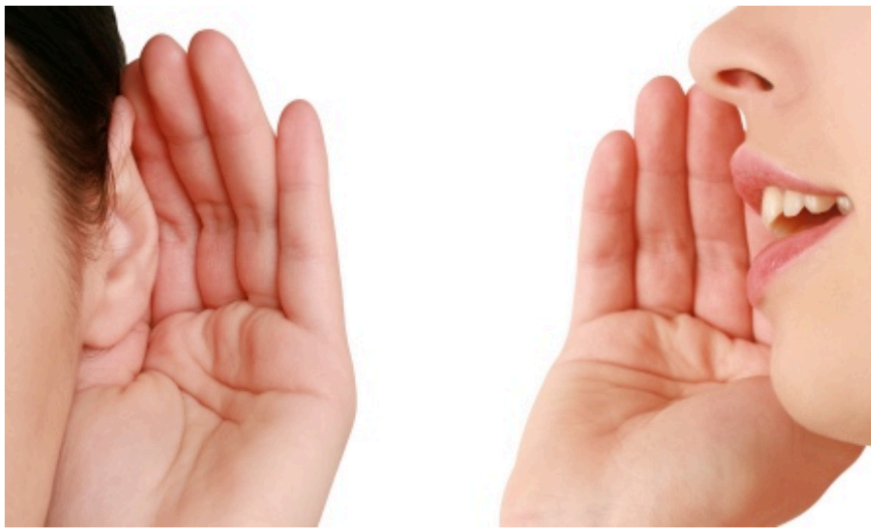


# The Language of Loving:

## A Way of Communicating To Get From Conflict to Connection



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# The Language of Loving: A Way of Communicating To Get From Conflict to Connection

Or the alternate title:

## Words Matter! A Way of Communicating To Improve All Your Relationships

*Dr. Geoffrey D. Carr, Ph.D.*

I am most indebted to Carl Rogers for the perspective described here. I have also relied on the insights of Bennet Wong, Jock McKeen, Harville Hendrix, John Gottman, Sue Johnson, Les Greenberg, Haim Ginnot, Adele Faber, Elaine Mazlish, Stephen Rollnick, William Miller, Eckhart Tolle, and David Burns.

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*The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place. George Bernard Shaw*

## Introduction

A few decades ago, I was in counselling with my now-ex-wife. As a clinical psychologist, a university professor researching couples therapy, and a supervisor for students learning couples therapy, I felt embarrassed to be there. When the therapist suggested that we (meaning me) work on communication skills and gave me a few photocopied pages to read, I was not impressed. I *knew* what the issues were in our relationship and communication was *not* one of them. I knew that I was an excellent communicator and had stellar student evaluations to back me up!

I was, of course, mistaken. While I was extremely skilled at communicating ideas, and also at compassionately relating to other peoples' experience, in the non-professional areas of my life my communication was leading to needless suffering. I've learned a lot since then, have been in a wonderful relationship for 23 years, and I want to offer the best tools I've found to help you improve your relationships.

Here you'll learn a way of communicating that will allow you to express yourself in a way that you are most likely to be heard, understood, and valued. It will also show you how to respond to what someone else has said or done such that they feel heard, understood, and valued. While our mutual understanding does not necessarily mean that we'll agree, through using these skills we are more likely to reach agreement. Similarly, we may want someone else to do something, or to stop doing something, and using these skills is the most fruitful way of promoting them doing it happily.

The goal of this way of communicating is to promote a genuine understanding between us and others. It makes it most likely that we will understand another person's experience and that the other person will understand ours. If our intention is other than this, such as to get our way with others or to control them, then this way of communicating will not be of much use. It is particularly valuable in more intimate relationships such as among family members or between friends, but is still quite useful in less-close relationships, such as with coworkers or even strangers. It's great when the two people who are communicating share this perspective, but it is even more important to use these skills when the other person doesn't.

Although on the surface you are practicing communication skills, if you work on them over time you'll find that they have a profound, transformational effect on your experience of the world. The skills serve the deeper goals of:

- promoting understanding and closeness between you and others
- enhancing self-esteem and self-concept for both of you
- improving interpersonal sensitivity and boundaries
- promoting your personal awareness and responsibility

Through conscious, disciplined effort to apply the skills, these deeper benefits are an inevitable, if gradual, result.

Although the research suggests that you can improve most areas of your life by applying these skills, getting good at them requires many hours of practice. Just reading this booklet will not improve your communication very much, and I don't want you to become discouraged about the value of actually learning the skills. Only you can decide whether it is worth the effort and discipline you'll need to get the results you want. If you don't have the time now, you may do yourself a favour by returning to this book later.

While I'm sure that you have your verbal strengths, you could become much happier in your life if you learned to communicate more effectively. I have actually found that the people who tell me they already understand and use these skills seem to be the worst communicators I come across. Even though I wrote this, practice it, and am very good at it, I'm also humbly aware that I still have lots of room for improvement. While the skills are simple in principle, there is no limit to how much better you'll become with practice, or to how much more benefit you'll experience in your life.

## Meet The iCARE

No, the iCARE is not some new piece of technology, but tried-and-true old technology, repackaged here for your convenience. The acronym stands for:

intention  
Compassion  
Appreciation  
Responsibility  
Encouragement

**Intention** refers to what we are intending to achieve by saying what we do and is in lowercase because it is mostly an internal assessment that we may not express.

**Compassion** refers to how we *respond to what others say or do*. It is about listening with care to the other person's experience, reflected in how we acknowledge what we have heard.

**Appreciation** refers to the importance of us expressing things that we genuinely like about others.

**Responsibility** refers to how we *express our experience*. It involves honouring our own experience and telling our truth, without blaming others for our feelings or circumstances.

**Encouragement** involves supporting others in doing what will genuinely serve them best, to do what truly matters to them.

## Intentions

Although I'll be describing the practical "how to do it" aspects of communicating, the most important aspect of communicating is really our intention. Why are we communicating with this person? What are we intending to achieve? We don't tend to give this much thought and it requires reflection and honest self-examination to find out. We often have a surface intention, such as giving the other person information, but we usually also have a deeper intention, such as wanting the other person to behave differently. This deeper intention may be apparent in our voice tone or body language as well as our choice of words. Others are often sensitive to our deeper intentions and react to what they perceive. So communication difficulties are often related to us believing that we are communicating one thing but the other person perceiving something quite different. A foible of mine is to be expressing one thing in words while my body language and voice tone reflect my impatience.

An important first step in communicating is therefore to be clear ourselves about our intentions. Usually we do not take the time to reflect on this in the moment, so it is valuable to reflect on it before and afterwards. If you are intending to

improve your communication within a particular relationship, consider what you most want to achieve through your communication with this person. Are we trying to be open and honest with the other person, revealing our thoughts, feelings, and true intentions, or do we have ulterior motives and are instead trying to provide misleading information or to withhold information to achieve some desired effect on the other person? Are we trying to get them to do what we want? Are we trying to get them to feel guilty? Are we trying to get them to like us? Are we trying to say something hurtful in revenge for feeling hurt ourselves? Ultimately, clear communication starts with self-honesty about what we are really trying to achieve when we open our mouths, and this usually proves to be the most challenging aspect of all. I emphasize that almost any motives we have in our communication are acceptable. There is nothing wrong with wanting someone to do something for us, to like us, or to stay with us. It is also quite normal to want to hurt others with our words, to want them to feel guilty or afraid, or to want them to feel jealous. Healthy communication just involves being more honest with ourselves and others about our intentions. It means that I have to tell people that I'm feeling impatient, without, as you'll read about below, blaming it on them.

