”.
- Next, think of a situation that is coming up in the next week in which you could use your assertiveness skills. Begin with a scenario that is easier, for example, giving your opinion or saying no to more familiar people, and then try it in more difficult situations.
- Try it out – how did it go? Notice how the other person reacted. Would you do something differently next time? **Remember: assertiveness is like any new skill, and requires time and practice.** Don’t be too hard on yourself if you are feeling nervous, or not getting it quite right. Reward yourself when you do speak up!



Note: Sometimes people who are not used to us being assertive may need some time to adjust. Just because people may not initially respond in a positive way, doesn’t mean that being assertive is wrong – they just need to adjust to the change!

Barriers to Behaving Assertively – Myths about Assertiveness

→ Myth #1: Assertiveness means getting your own way all the time

This is not true. Being assertive means expressing your point of view and communicating honestly with others. You may often not get “your own way” when you are assertively giving your opinion. But telling others how you feel, and trying to work out a compromise, shows respect for both yourself and others.

→ Myth #2: Being assertive means being selfish

This is false. Just because you express your opinions and your preferences does not mean that other people are forced to go along with you. If you express yourself

assertively (not aggressively) then you make room for others. You can also be assertive on behalf of someone else (e.g., I would like Susan to choose the restaurant this week).

→ **Myth #3: Passivity is the way to be loved**

This is false. Being passive means always agreeing with others, always allowing them to get their own way, giving into their wishes, and making no demands or requests of your own. Behaving this way is no guarantee that others will like or admire you. In fact, they may perceive you as dull and feel frustrated that they can't really get to know you.

→ **Myth #4: It's impolite to disagree**

This is not true. Although there are some situations where we don't give our honest opinion (e.g., most people say how beautiful a friend looks in her wedding dress, or we only say positive things on the first day of a new job). Much of the time, however, other people will be interested to know what you think. Think how you would feel if everyone always agreed with you!

→ **Myth #5: I have to do everything I am asked to do**

False. A central part of being assertive is setting and keeping personal boundaries. This is difficult for many people. With our friends, we may worry that they will think we are selfish and uncaring if we don't do everything they ask. At work, we may worry that others will think we are lazy or inefficient if we don't do everything we are asked to do. But other people cannot possibly know how busy you are, how much you dislike a particular task, or what other plans you have already made, unless you tell them. Most people would feel badly to learn that you had done something for them that you really didn't have the time for (e.g. writing a report that requires you to work all weekend) or that you really dislike doing (e.g. helping a friend move).

Final Tip: Although it is important to test skills out and use the trial and error process, we can learn a lot from observing others. Ask yourself who you feel comfortable interacting with – what do they do (lean forward, smile etc.). Try to identify some of the things that other people do that make you feel good interacting with them and then try doing those things yourself.

Recommended Readings

For more information on overcoming social anxiety, effective communication, and increasing assertiveness, see:

Antony, M. & Swinson, R. (2000). *Shyness and Social Anxiety Workbook: Proven Techniques for Overcoming Your Fears*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger

Antony, M. (2004). *10 Simple Solutions to Shyness*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger

Burns, D. D. (1985). *Intimate Connections*. New York: Signet (Penguin Books)

McKay, M., Davis, M., & Fanning, P. (1995). *Messages: The Communication Skills Book*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger

Paterson, R. (2000). *The Assertiveness Workbook: How to Express Your Ideas and Stand Up for Yourself at Work and In Relationships*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger