

Intro slide:

A Way of Communicating:

Responding with Compassion

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Welcome back. In this video you will learn more about how to respond to what others say or do with compassion. The word means to feel with another person and involves us entering into the other person's world with caring, attempting to see the world through their eyes, to take a walk in their shoes. Responding with compassion simply means that we show them that we understand by capturing their experience with our words.

For example, if Marion yells at me that I answered questions that were meant for her, I could begin by saying, "I see you're really mad that I took those questions."

As this illustrates, our compassion is conveyed primarily by capturing what they told us, their words, but also what they appear to be feeling. I'll note right up front that compassion is not about being nice, so doesn't involve praising, reassuring, or pitying others.

It also does not mean that we agree with what the other person is saying: You can be compassionate towards people who have said something that you disagree with, who do things that you do not like, or who you do not want to be around. Compassion is simply about understanding someone's experience and showing them that we get it...

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Acknowledging their Words

Much of what we learn about another person's experience is through the words they say to us. A lot of the conflict and distress in relationships happens because people believe we did not hear, understand, or care about what they said. But we can easily avoid this problem by simply telling the other person what we believe they said. At its most simple, this involves repeating back what we heard, almost word-for-word.

Jane tells her husband: "I'm fed up with you leaving your clothes and garbage around the house." John could simply say: "I get that you're really fed up with me leaving my clothes and garbage all over the house."

This word-for-word repeating back what the other person said is particularly valuable for you to use when there is a lot of conflict and

misunderstanding. When we repeat back what the other person said so accurately, there is little room for others to believe we didn't get it. So when communication gets heated, try slowing it down and capture what the other person said using mostly their words.

Rupinder exclaims to his mother: "If my teacher picks on me once more I'm never going to school again." His mother could simply say: "So if your teacher picks on you anymore you're never going to go to school again."

In most situations, however, this way of responding will sound stilted and silly. If someone asks you to pass the sugar, it probably won't help to say: "So you'd like me to pass the sugar?"

So instead, in most situations it works best to simply paraphrase what you've heard, trying to capture the essence of what the other person has said, particularly any feelings that they expressed.

So when Jane tells her husband: "I'm fed up with you leaving your clothes and garbage around the house." He could capture what she is saying with: "I get that you're annoyed with my messiness." Or, similarly he could say: "Finding my stuff around really bugs you."

When Rupinder tells his mother, "If my teacher picks on me once more I'm never going to school again." His mother could capture what he is saying as, "So you're feeling pretty bad about your teacher picking on you and don't want to have to deal with her any more." Or she could say: "So if she picks on you any more then you don't want to go back to her class."

As these examples illustrate, there is not one correct way to capture what you think the other person is saying. The important thing is your genuine intention to do so. In fact, it doesn't even matter if the other person says you misunderstood, that you got it wrong, since that gives them an opportunity to clarify it for you, and then you get a second chance to see if you got it.

Harry says to Hillary: "I want you to stop wasting our money?" and she could reasonably respond, "Oh, so you don't like the things I'm buying, like that outfit I bought last week" Harry may then say, "No, that's not it all. I really like you buying nice outfits for yourself, I just wish you'd buy things at the discount store or on sale." Now that Harry has clarified Hillary can say: "Ok, so what's upsetting you is not so much what I buy, but that I'm spending too much money on it, that I could get it cheaper".

Even though Hillary initially misunderstood what Harry was getting at, imagine how he feels now. And don't forget, Hillary might not even

agree with Harry, but at least he now knows that she cares enough to make sure she understands...

Wanting a sense of connection with others is a fundamental human desire and this desire underlies our wanting recognition and acknowledgement from others. People are often astounded at how positively others react to simply having their experience paraphrased back to them. Indeed, it reduces defensiveness dramatically and promotes others sharing their experience much more openly. It may be easier to appreciate if you put yourself in the other person's shoes. Imagine how good it would feel to have someone who you expect difficulty with, to instead show they are actually capable of seeing things through your eyes...

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Acknowledging their Feelings or Emotions

While we must listen to the words that others use to express themselves, much of their experience is conveyed in their voice tone, facial expression, and behavior. So compassion also involves expressing our hunch about others' likely feelings or emotions. Sometimes others tell us about their feelings and all we need to do is acknowledge their words. Often, however, they will not tell us explicitly how they are feeling or what they are experiencing, and if we are able to capture that in our own words they will experience being deeply understood. Although it is great when we are perfectly accurate, as with capturing their words, even if we don't get it quite right our attempt still serves as an invitation for others to share their experience on a deeper level...