Below is the first of several exercises. Although you may be tempted to skip over them, this guide will be of little use if you do. Communication skills are *skills*, and like all skills you'll need to practice them to get better. We don't expect to become a good pianist by reading a book on music theory, or a good soccer player by watching a game on television. Communication breaks down most frequently when we are in emotionally charged situations, and those are not ideal circumstances for us to be trying something for the first time. Reading this guide and then waiting for a big fight to begin using the skills would be like having your first driving lesson during rush hour in a big city. Make it easy for yourself and practice the skills during non-stressful times. And yes, you will have to write, type, or speak your answers as required; thinking them in your head will not offer much benefit. For simplicity, I will just ask you to write things down, but please read this as "write, type, or dictate out loud, etc." The more you practice these communication skills and they become automatic or second nature, the easier it will be to use them when you most need them.

Now, back to the exercise regarding our *intentions*. Pick a person with whom you would like to have better communication and answer the following questions. What I most want in my relationship with \_\_\_\_\_ is:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

Next, reflect on the last time that you had a difficult or conflicted interaction with that person. To the best of your recollection, write down the words you spoke to him or her.

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Now, put yourself in the other person's shoes and reflect on how you would likely feel if you heard those words spoken to you. Write down your response:

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If you're lucky, you'll recognize a disconnect between what you say you want in that relationship and how you would feel hearing your own words. You would be lucky because you now have important information about how your way of communicating is not moving you towards what you want in relationship with this person. The skills you learn in the next sections will allow you to bring how you express yourself in relationships more into alignment with what you really want in those relationships.

Take a few minutes now and reflect on what you are most commonly trying to achieve when you speak with people. Examples include: giving them information they asked for, impressing them with how much I know, making them feel better, winning an argument, getting them to do something I want, getting to know them better, making them feel badly about themselves, getting them to understand my experience, getting them to agree with me, making them like me, helping them with their problems.

1. 

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2. 

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3. 

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As noted earlier, these communication skills will not help you control others, because controlling others will not contribute to genuine happiness for either you or them. They will similarly not help you if your goal is to provoke others into



feeling badly about themselves or for you to feel superior to others. They will, however, be tremendously helpful if the intention behind your communication is to find out if the other person would be willing to do what you would like them to, to promote their understanding why you would like them to do it, to find out possible reasons they might not want to, to speak up for your desires, to express your truth, to learn about others' feelings and desires, to promote cooperation, etc.

You may or may not choose to share your intentions with others as part of your communication. Here are some examples of how you can share your intentions.

Flora: *I'd really like to understand what you'd like from me.*

Jessica: *This may sound nosy, but I really want to hear about your marriage.*

Rachid: *I just want to vent for a minute.*

Casper: *I don't like to admit it, but I really want you to feel guilty about this.*

Harvey: *I'm telling you this 'cause I really want you to stop doing it 'cause I'm beginning to think you're a jerk.*

Mary: *I REALLY want you to tell me I'm right on this.*

George: *To be honest, I don't want to talk about it, I just want you to do the dishes.*

In most instances, we need not express our intention. If you want someone to pass the salt, then a simple request will do, and a deep discussion of your intentions would be pointless. There is, however, a lot of room for us to make simple expressions of our intentions in everyday conversations in ways that are appropriate and sound natural. Again, the first focus needs to be on us becoming increasingly aware of our intentions, but as we become more skilled at this, we can include brief statements about them in our everyday conversations. A statement at the office like, "You screwed up on the Robinson file." (which of course is only intended to provide the person with information!?) can instead be, "I'm feeling really frustrated that you forgot the numbers in the Robinson report and I don't want this to happen again."

## Compassion

*Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable. David Augsburger*

Compassion refers to how we *respond to others*, to what they say or do. It 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. It involves us being genuinely *with the other* person in their experience and conveying that we understand their experience, not by telling them we do, but by showing them. It is, emphatically, not about being nice; that is, it is not about praising, reassuring, or pitying the other person.

We convey our compassion primarily by acknowledging what the other person has expressed to us. We do this by capturing their *words* in our own words, by acknowledging their likely *experience* or feelings, and by finding the *truth* in what they have said.

### Their Words

A tremendous amount of conflict and distress in relationships happens because people believe that the other person did not hear, understand, or care about what they said. This is a problem whether or not they were actually understood, and we can easily remedy this by 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: *I'm fed up with you leaving your clothes and garbage around the house.*

John: *I get that you're feeling fed up with me leaving my clothes and garbage around the house.*

Raj: *If my teacher picks on me once more, I'm never going to school again.*

Mom: *So if your teacher picks on you anymore, you're never going to go to school again.*

This word-for-word repeating back what the other person said is valuable in relationships in which there is a lot of conflict and misunderstanding because in repeating back so accurately, there is little room for misunderstanding. However, this can also sound stilted and silly in relationships in which the level of conflict

is lower and in situations in which communication is likely to be clearly understood. You probably don't need to say, "So, you'd like me to answer the door?" In lower-conflict situations it makes sense simply to paraphrase what you have heard, trying to capture the essence of what the other person has said, particularly any feelings they expressed.

Jane: *I'm fed up with you leaving your clothes and garbage around the house.*

John: *I get that you're annoyed with my messiness.*

Or, John: *Finding my stuff around really bugs you.*

Raj: *If my teacher picks on me once more, I'm never going to school again.*

Mom: *So you're feeling pretty bad about your teacher picking on you and don't want to have to deal with her anymore.*

Or: *So if she picks on you any more, then you're never going 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 the genuine intention to do so. Indeed, it doesn't even matter if the other person says you misunderstood, since it gives them an opportunity to clarify it for you, and you get a second chance to see if you understand.

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 having their experience captured in words. 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 another's shoes and imagine how relieving it would feel to have an expected adversary transformed into someone who can actually see the world through your eyes. This is a crucial aspect of intimate communication and one that must occur in an ongoing way, not just at times of potential conflict.

In the next exercise, practice showing that you have understood what the other person is expressing, first repeating back almost word for word, and then paraphrasing to capture the essence of what they expressed. Write each of these down.

Mary comes home from work exhausted and says, "*I can't take that job anymore. If I have to go in another day, I think I'll lose it with my boss.*"

Almost word for word: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Paraphrased essence: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Shahir just won the lottery and you are the first person he tells, looking stunned but elated. *“I can’t believe it. After ten years of buying tickets, I finally hit the jackpot.”*

Almost word for word: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Paraphrased essence: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

You are late getting home and your partner has been at home taking care of the children. Now your partner will be late for an important meeting. Your partner says, *“Where were you? You left me high and dry and now I’ll blow this account and we won’t have enough money for our holiday.”*

Almost word for word: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Paraphrased essence: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Against your wishes, your teenage daughter has a party while you are away and there is a few hundred dollars worth of damage. She tells you, *“I’m really sorry about stuff getting broken, but there was nothing I could do. It was Jimmy Parker who did most of it and he was really drunk and wouldn’t leave.”*

Almost word for word: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Paraphrased essence: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Your five-year-old son comes in crying and tells you that his friend hit him.  
*“Jessica hit my arm really hard. She’s mean. I’m never playing with her again.”*

Almost word for word: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Paraphrased essence: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### Their Experience or Feelings

Just acknowledging what the other person has told us is a powerful way of reducing conflict and creating a sense of connection with others. We can still go further, however, and be even more deeply compassionate. This involves expressing our hunch about others’ likely feeling and experience, and by acknowledging the truth of what they have expressed. Sometimes others tell us about their feelings and experience and, as discussed above, 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 can capture that in our own words they will experience being deeply understood. Although it is great when we are perfectly accurate, even if we aren’t, our attempt still serves as an invitation for others to share their experience on a deeper level.

