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HEARTFUL COMMUNICATION - Mindfulness and Communication

Most people want to connect with others, to tell their story. We want to be heard, to be understood by others, especially by those we love. And too, most of us really want to understand our loved ones. These longings are powerful. When we understand someone and/or feel understood, connection occurs. However, many of us go through life not experiencing that kind of connection very often or worse, we feel frustrated, alienated or angry from the lack of connection. We often think, "I wish she'd listen", or "If I could only tell him what I think", or "If he'd only communicate with me".

The word communicate originates from the Latin "communicare", which means "to make common, to converse intimately, exchange thoughts and feelings". One definition for communicate is "to be connected or form a connecting passage". Another root word, "commune" is defined as "coming together, sharing, holding in common".

The nature of communication is a coming together, a union. It is about more than getting your point across. It is about coming to a heartfelt understanding of one another. Understanding is not only a mental process. We must also bring the heart and mind together to achieve understanding and intimacy to ourselves and others. We must hear with more than our ears and speak with more than our mouths. We must listen and speak with open hearts. It is from the open heart that compassion and truth come. This is what is essential to connection.

QUOTE - From our center comes wisdom and compassion. Our center is wisdom and compassion . . . Life is not longer a question of I, me, mine, versus you, yours - - life is us and ours. Cheri Huber

So, how do we do this? My friend and mindfulness teacher, Sue Young, uses the words “heartful communication” to describe interaction that fosters understanding, compassion, and connection. Heartful communication is “mindful”. Fostering a mindfulness practice includes developing patience, acceptance, nonstriving, trust, nonjudgment, letting go, and a beginner’s mind in our lives, what Jon Kabat-Zinn calls the “pillars of mindfulness”. When we bring these attributes and present-moment awareness to our communications, we can begin to experience the true meaning of communication and connection. We may even come to the realization that we are already inter-connected without striving for it.

It seems like a simple idea that we need to be actively engaged in the moment in order to communicate. But many times we are only present in body and not in mind and heart. Can you remember a time when you’ve listened to someone but your mind was elsewhere and you didn’t catch all of what was said? It happens to all of us. Can you remember a time when you’ve blurted out something you didn’t mean to say or didn’t say what you wanted to say?

Cultivating present-moment awareness can help you engage in a conversation and return to active listening when your mind wanders. You can come to this kind of awareness by becoming aware of your breath, centering yourself, and reminding yourself to be open, compassionate, and present to the moment. With practice, you can connect with your body and the deep, internal wisdom and compassion with which you were born.

Yes, this is easier said than done during every-day interactions, let alone during a conflict. Because each of us has been hurt during our lives, we learn to live life on auto-pilot, to back away from conflict or to rage in the face of it. Perhaps we withdraw from people, making it difficult to access nonjudgmental present-moment awareness. When

conflict arises, we may feel threatened and react out of unconscious patterns that seem so deeply ingrained as to seem automatic and uncontrollable. Many times reacting automatically can cause the situation to escalate into further conflict, hurt feelings, and nothing gets resolved.

Because our patterns of communication are ingrained, and because the wandering mind is part of being human, we need conscious practice to do interact differently. "Practice" is the intentional cultivation of ability; something that we do again and again with the intention of learning each time. Mindfulness is a practice, a way of life, that helps us learn afresh with each interaction.

Mindfulness during your interactions can help you the learn ways in which you communicate that are not serving you well. Try this. The next time you are in conversation, notice how you listen to others. Is your mind open to what someone is saying? What judgments are you making about the other person? Do you feel defensive and explain away your behavior or explode with anger? Or do you feel ashamed, afraid of saying something that is important, or afraid of standing up for yourself? Sometimes simply bringing nonjudgmental awareness to our interactions can help us intentionally change how we communicate.

This same kind of attention applies to how we treat our own inner dialogue too. Sometimes we talk to ourselves in a more harmful way that we would speak to others. Treating yourself with compassion instead of criticism and derision can help open your heart to all of you, even the parts of you that are traditionally considered dark or negative. With this opening to yourself, you can begin to open more fully to others. Listening to yourself with compassion can help you to know your own truth and to speak it.

Speaking mindfully means, first, listening to your own inner truth, trusting the integrity of it, and then speaking in a mindful way. It isn't simply saying whatever is on your mind, like blurting out a judgment of the other person. With practice, when we are centered,

we find wisdom, truth and compassion. IS THIS ENOUGH? With a commitment to honor our individual truth, “right” speech can come even if we are afraid to say it. When Saki Santorelli, one of the teachers at the Stress Reduction Clinic at University of Massachusetts Medical Center, is about to speak, he often looks up, takes a long breath, and then speaks very deliberately.

Reviewing the pillars of mindfulness and how they can directly apply to communication can shed some light on how mindfulness can change our interactions.