Going back to the example with Jane, when she says: "I'm fed up with you leaving your clothes and garbage around the house.", John's acknowledgment of her experience could be: "I imagine you're pretty frustrated and exasperated having to pick up after me all the time." Here John has captured some of her words, but also how she is likely feeling, namely frustrated and exasperated. And of course Jane is upset with John, not because he has left his stuff around, but because it means to her that he doesn't care about what SHE wants. If John had a back injury and couldn't bend over to pick things up she likely wouldn't be upset. So if John were to respond by defending himself or attacking her, it would confirm to her that John really doesn't care. If, as I've described here, John begins by acknowledging her experience, then she instantly learns that he does care about her feeling, a perfect antidote for her distress...

Here's another example. Stan complains sarcastically to Rosy: "Two voicemails and three texts isn't enough to get your attention!?!". Rosy would be best off acknowledging that Stan is obviously upset. "Oh Stan (sympathetically). You must have thought I was ignoring you. That must have felt lousy for you." Only *after* acknowledging his experience she could then explain that her phone was broken, turned off, lost, or whatever her reasons were...

Or back to the example of Rupinder, who said to his mother, "If my teacher picks on me once more I'm never going to school again." His mom could try to capture his feelings with, "Gee Rup. I imagine that going to school feels pretty lousy when you get picked on." Or, she could similarly say, "Wow. You're feeling pretty mad and fed up with him, hey?" Again, there are many different ways to capture his experience, and she doesn't even have to be bang on. All her son needs to see is that she is trying to understand his feelings with compassion.

Here's a final example. Francine is in tears and walking away from Fraser: "Okay, I'll see you later." Fraser would most fruitfully acknowledge her distress and his guess about the reason for it: "Francine, I imagine you're really hurt and disappointed 'cause I'm cancelling at the last minute." Again, knowing that Fraser cares enough to compassionately acknowledge her experience is likely the most valuable thing she could hear...

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Acknowledge the Truth

So far I've talked about compassionately acknowledging others' words and their feelings. If you develop some proficiency with those, you will find that your relationships improve substantially.

A final, and more challenging skill, is to acknowledge the truth in what others are saying, especially if we disagree with them or they are being critical of us. When people are saying negative things about us or expressing things that we disagree with, our inclination is to defend ourselves or our beliefs.

To be able to simply acknowledge what someone else has said in these situations is a tremendous accomplishment in itself; instead of defending ourselves, to begin by acknowledging what they have said is wonderful. Then, to take the extra step of acknowledging how they likely feel requires us going the extra mile. And, on top of these, to actually acknowledge that what they are criticizing us about holds some truth is truly heroic! It's the ultimate triumph of our desire for

connection with others over our need to be right, over our egos. It reflects the ultimate attempt to see the world through their eyes.

Very few people choose this tack because, as my mentor, Bennett Wong, said “Most people would rather be right than happy.”

What does acknowledging the truth in what other people say look like. First, it doesn't mean that we say something that we don't think is true. Lying to someone will not build connection. Second, it does not mean that we completely agree with them. Indeed, we may largely disagree with them, but still manage to see, and agree with, a grain of truth. That's what we're after...

Let's take a challenging example. Boris yells at his wife: “You never listen to me, you're a terrible wife!” Boris obviously feels hurt and angry because he doesn't think he has been understood. His heroic wife may believe that she usually listens to him, that she is not a terrible wife, yet still say something like: “Well, I sure get that you don't think I listen, and I'm sure I haven't understood you at times. Why don't you try again, what am I not hearing?” So his wife is finding the grain of truth in his complaint, that she never listens to him, when she says, “I'm sure I haven't understood you at times.” Of course if she usually responded like this then Boris probably wouldn't complain about not being listened to, or she likely wouldn't choose to be with a man like Boris.

Let's look at some more examples. Your child is upset and says to you: “You're mean. I hate you! You're the worst daddy in the world!”

Unfortunately, parents typically respond to situations like this with some form of retaliation; grabbing and spanking her while saying “I am not a bad daddy, you are being a mean, disrespectful daughter! Now go to your room and think about what you just said!” So by what he did he essentially validated what his daughter said.