Jane: *I’m fed up with you leaving your clothes and garbage around the house.*

John: *I imagine you’re pretty frustrated and exasperated having to pick up after me all the time.*

Stan: *Two voicemails and three texts isn’t enough to get your attention!?!*

Rosy: *Oh Stan (sympathetically). You must have thought I was ignoring you. (before explaining that her phone was broken, turned off, or lost)*

Raj: *If my teacher picks on me once more, I’m never going to school again.*

Mom: *I imagine that going to school feels pretty lousy when you get picked on.*

Or, Mom: *You’re feeling pretty mad and fed up with him, hey?*

Francine: (leaving tearfully) *Okay, I’ll see you later.*

Fraser: *Francine, I imagine you’re really hurt and disappointed that I’m cancelling at the last minute.*

## The Truth in What They Said

After capturing their words and feelings, the third, and most challenging, level of compassion is to acknowledge the truth in what others are saying, especially if 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. Just acknowledging what they are saying in these situations is a tremendous accomplishment in itself. Taking the extra step of acknowledging their likely feelings requires us to go the extra mile. And to actually acknowledge that there is some truth to what they are criticizing us about is the ultimate triumph of our desire for connection over our egos, over our need to be right. It isn't easy, and as my mentor, Bennet Wong, was fond of saying, "Most people would rather be right than happy."

Acknowledging the truth in what other people say does not mean that we completely agree with them. Indeed, we may largely disagree with them but still be able to see and agree with a grain of truth. For example, recognizing that our wife feels angry because we have not understood her, and that this indeed disappointed her does not mean agreeing that we are a terrible husband. Finally, it's important to think in terms of agreement and disagreement rather than right or wrong or ultimate truth. As explained in my book *Being Human*, all we have is our opinions and our experience.

Your child is upset and says to you: *"You're mean. I hate you! You're the worst mommy in the world!"*

Parents typically respond to situations like this with some form of retaliation. Grabbing her and spanking her while saying *"I am not a bad mother, you are being a mean, disrespectful daughter! Now go to your room and think about what you just said!"*

One small 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 mommy."*

One big step up would be, *"Oh, Honey! You really hate me now. And you think I'm the worst mommy in the world."*

If we want to reach the top of Everest, however, it would look something like this: *"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 mommy. And I have to agree with you because you think I haven't understood how you feel, and that's my most important job as your mommy."*

Your wife says: *"You're such a lazy bum. I should have listened to my mother and not married you!"*

You could reply: *“Ouch. That’s hard to hear, but I understand how much you’re resenting me. And I’ve got to agree that you’ve been doing the lion’s share of the housework and making our meals.”* (Note that he can say this even if he doesn’t see himself as being lazy and has been working 14-hour days at the office. He can responsibly express this later. His first job, if he wants a close relationship, is to be compassionate with *her* experience, not to defend himself.)

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.”*

You could reply: *“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 most important, and the fact that she has much more money than we do, that we spent weeks researching and finding her family tartan/crest and ordering the scarf with that on it, or that we wove the scarf ourselves from rare Tibetan llama wool, can come later.)

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 upon, so I can easily understand your frustration.”* (It doesn’t matter if 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. You *may* let him know this *after* you have acknowledged his experience.)

### **Curious Invitation**

Finally, we can 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 make our curious invitation more explicit 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.*

When talking with others, especially when conflict is involved, most people feel the pressure to express their experience, their side of the story. The result is that the other person doesn’t experience being heard, or that we are genuinely

interested in what they have to say. In turn, they experience even more urgency to press us to understand them, and are therefore much less likely to really hear us. 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. They then become more receptive to hearing ours.

### **Be All WET!**

In sum, responding to others with compassion requires our willingness to be all WET. Particularly when in conflict we are called to acknowledge:

Their *Words*

Their *Experience* or feelings

The *Truth* in what they said

You will find out how successful you are being in your compassionate acknowledgement by the kinds of responses you get from others. If they tell us, “exactly!”, then we know we’re nailing it. If they say “yeah”, and then continue to expand on what they’re saying, then again we know we are on the right track. If they continue and they move more deeply into their experience, including how they are feeling, then we know we have captured their experience well. If they tell us to stop just repeating what they’re saying, then we know we are staying much too close to their actual words and not giving enough attention to their meaning.



## Appreciation

Expressing appreciation involves letting other people know things that we genuinely like about them or what they have done. It is not about being nice, not about saying things that aren't true for us, and it doesn't involve backhanded compliments. It can involve small appreciations, such as over something someone has just done, or a larger appreciation about some characteristic they have. While it is generally important to express appreciations in our relationships, it is particularly valuable to share them at times of conflict, even when we are feeling resentment.

As John Gottman's research found, couples' relationships can withstand conflict and criticism, but only if expression of appreciation is abundant. The problem is that there may be lots of things we appreciate about the other person, but if we don't express it, or express it infrequently, they will not know. We may withhold expressing appreciation due to resentment towards others, as if our appreciation would somehow discount what we are unhappy about. We may not express our appreciation to others because we believe that what they did is "expected", so somehow doesn't warrant appreciation. The predictable result is that we leave others with the impression that we don't like them, don't love them, or even hate them, even when these things aren't true. It is pretty obvious that if someone mainly tells us about the things they don't like about us, we will believe that they don't like us.

By regularly expressing our appreciation towards others, we make ourselves increasingly aware of the many things we *do* appreciate, which contributes to our experience of gratitude.

*"Thanks for taking out the garbage."*

*"I really appreciate you taking care of your homework without being asked."*

*"You're looking particularly attractive tonight."*

*"I really appreciate you being on top of all the kids' activities."*

Expressing appreciation is also valuable when someone has been critical towards us, expressed resentment, or been provocative. The appreciation is profoundly disarming, so conflict is reduced, and the other person will usually become more receptive to hearing your perspective.

*"That must have been hard to let me know but I'm really glad that you did."*

*"I appreciate knowing where I stand with you."*

*"While I'm sorry you feel that way, I'm really glad that you told me."*

*"I appreciate that you don't beat around the bush."*

*"Yeah, I suppose I was a bit of a jerk. I hate to admit it but thanks for calling me on it."*

## Responsibility

Responsibility refers to how we express *our* experience to others. It has nothing to do with blame but instead involves telling our truth and fully honouring our own perceptions, beliefs, desires, feelings, boundaries, and limits.

### Responsibility for Our Experience

As much as we might like to believe that our views reflect some ultimate reality, we can never be 100% sure of this. We can, however, be sure about *our experience* of the world, and this is what we can communicate with others. Healthy communication therefore involves taking responsibility for our perceptions, attributions, impressions, interpretations, etc., often reflected in us using “I” statements. “I think...”, “For me...”, “My impression...”, “I believe...”, etc.

