Responsibility

Slide:
A Way of Communicating
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Responsibility

Welcome back. Here we will explore Responsibility, the R in the iCAR model of communication.

While Compassion refers to how we respond to what other people express, Responsibility refers to how we express our experience to others.

Responsibility has a lousy reputation, as if being responsible means you are to blame for something. This is completely misguided. Responsiblility is actually the key to your freedom! It is about recognizing our own agency in the world, that we are not merely passive victims of events in the world but are active players that create and affect the world we experience. Far from being confining, responsibility gives us greater freedom to be and to express ourselves. It involves you telling your truth and fully honouring your perceptions, beliefs, desires, feelings, boundaries, and limits. Responsibility is not heavy, but it does require courage.

The rewards are well worth it. As I discuss in another video, recognizing our responsibility for our beliefs and feelings is crucial for our well-being and happiness, whereas to indulge in being a victim is absolutely toxic for our relationships.

Being responsible in our communication simply requires that what we say reflects our awareness that this is my perception, my impression, my interpretation, or my belief. This is often reflected in the use of "I" statements. "I think…", "For me…", "My impression…", "I believe…", etc. This does not mean that we are in any way diminishing the importance what we are expresssing, as if it is "just" my belief. Indeed we may feel very confident in our beliefs and express that. For example in a board meeting I could say, "I strongly expect that their department will be late getting the cost estimates to us."

Being responsible in this way contrasts with making pronouncements about the ways things are. As much as we might like to think that our beliefs reflect some ultimate reality, we can never be 100% sure of this. We can, however, be sure about our experience of the world and what I believe to be true. And we can freely communicate this to others.

Being responsible in communicating our own beliefs is the necessary complement to responding to others with compassion. If I acknowledge what

someone else believes, such as, “So you‘re pretty convinced that labour unions are the scourge of the country” but I then say, “but it’s not true - actually labour unions are great for the country”, I’ve pretty much invalidated the other person’s beliefs and set us up for a fight. That’s because implicit in my statement would be me arrogantly asserting that she is wrong in her beliefs, and that I am right. This is not a recipe for connection.

Instead I could simply say, “Oh so you’re pretty convinced that labour unions are the scourge of the country. I actually believe that they do a lot of good, such as reducing abuse of workers, ensuing a living wage.” I’ve compassionately acknowledged her experience and then responsibly expressed mine. And ideally I would then invite, “what do you think the downsides of unions are?”

Again, this way of communicating is valuable if your intention is connection, to promote understanding and closeness in your relationships. It invites you and the other person to more deeply express and understand your respective views on labour unions. If your primary goal is to win an argument, however, to crush her with your superior knowledge and logic, then this won’t help you much…

Let me illustrate responsible expression with more examples:

Rather than declaring, “That’s a beautiful painting.”

You could say, “I think that’s a beautiful painting.”

Or, “I feel stunned by the beauty of this one…”

The second two are obviously quite similar to the first one, simply responsible.

Here’s another involving expressing an opinion:

Rather than saying, “She was being such a witch to him.”

we could say “My impression was she liked him feeling like crap.”

Or, “I thought she was cruel ‘cause she wanted him to leave.”..

Again we are expressing essentially the same thing, but our words reflect our awareness that it is our opinion, not some ultimate truth.

Here’s a difficult interpersonal example.

Someone seems to be lying to you. Instead of saying, “You’re lying.”, which will not go well, you could say, “I don’t believe that’s true.”…

Or, “I think you are trying to mislead me.”

While these differences may not seem like much, they can be major. The first thing is that you get much more freedom to express yourself because it only has to be your experience, not something you’re absolutely certain about. And the most crucial time to be responsible in expressing ourselves is when someone else is likely to hold a different belief. When others disagree with us, they will be less defensive if we have expressed information

as our opinion rather than stated it as a fact. If our words indicate that we are simply stating our opinion, we leave room for others to have their opinions and invite more curiosity about ours. It is common in couples I work with for one person to say one thing, the other to respond with “that’s not true” or “no I didn’t”, followed by, “yes you did”, “no I didn’t”, “Yes you did!” Conversations like this go no where, leave people very discouraged, and often believing that their partner is a liar.

As you learned in the video on responding with compassion, it will help a lot if you acknowledge the other person’s experience first. That could be something like, “Oh, so you don’t think you left me to clean up the kitchen.” But if you follow it up with, “but you did”, you’re still stuck in a fight. If instead you responsibly say, “I understand that you don’t think you left me to clean up the kitchen. I’m stunned because I sure thought you did.” You’re identifying that you each had a different experience, not asserting that the other person is wrong. Once you do this, the door is open for each of you to clarify your experience. What usually happens when people communicate like this is they realize that there is validity to what each of them said. For this example, Aaron may mean that he helped a bit in the kitchen before he left to do paperwork, while Zeo may mean that while he indeed helped a bit, that he left her to do most of the clean up. You’ll never get to this if you keep asserting that you are right and the other person is wrong. Without responsibility it is virtually impossible to get to a deep mutual understanding with others. Instead of the closeness and emotional intimacy that we say we want, we end up with conflict, resentment, and disconnection.

