

Barriers to Effective Communication

Some of the ways we communicate can make things worse, not better:

Not listening to the other person

Listening is at least half of communication, and is almost always the problem when it comes to communication breakdowns.

What gets in the way of listening? Our mental habits, namely:

- Judging what is being said (e.g. "That's not right")
- Concentrating on what we want to say
- Going someplace else in our mind (e.g. "What am I having for dinner tonight?")

Instead of listening to the other person, we're listening to our own thoughts. Focus on what the other person is saying and show them that you are listening. This can be done by:

- Nodding your head
- Maintaining eye contact with the person
- Reflecting back what they are saying to them (e.g. "So you're saying you're feeling really upset at the moment and you feel like I haven't been as supportive as I could be?")

Avoidance

Avoidance is about putting off what we need to say to the other person because we think it'll be unpleasant or even painful. The problem with this is that it stops us from resolving issues as they arise, which can lead to tensions and resentment. While you'll feel better in the short-term, your relationship will deteriorate as the resentment grows. Avoidance stems from fear of conflict and/or disapproval.

Here are some common beliefs ('thinking errors') that cause avoidance –



Raising the issue will only cause an argument
Everyone should like and approve of me
If someone is hostile to me, it's awful and I can't stand it

Source: Adapted from Edelman, S. (2008)

'You' Statements

'You' statements are expressed in a hostile, uncompromising way, and put the other person on the defensive. When others feel judged or under attack they usually stop listening, planning their counterattack instead.

Here are some examples of 'you' statements –

'You' messages stem from anger, defensiveness or disapproval. Making 'you' statements can be a way of avoiding having to acknowledge our own feelings and placing the responsibility for how we



Labels	<i>"You're just a junkie" or "You're just an Alcoholic"</i>
Overgeneralisations	<i>"You're always negative and critical"</i>
Sarcasm	<i>"And you've got all the answers... don't you?"</i>
Threats	<i>"If you don't change I'll leave you"</i>

Source: Adapted from Edelman, S. (2008)

feel onto someone else.

How can we change this pattern?

'I' statements make it clear how we feel. For this reason they can be perceived as exposing us or making us more vulnerable, and using them can take a bit of getting used to. However, after a while 'I' statements can become quite liberating, as they're a useful tool in communicating more assertively.

Have a look at our Assertive Communication and Active Listening sheets for more information on these subjects.