Rather than, “*That’s a beautiful painting.*”  
Instead, “*I think that’s a beautiful painting.*”

Rather than, “*The team’s old uniforms looked much better than their new ones.*”  
Instead, “*I liked the team’s old uniforms better than the new ones.*”

Rather than, “*It’s stupid to focus on that issue.*”  
Instead, “*I’d rather focus on another issue.*”  
Or, “*I don’t think it’s useful to spend our time on that issue.*”

Rather than, “*She was being such a bitch to him.*”  
Instead, “*In my opinion she liked him feeling like crap.*”  
Or, “*My impression was she wanted him to leave.*”

Rather than, “*You’re lying.*”  
Instead, “*I’m wondering if you’re lying.*”  
Or, “*I think you are trying to mislead me.*”  
Or, “*I don’t believe that.*”

We are usually more comfortable using “I” statements regarding matters of opinion but feel more entitled to make pronouncements about apparent matters of fact, such as: “*It was raining all morning.*” “*Grandma is coming for dinner.*” “*Whales are mammals.*” We are less likely to get into communication difficulties when discussing facts that most people agree on, and it would be ridiculous to turn everything into an “I” statement.

However, sometimes what may seem to be a clear fact to you may not appear to be a clear fact to someone else. Further, even 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. When our words reflect that our view is simply our opinion, we leave room for others to have their opinions.

Try making the following statements more responsible:

*“He’s the best one on the team.”*

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*“You’re just trying to make me feel guilty.”*

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*“The green one should go next to the blue one.”*

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### **Responsibility for Our Feelings**

The next skill is accepting responsibility for our *feelings*, a concept that can be difficult to grasp. When someone hits us, we feel pain. When someone we love dies, we feel sadness. It is therefore not a big leap to conclude that the other person, or the event, made us feel as we do. The problem is that there is an intermediate step, the “us”, that we don’t tend to take responsibility for. Consider that even if 99% of people in that situation would feel the same way that you do, there is still the other 1%. If another person, even one other person, would feel differently in that situation, it illustrates that you must play some role in developing your feelings. No one can “make” us feel anything without our cooperation. Also consider that regardless of how “normal”, “healthy”, or “predictable” your reaction is, it is *your* reaction. Responsibility for our feelings involves us realizing that when we feel something that it is *us* who is feeling it and that someone else in the same situation may feel differently. Of course this also involves realizing that others are responsible for *their feelings* too. Although we may want another person to feel something and we may behave in ways to promote this feeling in them, we can’t *make* them feel anything.

Accepting responsibility for our feelings eliminates a whole lot of statements that get us into communication difficulties. “You made me feel...” statements are a common example. “*You make me so angry.*” “*Stop making me feel guilty.*” “*You’re hurting my feelings.*” Healthy communication requires that we not blame others for our feelings, however tempting this may be. Responsible

communication involves simply stating the relationship between some event and your feelings, such as, “When you... I felt...”, or actively stating our responsibility such as, “When you... I make myself feel...”.

Rather than, “*You’re making me feel guilty.*”

Instead, “*I feel guilty.*”

Or, “*I think you want me to feel guilty, and I am.*”

Rather than, “*You should be more careful when you’re lighting a fire.*”

Instead, “*I’d like you to be more careful when you’re lighting a fire.*”

Or, “*I’d feel better if you made sure the children were further away when you’re lighting a fire.*”

Rather than, “*You make me mad.*”

Instead, “*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.*”

Rather than, “*You scare me.*”

Instead, “*I find your laugh a bit frightening.*”

Or, “*I get scared when you laugh like that.*”

Rather than, “*You’re hurting my feelings.*”

Instead, “*I feel really sad when you talk to me like that.*”

Or, “*I feel really sad when you’re disappointed with me.*”

Rather than, “*You are so irritating.*”

Instead, “*I am feeling very irritated with you.*”

Or, “*I get very irritated when you talk during the show.*”

Rather than, “*You make me feel so happy.*”

Instead, “*I am so happy being with you.*”

Or, “*When I’m with you all my worries seem to go away.*”

Rather than, “*Stop bugging me.*”

Instead, “*I’m finding that really irritating and I want you to stop now!*”

Or, “*When you keep pushing me for an answer, I feel very frustrated and I want you to stop now or I’m going home.*”

As I hope is apparent in these examples, healthy communication is not about being “nice”, but rather about being responsible and honest. If we don’t like something about someone, healthy communication isn’t about sugar-coating it, but about accepting responsibility for the fact that, while someone else might like it, I don’t. For example, Rachid may like a lot of sarcasm, but I find it hostile.

Blaming others for our feelings, or otherwise placing the source of our feelings and impulses outside of ourselves, is contributed to by a lack of self-acceptance. It also *perpetuates* a lack of self-acceptance. If we have a deep, inner conviction that our feelings are always acceptable and “OK” (the core of self-acceptance), then we are more inclined to just accept and express what we feel, without a need to justify it in terms of what happened to us. If our self-acceptance is more shaky, then we become more prone to looking for a solid justification to rationalize our feelings: “I’m angry because you...”, “You embarrassed me!” Conversely, the more that we practice just expressing our experience and feelings without defending or justifying them, the more we will gradually convince ourselves that our feelings and impulses are indeed alright. It helps to realize that feelings are always valid, acceptable, and OK, although what we do with our feelings will have consequences (positive or negative) for both ourselves and others.

Try making the following statements more responsible:

*“You’re frightening me.”*

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*“You’re hurting my feelings.”*

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*“Stop making me mad!”*

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### **Feelings and Beliefs**

For responsible communication, we need to know the difference between our feelings and other aspects of our experience. Our feelings refer to emotions and motivations such as feeling angry, sad, surprised, scared, embarrassed, hungry, sexually aroused, happy, thirsty, elated, etc. Feelings include liking something or not liking something. Our feelings are ours and are never right or wrong, they just are. If I feel hungry, it is ridiculous for someone else to agree or disagree with whether I am, although this certainly happens: *“You’re not hungry, you just ate an hour ago!”*. Only you can know your internal experience, which is what feelings refer to.

In contrast to our internal experience we have our beliefs about other people and the world. *“Firm beds are good for your back.” “Harry is tall.” “Susan talks a*

*lot.*” We also have judgments about people and things. We may think that Harry would make a good basketball player or that Susan is being inconsiderate.

The confusion between feelings and beliefs or judgements becomes a problem when we make a statement about our beliefs but disguise it as a statement about our feelings. For example, “I feel that you were inconsiderate.” is not a statement about a feeling but instead a belief or judgement about another person. “I feel this is a bad idea.” reflects beliefs about the idea being a poor plan. “I feel judged.” is actually a judgment about the other person (that they have judged you) that disguises your true feelings: perhaps hurt, inadequate, or resentful. This feeling/belief confusion muddies the waters in our communication because we put someone who disagrees with our belief in the position of appearing to disagree with our feeling.

Rather than, “*I feel that you’re a jerk.*” (a belief, not a feeling)

Instead, “*When I found out that you had left and hadn’t told me, I thought you’d been extremely inconsiderate of my feelings* (responsible statement of her belief) *and I felt furious* (responsible statement of her feelings).”