One step up from this would be something like, “But honey, we just had such a good day together, and I bought you an ice cream cone and read you a story. I don't think I've been a bad daddy.” That would be better, but it still didn't include any compassion.

One big step up again might be, “Oh, Honey! You really hate me now. And you think I'm the worst daddy in the world.” Yay, we finally have compassionate acknowledgment of her experience.

If we want to reach the top of Everest, however, we'd have to also find some truth in what she has said: “Wow, Sandy, you must be really mad at me right now. You think I've been mean to you and that I'm a bad daddy. And I have to agree because you feel like that I haven't

understood how you feel, and that's my most important job as your daddy."

Again, he's just acknowledging the truth in what his daughter is saying. It doesn't mean that he believes he is the worst daddy in the world, just that he understands why his daughter would be saying that. Here's another challenging example. Your friend says: "I can't believe how cheap you are. For your birthday I gave you that beautiful watch and for mine you give me a scarf."

How can you capture her experience, including the truth in it?: "Oh, Julia... I hear how disappointed you are with my gift. I guess it leaves you wondering about how much I value you as a friend. And for sure, this watch I have been enjoying so much cost a lot more than the scarf."

Again, acknowledging our friend's experience is the most important thing we can do since feeling valued is clearly the issue here. Only later will it be fruitful to explain that you make much less money than she does, or that you spent weeks researching and finding her family tartan and ordering the scarf with that weaving, or that you wove the scarf yourself from rare Tibetan llama wool. But these explanations must come long after your compassionate acknowledgment.

And now a workplace example. Your client says: "I've had nothing but crappy service from you. From now on I'm going to take my business elsewhere and warn others to do the same."

You could reply: "I can see how upset you are and I've clearly let you down. We were late finishing the job, two days later than we agreed on, so I can easily understand your frustration." Here you've acknowledged the truth, that you were late finishing the job. Now it may be that you were late because he changed his mind about his order three times, that a supplier was a week late getting things to you, or that you warned him a week ago that the job would be two days late. The fact is that you have an unhappy client who may spread negative reviews of your business. If you want a happier client, and your best shot at a better relationship with him, you now know what to do.

And a final example. Georgio's wife says: "You're never romantic anymore. You used to take me out, bring my flowers, and want to talk want to me."

To acknowledge the truth in what she has said, Georgio could say: "Ouch. That's hard to hear but I understand how much you're missing that stuff. And I've got to agree that I haven't bought you flowers for

ages.” Of course he may have wonderful reasons for each of the things his wife is unhappy about, and he can explain those later. His first job, if he wants a close relationship, is to be compassionate with her experience, not to defend himself...

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Summary

To summarize, responding to others with compassion involves acknowledging *their* experience.

On video words, timed to my words. When I say acronym WET, ideally have first letters change to different colour:

Words

Emotions

Truth

We can do this by capturing Their Words, Their Emotions or feelings, and perhaps the Truth in what they have said. It makes the acronym WET, which you likely won't remember in the moment, but may be useful as you practice this skill.

A couple of final points about compassion. Most of the examples I used involved situations of potential conflict, since those are usually most difficult for us. If, however, you wait until you are in conflict before using these skills you won't do very well. Compassion is a valuable aspect of communication in general, letting the other person know that we understand their experience. While no one wants a tape recorder or parrot repeating back everything they say, virtually everyone appreciates some compassionate acknowledgement of their experience. This includes when they are happy, sad, hurt, scared, ashamed, or even hungry.

Finally, I have often noted situations in which it is best to express our experience later. When is later? It is after the other person is finished, after they really feel heard. Rushing in with, "I understand, but", or immediately telling our side of the story will obviously take away from the other person experiencing us as caring about them.

So we convey our compassion for others by letting them know that we are open to hearing more about what they have just expressed. This will often be reflected in some tentativeness or questioning in our voice tone. "Oh, so you really felt hurt when I did that", serves as an acknowledgment of their experience, checking out if we got it right, and an invitation to say more...

We can also invite them to say more using words such as:

Is there more you'd like to let me know about it?

Is there more about that?

I'm all ears. Tell me more.

The curious invitation, in voice tone or in words, leaves the other person with no doubt about our interest in and compassion for their experience. Once this happens, other become much more receptive to hearing what we have to say.

Now you understand how to respond to others with compassion. The rubber meets the road when we actually begin to practice this skill, and that comes next.

Closing Slide:

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