Apart from situations where we have different views from others, I encourage you to experiment with expressing yourself responsibly even in ordinary situations. The benefit is that this contributes to our experience of agency and responsibility in our lives. It may seem like a small thing, but when we responsibly say “I love sunny days like this” instead of “It’s a beautiful day”, we become more aware of ourselves, and at the same time become more revealing of ourselves to others. If we spend our days like this, the collective impact of these statements can be powerful.

While expressing our BELIEFS responsibly is a valuable part of healthy communication, expressing our FEELINGS responsibly is vitally important. Listen to these very common ways that people express their feelings.

Each statement with a red X next to it after I say it.

“You made me so mad.”

“Stop making me feel guilty.”

“You’re hurting my feelings.”

“How could you embarrass me like that!”

“She ripped my heart out and crushed it.”
“Stop pushing my buttons or I’ll…”
“George! you scared me.”
In each of these the other person is being blamed for my feelings. Instead of blaming others, as if we are helpless victims of other’s behavior, we can responsibly express what we are feeling. "When you don’t answer my questions I feel really hurt.” Not “you hurt my feelings, but “I feel really hurt”
You hurt my feelings. Red X,
I feel really hurt. Green √
Responsible statements can also include things like, “I feel really hurt when… you laugh at my clothes.”, “I’m really frustrated that you… were late for our meeting” “I get myself so worked up at times like this”.
“I feel really hurt when…”
“I’m really frustrated that you…”
“I get myself so worked up at times like this”.
Here are some more examples.
Your partner is telling you about all of the things she did for you today and that you didn’t even get to the one errand she asked you to do. You could irresponsibly complain, “Stop making me feel guilty.”
Or, you could begin by acknowledging, “I realize that you’ve done several things to help me out today, and no, I didn’t pick up your coat like you asked. Now I’m feeling guilty and I wish I wasn’t.” Or you could say, “I think you want me to feel guilty, and I do.” You may have a great reason for not picking up her coat, which you could then let her know about. Or you may have completely forgotten and resent that she is rubbing it in. Regardless, being responsible means we don’t blame her for us feeling guilty. We can tell her we don’t like her rubbing it in, but don’t blame her for our feelings.
Another example. Your friend is starting the campfire but the flames quickly get very big. Instead of saying, “You should be more careful when you’re lighting a fire.” You could responsibly say,
“I’d like you to be more careful when you’re lighting a fire, not let the flames get so big.” Or, you could say, “I’d feel better if you made sure the children were further away when you’re lighting a fire.” Or you could say, “I felt afraid for the children and others when you let the flames get so big. I’d feel much more comfortable if you keep the fires smaller in the future.” There are many responsible ways of expressing your feelings and what you want in a situation like this, and it can be brief. “Bud, I think smaller would be better next time.”
Another example: Your husband has gone out but didn’t tell you he was leaving or where he was going. Instead of later saying, “You’re an

inconsiderate jerk", or "You make me mad.", you could responsibly say, "I get so mad when you don't tell me where you're going." Or, "I make myself so upset and angry when I don't know where you are."

Here's another. As you arrive at your daughter's soccer practice you see your wife and the coach are flirting. Instead of saying, "Stop being such a flirt and making me jealous." You could say, "I know the coach thinks you're cute, which must feel nice, but I hate how jealous I feel."…

Another. Your boyfriend is visibly upset that you forgot to text him when you got home. Instead of blaming him with "You're hurting my feelings." You could responsibly tell him, "I feel really sad when you talk to me like that." Or, "I feel really sad when you're disappointed with me."…

A few more quick ones. Rather than saying, "You are so irritating." You could responsibly say, "I'm feeling very irritated with you." Or, "I get really irritated when you talk during the show."…

Rather than saying, "You make me feel so happy." You could responsibly say, "I am so happy being with you." Or, "When I'm with you all my worries seem to go away."…

Rather than saying, "Stop bugging me." You could responsibly say, "I'm finding that really irritating and I want you to stop now!"

Or, "When you keep pushing me for an answer I get very frustrated. Please stop now or I'm leaving."

As I noted in the introduction video, when we express our feelings responsibly, others' attention becomes focused on our feelings, which is what really matters. If, on the other hand, we are irresponsible and blame others for our feelings, then we put the focus on them. They will therefore tend to focus on our criticism about them, will usually respond defensively, and possibly with hostility towards us. If I say, "you're making me mad", I'm pretty much inviting the other person to deny that they are, that they are just doing something innocent, and to attack back with, "why are you so sensitive!" This wouldn't leave either of us feeling very good, or very connected.

To summarize, expressing ourselves responsibly means recognizing that our beliefs and feelings are ours. We can express them confidently, and without apology; "this is what I think. This is what I feel." And we realize that others may experience things differently.

Remember, no one can "make" us feel anything without our cooperation. And regardless of how "normal", "healthy", or "predictable" your reaction is, it is still your reaction. Responsibility means we don't blame others, or our circumstances, for our feelings.

As I hope was apparent in the examples, being responsible is not about being “nice”. If we don’t like something someone has done, we can say so without sugar-coating it.

Your practice at becoming more responsible will pay off in you having more satisfying relationships, and in you becoming more aware and accepting of yourself. “I think” it’s worth the effort. Hope you have fun practicing.

Closing slide:

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