Rather than, “*I feel this is a bad idea.*” (a belief, not a feeling)

Instead, “*I have a bad feeling around this idea but I can’t put my finger on why.*” (responsible statement about a gut feeling where specific beliefs aren’t clear)

Or, “*I think this is a lousy plan and I think we will regret it big time.*” (responsible statement of his beliefs)

Make up some statements that improve upon these feeling/judgement confusions.

“*I feel you should go.*”

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“*I feel that our company will do well this year.*”

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## Encouragement

At times we may want others to reach a particular conclusion or make a certain choice. At these times we can consider our *intention*, and whether we are wanting to convince them to see things our way, or want to support them in finding their own way. *Encouragement* provides a way of offering this second approach.

At the heart of encouragement is, literally, *heart*, from the French word "coeur". Our intention is to support others in following their hearts, to do what truly matters to them. This is no small goal, because in a contest between our hearts and our fear, all of us are inclined to be run by our fear<sup>1</sup>. Most of what we wish for others, and for ourselves, involves tolerating some temporary distress or discomfort in order to reach a more meaningful goal.

- To find a good boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, or wife, we must be willing to put ourselves out there, often requiring time and effort, and necessarily risking rejection.
- To become good at any skill, whether a sport, playing a musical instrument, or career expertise, we spend many hours floundering and failing before we begin to gain a sense of mastery.
- To get into a good school or to find a good job, we usually have to put in the work of applying to many, and then tolerating inevitable rejections.

In order for us to tolerate this distress and discomfort we need courage. We need to keep our awareness of what really matters to us at the front of our minds so that we are willing to do the uncomfortable things rather than succumbing to short-term comfort. To *encourage* involves relating to others in a way that supports their courage in doing what will truly serve them (and others) rather than them doing what is comfortable and familiar.

### A Different Kind of Encouragement

The encouragement I am writing about here, what I would call "real" encouragement, is different from how the word is often used.

*"Oh come on Sarah. I think you should go for it. You've got the skill, experience, and I know you'll do great!"*

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<sup>1</sup> While some of us display great courage in one area of our lives, it is typically lacking in other areas of our lives. We are usually blind to our lack of courage because we have come up with many apparently-reasonable rationalizations for continuing to do what we do.

Unfortunately, this doesn't have much to do with what Sarah wants, or her concerns. When others are doing things, or planning to do things, in ways that we don't think serves them or others, it can be very compelling to try to convince them to do things differently. Indeed, what I actually did was to tell Sarah what *I* think she should do and why *I* think she should do it. Although she may feel good knowing that I think positively of her, and she may value my opinion, this approach usually backfires.

It's easy to see why. If you think about a difficult decision in your own life you'll realize that as soon as someone starts trying to talk you into something, you'll quickly come up with the reasons against it. While your friend might be trying to talk you into doing something good for you, it ends up provoking you to talk yourself out of doing it. There is very strong research demonstrating this, even showing that how much someone changes their views goes up and down over the course of a conversation, all in reaction to how much we push our views on them!

When someone tries to convince us to see things their way, or to do things in a particular way, we usually feel like our autonomy is being challenged. To regain a sense of autonomy we are likely to push back, even when this goes against what might be best for us. This happens a lot when parents are controlling with their children because the control naturally evokes the "misbehaviour" that the parents are trying to stop.

Imagine that Mindy has been in a relationship with an abusive guy. Her friend Allysha says:

"C'mon girl. You gotta dump that a-hole. He's been treating you like crap. Lyin' and cheatin' on you. You're a beautiful woman with lots of other options."

And what is Mindy likely to say?

If Mindy's decision was as black and white as Allysha is implying, she would have left the guy a long time ago. She's staying because there are things about being with him that she likes and doesn't want to lose. So as soon as Allysha tells her about the reasons to leave, she'll think "yes, but..." and think about all the reasons she wants to stay.

The most important thing about *encouragement* is your intention to support the other person in making the best decision for *them*, not in telling them what *you* think is best for them. The more that we can avoid directing others, telling them what to do or feel, the more likely they'll make the best decision for themselves, and develop the courage to keep making better decisions in the future.



Along with you offering others what is actually most helpful for them, practicing *encouragement* will save you from frustrating conflict in your relationships. While it is entirely fine to tell others what we want, telling them what they should do is a recipe for a struggle. Consider how much of your difficulty with your partner, or with your children, are due to power struggles over you wanting them to do something, or not do something. Imagine the relief you would get if you could minimize this.

So, what does *encouragement* actually look like in practice? We start with skilled compassionate acknowledgement of the person's experience. This alone is very potent for helping people decide what they truly want. Beyond this there are questions we can ask that support others in reflecting more deeply on their choices, and in succeeding with their plans. Finally, we can offer sensitive, responsible expressions of our own feelings about their situation.

Imagine yourself struggling with a difficult situation and how wonderful it would be to have someone really understand it and to speak with you in a way that evokes your own courage to follow your deepest values and desires. For most of us this would be gold. I therefore consider *encouragement* to be among the greatest gifts we can offer to another person. It is, however, an advanced skill and it depends on a fair level of mastery of the other skills. Fortunately, you don't need to be skilled at encouragement to get tremendous benefit from learning the other skills. If you're reading this book for the first time then I suggest that you simply skim through the rest of this section, or skip it entirely, and then return to it when you're ready. (The next section begins on page 31.)

### **Compassionate Acknowledgement is the Foundation of Encouragement**

Encouragement is the most difficult of the skills to master, but the good news is that you already know about the most important part. The most powerful way of promoting people making positive choices in their life is by compassionately acknowledging their experience. Research shows that even among trained counsellors, their skill at compassionately acknowledging peoples experience is the most important factor in facilitating their client's improvement. When someone accurately captures what we are saying, it helps us to become clearer about our own experience. The benefits of making a difficult choice become more apparent to us.

The other big benefit is that when someone clearly understands our experience, we have nothing to fight against. Most interpersonal anger and conflict is due to resentment over the other person not seeming to understand or respect us. When someone compassionately acknowledges our experience then we have the sense that they understand us, that they are on our side, even if they don't agree with us

about everything. I'm then going to be much more likely to listen to anything else they might say.

So, Allysha could best help Mindy by compassionately saying:

*"I get how hard it's been for you living with Jason. He's betrayed you so many times. Sometimes he treats you good, and you feel hopeful, but then he always gets mean again. That really sucks, Mindy."*

Allysha is simply acknowledging what Mindy has told her. Of course, compassionate listening is not a one-shot deal, so Allysha would best listen to what Mindy says next, and again acknowledge it. Mindy might say:

*"Yeah, it's been pretty crappy. Every time I get my hopes up he does some other shitty thing. It's always been like that."*

Mindy is now fleshing out, for both herself and Allysha, just how bad it is with her boyfriend. Allysha can then acknowledge:

*"I'm so sorry, girl. You keep hoping that it's going to get better, but it never does."*

Now Mindy has heard back the essence of what she has been saying, and it's a pretty strong statement about how hopeless her relationship really is. Allysha got here by simply acknowledging Mindy's experience, whereas if she had started with, "Your relationship is hopeless girl! You gotta dump that mofo.", Mindy would have just defended him.

So, encouragement is a skill that builds upon the previous skills that you have read about. It begins with being clear about your *intention* to support the person in following their heart, what really matters to them, rather than you trying to convince them of some conclusion or what you think they should do. As just noted, much of what is genuinely encouraging naturally flows from you *compassionately acknowledging* their experience. And as explained below, when you express your own views or desires, it is crucial to express them *responsibly* or you risk pushing the other person into arguing with you.