Acceptance

Acceptance of ourselves, others and the present-moment situation can go a long way to fulfilling the longing for understanding and connection mentioned above. So why not start with the next conversation you have. Intentionally remind yourself during a conversation to accept the moment, yourself and your partner in communication exactly the way you find them in the moment. This doesn't mean you have to like the way things are. It simply means that whatever the conversation brings, it is there in the moment, so why not accept it. Giving up the struggle of trying to make things different than they are in the moment can help you focus on the conversation, give support, and maybe even have a pleasant talk.

QUOTE - One of the most satisfying experiences I know . . . is just fully to appreciate an individual in the same way that I appreciate a sunset. When I look at a sunset . . . I don't find myself saying, “Soften the orange a little on the right hand corner, and put a bit more purple along the base, and use a little more pink in the cloud color.” I don't try to control a sunset. I watch it with awe as it unfolds. Carl Rogers

Nonstriving

In mindfulness practice, we practice letting go of attachment to specific results. In communication, you could practice this by setting

aside your own agenda for a conversation, listen to the other person and let the conversation flow. This is difficult at times, because of our attachments to what we think is the “right” outcome. In many cases, the “right” way is simply OUR way, but, by no means, the only way. Notice what happens when you set aside your agenda or refrain from changing the subject.

The prospect of making someone uncomfortable by what is said can be enough to make some people back away from standing up for themselves. This pattern of interacting can be harmful to both parties in the interaction. If this is your typical reaction, you might decide to set this agenda aside, take a few conscious breaths, center yourself, and say what you feel is important.

Letting Go

Many of my couple’s clients describe the following problem. They come to a session in which the woman (the roles could be reversed) tells me how her husband doesn’t listen to her. The husband denies this statement. Upon further discussion, it turns out that when the woman talks about a difficult emotional situation, the husband reacts by giving advice. The woman wants to have her emotional difficulty recognized, feel some connection with her husband, and think he is on her side. The husband describes thinking that he is helping by coming up with a solution to her dilemma, and that his solution is a good one. Because of the inability to let go of a desired outcome, both spouses feel hurt and angry. In situations like these, letting go of how he think things should go, and listening with mindful compassion could give both spouses a different experience.

Nonjudgment -

Being aware and letting go of judgment in our communications helps us to speak and listen in a way that goes beyond a simple exchange of information. It helps us develop compassion for ourselves and others. Communicating from a compassionate place can transform our relationships. A recent article in the Houston Chronicle reports

that one of the best indicators of success in a marriage is that the husband is capable of saying “Yes, dear” to his wife. I think this is not so much about acquiescing as it is about being able to step into another person’s experience, and letting go of judgment and control of the situation.

Patience

Notice what happens when you consciously foster patience in communication. Take a slow, deep breath during an interaction, notice what is going on inside, and perhaps refrain from reacting in your typical way. Though it may be uncomfortable, there is a lot to learn. What do you notice?

Some people notice that with patience, things have a way of changing on their own, in due time, without our intervention. During difficult times, this simple, yet profound knowledge, may give us more patience in the moment.

QUOTE “This too shall pass” - Jesus.

Beginners mind -

Using a present-moment orientation to the way you listen to yourself and other, and the way you speak can have a powerful impact on your interactions. You may notice that you use the words “always” or “never” when talking with a loved one; like, “You always forget to take the trash out” or “You never listen to me”. Many people feel angry when their behavior is described in this way. Try staying right in the present, without reaching back into the past for ammunition. Notice what happens when you consciously stay right in the present moment.

Trust

Try intentionally developing the attitude that people have more right with them than wrong. With this belief, we can trust people’s innate

capabilities, rest in the moment, worry less about fixing things, and lend emotional support that fosters connection. Notice what happens when you practice this sense of trust.

In summary, I am reminder of how Angels Arien, a cultural anthropologist, described the similarities in all spiritual traditions: Show up, Pay attention, Tell the truth, and Let go of attachment to results.

Mindfulness practice can help us communicate more effectively through gaining access to our innate wisdom and compassion, and through fostering the pillars of mindfulness. Though many of us begin practicing mindfulness to “achieve” something or “get somewhere”, hopefully, with continued practice, we practice mindfulness for its own sake

MINDFULNESS BASICS - SIDEBAR

- _ Mindfulness can be defined as paying attention, in the present moment, without judgment.
- _ Developing the ability to pay attention to our moment-to-moment experience without judgment can help us:
 - _ awaken from living life on automatic pilot and live more consciously;
 - _ live more fully and joyfully;
 - _ learn from our difficult experiences to develop more resourceful coping strategies;
 - _ build concentration by training the mind to pay attention;
 - _ begin to question assumptions and automatic reactions;
 - _ let go of judgment of ourselves and others.
- _ Mindfulness meditation is the way we train ourselves to pay attention in the present moment.

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