## Encouraging Questions

Upon this foundation of compassionately acknowledging the other person's experience, there are two areas where our sensitive questioning may support them. The first is supporting them in reflecting deeply on their situation and on the options or choices that they have. Once they have made a decision about what they

want to do, the second way we can support them is with questions that support them in being successful in what they are wanting to do.

### **Questions to support deeper reflection on their choices**

It can be very compelling to tell people all of the reasons we have for them to make a particular choice. This is rarely helpful because people usually have more understanding and awareness of the different sides to a story, and the pros and cons of different choices, than they initially speak about. If you are the one giving voice to one perspective or option, it puts them in the position of arguing for the other perspective or option.

It is quite possible, however that the person is focussed on their short-term relief or pleasure, and may not be thinking about other things they need to consider to make the best choice for themselves. We can therefore support them in getting what most matters to them by simply prompting them to reflect on things they already know. Our intention is crucial and will be reflected in our voice tone; we are not trying to convince them or manipulate them. We are inviting them to tell us what they already know. We may ask them what they already know about the issue or situation they are in, we can ask if they have any concerns about their plan or choice, or we can invite them to take a step back to look at their situation with more perspective.

#### Invite them to share what they already know about the situation.

For example, Allysha could ask Mindy, *“I guess you’ve already read lots about abusive relationships online?”*

To a reluctant child: *“I bet you know why we brush our teeth?”*

To a pregnant friend: *“What have you already heard about drinking during pregnancy?”*

To a spouse angry at his boss: *“What do you think will happen if you tell him off like that?”*

#### Ask if they have any concerns about what they are doing or plan to do.

After we have acknowledged the person’s experience and feelings, they usually feel more open to expressing their concerns, fears, and any downsides around their idea or plan.

For example, Allysha might ask:

*“I get that you’re gonna stay with him, for now at least. Do you have any worries about doing that?”*

There are many ways that we can word this, depending on the particular situation the person is in.

*“It sounds like you’re pretty sold on this idea, Hakeem. Do you see any downsides?”*

*“I get you’ve decided to just end your marriage with Mariam and carry-on with Sakura. Are you worried about any fallout?”*

*“You’re so mad at George that when you see him at school tomorrow you’re going to go and punch him, huh. It sure sounds like you’re really, really mad. Do you think anything bad might happen if you punch him?”*

In these situations, the other person has an idea or a plan but we are concerned that it won’t serve them well. By acknowledging their plan and their reasons for it, and then asking them for any of their concerns, we are inviting them to give voice to their own doubts and hesitation. Instead of us imposing it on them, it is much more potent when they speak it themselves.

Then, after the person has expressed their concerns or doubts, we can again compassionately acknowledge what they have said.

*“OK, so you really want to keep seeing Sakura, and you hate how Mariam nags you. But there are things about Mariam that you really like, that you’ll miss, and you’re mighty afraid over how upset your family will be because they really like her.”*

In the end we want the person to make choices that will support his well-being in the long run rather than making a more impulsive decision that will feel easiest in the short run. If we are respectful of other people’s autonomy, we don’t tell them what to do, but we can promote them considering their own hesitations and doubts.

### Ask them what they think will be best in the long run

Particularly when we are emotionally upset, dealing with intrusive feelings, our views of the situation and planning tend to be more focussed on getting us relief in the short term. This question simply invites the person to broaden their thinking to reflect more on the big picture, including the long-term consequences.

*"Given what you've said so far, what do you think would serve you best in the long run?"*

*"If you were to be looking back at your life five years from now, or even on your deathbed, what would future you want you to do now?"*

### **Questions to support succeeding with their plans**

We humans have a strong tendency to expect our plans to work out as we imagined them in our minds. We don't tend to consider the things that are likely, or predictably, going to go wrong. For example, we are usually prone to underestimating how long something will take to do because we imagine the steps working out well, when in reality there will be problems we hadn't expected. Similarly, we may arrive at our plan when we are feeling relatively good or strong, not really considering that it will be harder to follow through once we are actually in the difficult situation. These questions support others in being successful in following through with what really matters to them by prompting them to consider predictable problems or obstacles so they are prepared for them ahead of time.

#### Ask them what might get in the way of their plan

Allysha might ask Mindy:

*"I'm so glad that you've decided to leave him. I know it's a tough choice. What do you think the hardest parts will be?"*

Other examples:

*"I'm really glad that you decided to stop drinking, Olivia. From what you've said, booze really messes up your life. What do you see being different this time? (compared to the other times you've tried to stop?)"*

or

*"I'm really glad you've decided to stop drinking, Olivia. Can you think of anything that might get in the way of you being successful this time?"*

#### Ask them how they might deal with these obstacles.

Allysha might ask Mindy:

*“So it gets really hard when he apologizes and begs you to stay, especially when he promises it’ll never happen again. I know you don’t wanna cave again, so what do you think you’ll do?”*

Other example:

*“So you think the toughest times to keep sober will be at a party or with your friends after work. What do you think you can do to keep sober in these situations?”*

Ask them about anything they would like you to do to help them succeed.

It’s often surprising what other people really want from us, so it’s best to actually ask. Of course that doesn’t mean that we have to agree to do it.

Allysha might ask Mindy:

*“Girl, I know this is gonna be real painful, leavin’ him after all this time. But I’m gonna be with you! What you need from me so you don’t cave when he come crawlin’ back?”*

Other examples:

*“I know this won’t be easy, Azim, but it sounds like you’re pretty clear on what you need to do. Is there anything you want from me that would be helpful?”*

*“I know you really hate brushing your teeth before bedtime sweetie. Is there anything I could do to make it easier for you?”*

### **Sensitive, Responsible Expressions of Your Feelings**

Finally, while *telling* others what to do is not encouraging, responsibly expressing our own feelings, can be.

Allysha could say:

*“I know that there are some good things about Jason. I just find it really painful to watch you getting hurt over and over.”*

This conveys Allysha’s caring for her friend, but without telling her what to do. Obviously, knowing that others care about us promotes us feeling better, and when we feel good about ourselves we become more courageous.

Other example:

*“I sure understand not wanting to brush your teeth; some nights I hate doing it too. And I really want you to grow up to have healthy teeth and gums.”*

### **Summary of Encouragement**

Encouragement means supporting others in following their hearts, in doing what really matters most to them. It mostly involves skilled, compassionate acknowledgement of other people's experience, which is the most potent way to support others in exploring the realities of their lives and their choices.

It also includes questions that support others in exploring their options more deeply and in promoting their success with their plans. These encouraging questions are more like sprinkles on top of a bowl of compassionate listening ice cream. They can be a valuable addition, but make a relatively small contribution compared to what we offer through compassionately acknowledging what others are telling us.

Finally, we can also encourage others by sensitively and responsibly expressing our feelings about their circumstances and choices. Our intention must be to share our caring feelings about the other person, rather than our judgments about their choices.

## Some Final Pointers

### What iCARE is Not

Now that you know what the iCARE way of communicating is, I might make it clearer by noting what it isn't. The iCARE is based on the principle that you care about the well-being of both yourself and the other person and want a closer and more cooperative relationship, with less conflict. If you don't really care very much about the other person's well-being, or your relationship with them, and really just want to get your own way, then there are lots of very common, popular things that you can do.

- You can yell, threaten, or insult them
- You can manipulate them with guilt, ridicule them, or shame them
- You can lie to them
- You can withhold your affection or refuse to talk to them
- You can try to persuade them with logic or lecture about why your way is better
- You can appeal to some outside authority, telling them what is right or appropriate
- You can give them unsolicited advice
- You can explain their choice or preference in terms of their personality flaws

I'd like to be able to claim that I never do any of these things, but I'm still inclined to try to persuade with logic. Since I heard a therapist refer to "the tyranny of logic" I've tried to cut back. Of course I still value logic, but I'm less inclined to push it on others. I suspect that you can see some of your own favourite gambits in the list above, and our challenge is to refrain from them while instead using the iCARE skills to promote closeness, cooperation, and well-being.

### Check It Out

Above I discussed *curious invitation* as a part of compassion, and *check it out* expands on the importance of asking others about their experience. Much difficulty in relationships results from our rather arrogant beliefs that our perceptions, interpretations, and judgements are correct, and that there is therefore no reason to get the other person's perspective. We carry on, having our feelings and taking action, without considering that perhaps we were mistaken, or at least that there may be additional valuable information. There is *always* valuable information to be gained from checking out the other person's perspective, even if it only confirms our perceptions and judgements (which it rarely will).

Rather than, "*Why do you treat me like crap all the time?*"



Instead, *"When you call me names, I feel lousy and assume that you want me to feel lousy and don't really care about me. Is that what goes on for you?"*

Rather than, *"You're always such a grouch."*

Instead, *"You seem pretty angry?"*

Rather than, *"I've told you a million times to do it this way, but you're so pig-headed you won't listen to anyone."*

Instead, *"I'm feeling really hurt and frustrated that you again didn't do what I asked. Do you just forget, can't you stand not to do it your way, or what?"*

Rather than, *"You selfish bastard!"*

Instead, *"You don't seem to care about what I want. Do you?"*

Or, *"What was going through your head when you took the last piece of cake?"*

This simple step of checking it out is both very valuable and extremely difficult. It is valuable because the difficulties we have in relationships are often due to our unique patterns of persistently judging others in the same mistaken ways. As discussed in *Being Human*, the deeper roots of this relationship difficulty are in our early experiences of the world, usually with our parents, and we unconsciously continue to make judgments about others based on the expectations we developed in childhood. It is only through persistently checking out our judgements that we will ever be able to correct them. Unfortunately, we are least inclined to check out the judgments we most persistently make, both because they are so automatic that we are least aware that we are making the judgements, and because we often don't really want to have our negative judgements confirmed. Believing that someone we care about is inconsiderate or otherwise doesn't care about us is painful. To have it confirmed would be that much more painful. It would, however, be rather important information to have.

Try to imagine some ways to improve upon these statements, including responsibly stating your beliefs and checking them out.

*"You've never liked me so why don't you leave."*

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*"You're just trying to make me feel guilty."*

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*"You always think you're better than everyone else."*

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### **“Just the Facts, Ma’am”**

The higher the level of conflict in a relationship, the more that communication needs to have a basic foundation upon which each person agrees. This can be challenging because, as I discussed above, there are no pure facts and two people can disagree about some event they have each just witnessed. However, there are some types of statements that are more likely to be agreed upon than others. Particularly when communicating with others in conflictual situations, it is valuable to begin with statements that are fairly close to your sensory experience (your five senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch). Begin by stating what you saw, heard, smelled, etc. with as little interpretation of the event as possible.

- *“I thought I saw you take my beer.”*

- *“I believe you said that you wanted me here by eight o’clock.”*

- *“I’m smelling something rotten.”*

Rather than, *“You are a selfish pig.”*

Instead, *“When I saw you take the last piece of cake (what he thought he saw) I figured that you weren’t thinking about the rest of us...(his belief or judgement)”*. Or, *“When I saw you take a piece of cake (what he actually saw), which I assume was the last one, (his interpretation) I thought that you weren’t thinking about the rest of us (his belief or judgement).”*

Rather than, *“You don’t love me anymore!”*

Instead, *“I heard you get out of bed early (what she thought she heard) and I imagined that you wanted to get away from me (her interpretation or belief).”*

If we begin with statements that each person is most likely to agree as being “the facts”, from here we can each discuss our different interpretations and feelings about an event. Staying close to sensory experience is valuable because it gives us a shared foundation upon which to base our communication. We may not agree that I am a selfish pig, but we are more likely to agree that I took the last piece of cake. However, realize that all of our experience is individual to us, and that even basic sensory experience may be open to interpretation, as athletes and referees can attest. Even in the first example, it may surprise us to find out it was not the last piece of cake, that there are more pieces of cake in the refrigerator.

### **Keep it Brief**

When communicating around conflict, keep your statements relatively brief. It often takes more words to be clear and responsible, but if we go on and on, then the other person will have difficulty remembering all the points we are making and we are not giving them an opportunity to respond.

**One Issue at a Time**

Particularly in higher conflict situations, it can tempt us to bring out a trunk load of past resentments or evidence to bolster our case. It's hard enough to communicate well around one issue or event and nearly impossible to cope with a barrage of them. Keep it simple.

**Stay Connected, Even at a Distance.**

Sometimes we may not be able to compose ourselves enough to think straight or to communicate responsibly. At these times it is reasonable and advisable to take a break - a time-out until you are ready to re-engage. However, just walking away in a huff is not a responsible way of taking space, and it often triggers our partner's anxiety over being abandoned, or anger over being rejected. Instead, we can simply leave some kind of verbal lifeline to indicate we are taking time out but intend to reconnect. *"I'm too upset to talk about this now. I'll be back in about ten minutes (or an hour, or ten hours) and we can talk then."* Or *"I want you to know that I love you but I just don't know what to make of all this and I'll need some time alone to sort it out. I'll call you tomorrow."*

**I Forgot to Use the iCARE Skills!**

As I noted at the beginning, these are skills and the first challenge is getting good at them through intentional practice. The worksheets below will help with that.

The other big challenge we face is using the skills when we are emotionally triggered. You might discover that you are becoming pretty good at using the skills at work, and usually remember with your kids as well, but they go out the window when you start to fight with your partner. This is a very human problem, and you are not alone.

The first solution is to be practising the iCARE skills when you are not emotionally upset. The more automatic it becomes for you to turn to these skills, the easier it will be when things get heated.

The other solution is to cultivate an increased ability to navigate your own triggered feelings. I consider this to be one of the major pillars of well-being. You can find more free information about this at [Feel Good - For You](https://drgeoffreycarr.com/feel-good-free/feel-good/) <https://drgeoffreycarr.com/feel-good-free/feel-good/>

### A Sample Conversation

Jerry: I am fuming so bad my head may explode. When you took my car through that cruddy carwash at the garage, it scratched the paint all to heck. I told you never to use that thing and now the paintjob I just did last month is ruined. I figure that you just don't care about things that are important to me. Give me a minute to calm down and then I want to know why you did it.... Okay, go ahead.

Sasha: Jerry, I get how furious you're feeling. You've just finished putting all that work into your car and now it seems ruined. I'm really sorry that the paint is scratched. I remember you telling me not to take the car to the carwash at the station but I thought you meant the one down by the supermarket and I took it to the one up by the highway. I actually thought you'd be pleased to have your car washed. I could have been more careful though, like double-checked with you first.

Jerry: I hear what you're saying, but I could have sworn that I mentioned Smith's service station. I don't know. It just seems to me that my things keep getting ruined, broken, or misplaced.

Sasha: I get that you thought that you mentioned Smith's station. I don't remember hearing it. I realize that you often seem to feel as if I don't care about your things. All I can tell you is that I care about you and your feelings, and I realize that your things are important to you.

Jerry: I feel relieved hearing that. I realize that I should know from all the things you do for me that you care about my feelings. I've always been sensitive about my stuff, as far back as I can remember. I'm still really upset about my car though.

Any conversation can go many different ways. Why would one that starts off with as much conflict and distress as this one go like this, leaving them connected? Let's take another look. Notice the use of the **iCARE**, with the relevant letter in bold, below. Also notice the elements of compassion (*WET*), and some of the Final Pointers, capitalized.

### A Conversation: Slow-Motion Replay

Jerry: I am fuming so bad my head may explode (*Responsibly expresses Feelings*). When you took my car through that cruddy carwash at the garage it scratched the paint all to heck (*Statement of facts, could have been closer to sensory experience*). I told you never to use that crappy place and now the paintjob I just did last month is ruined. I figure that you just don't care about things that are important to me (*Responsible statement of Experience*). Give me a minute to

calm down and then I want to know why you did it... Okay, go ahead (*Checks Out his judgements*).

Sasha: Jerry, I get how furious you feel (*Compassionate acknowledgment of Jerry's Experience*). You've just finished putting all that work into your car and now it seems ruined (*Compassionate acknowledgement of Jerry's Words*). I'm really sorry the paint is scratched (*Responsible expression of own feelings without taking on blame*). I remember you telling me not to take the car to the carwash at the station but I thought you meant the one down by the supermarket and I took it to the one up by the highway (*Responsible expression of Sasha's interpretation of events*). I actually thought you'd be pleased to have your car washed (*Responsible expression of her attributions about Jerry's feelings*). I could have been more careful though, like double-checked with you first. (*Compassionate acknowledgment of some Truth in Jerry's experience*.)

Jerry: I hear what you're saying (*Compassionate, though minimal, acknowledgment of Sasha's Words*), but I could have sworn that I mentioned Smith's service station (*Responsible expression of his Experience*). I don't know. It just seems to me that my things keep getting ruined, broken, or misplaced (*Responsible expression of his Experience*).

Sasha: I get that you thought that you mentioned Smith's station (*Compassionate acknowledgment of Jerry's Words*). I don't remember hearing it (*Responsibly expressing her Experience as contrasting with his, not trying to claim either was right*). I realize that you often seem to feel as if I don't care about your things (*Compassionate acknowledgment of his Words*), and all I can tell you is that I care about you and your feelings, and I realize that your things are important to you (*Compassionate acknowledgment of Jerry's Experience and Responsible expression of her Experience and Feelings towards him*).

Jerry: I feel relieved hearing that (*Responsible expression of his feeling*). I realize that I should know from all the things that you do for me that you care about my feelings (*Responsible reflection on his Experience, Appreciation*). I've always been sensitive about my stuff, as far back as I can remember (*Responsibility for Feelings*). I'm still really upset about my car though. (*Responsible expression of Feelings*)

Emotionally intense discussions like this can easily go badly, into blame, resentment, and hostility. This one worked because both Jerry and Sasha followed the principles of the iCARE. They Compassionately acknowledged the Words, Experience, and Truth of what the other expressed, they spoke Responsibly, and were able to express Appreciation. Their intentions were apparent in their willingness to be compassionately present with each other and responsible in how they expressed themselves. Most people in Jerry's position would have wanted to

blame Sasha for ruining the paint on his car (taking the position of the victim) and most people in Sasha's position would have become defensive and hostile over being attacked when she was simply trying to do something nice for Jerry ("He never appreciates my efforts and only complains").

### **Communication Worksheets**

We don't become Jerrys and Sashas without dedicated effort. Fortunately, life is very generous in offering us opportunities to work on our communication skills. We can find them both in the future and in the past! There are often situations that we anticipate being difficult for us, and we can use those to work on our skills before we arrive in the situations. We can learn from the past whenever we have conversations that don't go well. They offer us a golden opportunity to practice how we would have liked to communicate with others. We will very likely have similar opportunities in the future where this practice will pay off. I encourage people to work on these worksheets daily, until your relationships are as harmonious as you want and conflicts are easily resolved. As I wrote at the beginning of this guide, we can always become better at applying these skills, and the benefits are always worth our effort. The Daily Communication Practice sheet can also be downloaded as a printable PDF at [Create Better Relationships](https://drgeoffreycarr.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/CreateBetterRelationships.pdf)  
<https://drgeoffreycarr.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/CreateBetterRelationships.pdf>

## Daily Communication Practice

Here we use past interactions with others to practice and, through this, improve our future interactions. We work on this on our own, and can improve our relationships regardless of what the other person says or does.

Pick a recent interaction that was distressing or less than great. Choose a few words to identify it: (e.g. "Fight over the car.") \_\_\_\_\_

What did the other person say or do? (Write it down as accurately as you can remember).

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What did you say or do? (Write it down as accurately as you can remember).

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How is the other person likely to feel based on what you said? (Not what you intended, but what is predictable or likely. Or, maybe check with someone else, "If someone said this to you, how would you probably feel?")

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We may be surprised that the very behaviour we don't like from others is often evoked by what we say & do.

Now come up with a more fruitful response to the other person using the iCARE points below.

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**intention** - What is your intention is what you are saying to the other person. Are you trying to be right, to win? Do you actually want to understand their experience and to have them understand yours?

**Compassion** – Are you checking to see if you understand the other person's experience using WET below?

**Words:** Did you begin by acknowledging what the other person said, capturing the essence of what they expressed?  
Demonstrating that you understood what they said is powerful. "Oh, so when I didn't call you back you figured that I got a better offer and didn't bother telling you."

**Experience:** Did you express your hunch about what the other person was likely feeling, their emotions or desires? The other person may have told you what they were experiencing, and if not, you can still make your best guess: "I imagine you felt really annoyed with me for that."

**Truth:** Did you acknowledge the truth, even a grain of truth, in what the other person expressed, finding some validity even if you disagree with most of what they said? "Well, I've got to agree. I said I was going to call you back and I didn't."

**Appreciation** - Is there an opportunity to express something you genuinely like about the other person?

**Responsibility** - When you express your experience, are you expressing your truth without blaming others?

**Encouragement** - Are you supporting what really matters to them, or pushing your own agenda?

## Communication Skills Practice: Future Situation

Consider an upcoming interaction that you are worried about.

**i:** What am I really hoping to get out of this conversation? What are my true *intentions*?

Is my intention aligned with what matters to me? Would it be useful to share my intention with the other person?

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What do I expect the other person to say?

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**C:** How can I respond with *compassion* to their likely:

*Words:*

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*Experience or Feelings:*

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*Truth in what They Say:*

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**A:** Is there a good place to say what I *appreciate* about them? If so, what could I tell them?

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**R:** What words can I use to express my experience and feelings *responsibly*? (Not blaming them or my circumstances for my feelings or behaviour.)