

Different Communication Styles

Understanding how we communicate, think and express ourselves differently

Two people can care deeply about one another and still communicate in very different ways. One person may speak immediately and process thoughts aloud, while another needs silence before they know what they think. One may communicate through emotion and reassurance; another may show care through practical action. One person may be very direct while another relies on hints, tone or context. Neither style is automatically better, but difficulties arise when we assume the other person communicates for the same reasons and in the same way that we do.

Many relationship conflicts are therefore not only about what was said. They are about how it was said, what was expected to be understood without being said, how quickly a response was expected and what each person believed the other person's behaviour meant.

Direct and indirect communication

A direct communicator may state exactly what they want, need or dislike. To them, clarity can feel respectful and efficient. An indirect communicator may soften requests, use context, hints or questions, or expect somebody close to them to notice what is needed. To them, directness can sometimes feel abrupt or confrontational. Problems occur when directness is interpreted as hostility, or indirectness is interpreted as manipulation or a refusal to say what is wrong.

Emotional and practical communication

When something difficult happens, one person may need empathy first: 'That sounds really hard.' Another may instinctively offer a solution: 'Here's what we can do.' The practical response may be an expression of care, yet the person seeking emotional connection can experience it as dismissal. Conversely, somebody wanting practical help may feel frustrated by a long emotional discussion when they are trying to solve an immediate problem.

Different does not automatically mean uncaring. Before deciding what somebody's communication means, it can help to ask what they intended it to mean.

Verbal and non-verbal communication

Some people communicate most comfortably through spoken language. Others rely heavily on facial expression, gesture, touch, written messages or actions. Difficulties can develop when one person expects affection or reassurance to be spoken while the other believes their behaviour already communicates it. It can be useful for couples to make these expectations explicit rather than assuming love, care or concern should be obvious.

Neurodivergent communication

Autistic and ADHD communication can differ from common social expectations. An autistic person may communicate very directly, interpret language literally, need explicit information, find eye contact uncomfortable or require longer processing time. ADHD can affect attention, working memory, impulse control, emotional regulation and the ability to retain several points during a conversation. Someone may interrupt because they fear losing a thought, forget a request they genuinely intended to complete, or become overwhelmed by a conversation containing many issues at once. Understanding these differences can reduce moral interpretations such as 'you don't care' or 'you're deliberately ignoring me,' while still allowing both people to discuss impact and responsibility.

Learning Each Other's Communication Language

Healthy communication does not require both people to become identical communicators. It involves learning enough about one another to translate between different styles. That may mean becoming more explicit, allowing processing time, checking meaning, agreeing how to signal overwhelm or learning whether a partner needs empathy, practical help or both.

A communication-style check-in

When upset	Do I want to talk immediately, have quiet time, write first, seek reassurance or solve the problem?
When listening	Do I need eye contact, movement, fewer words, written information or time to process?
When asking	Am I direct about what I need, or do I hope the other person will notice or infer it?
When caring	Do I show care through words, touch, practical actions, time, humour, problem-solving or something else?
When overloaded	What happens to my communication? Do I become quiet, fast, repetitive, defensive, tearful or unable to find words?
To reconnect	What helps me return to a difficult conversation safely and constructively?

Try asking instead of assuming

Useful questions can include: 'Do you want me to listen or help you think of solutions?' 'Do you need an answer now or would it help if I thought about this first?' 'When you went quiet, what was happening for you?' 'What did you understand me to mean?' and 'How would you prefer me to raise something difficult?' Questions like these turn communication differences into information rather than evidence that somebody does not care.

When styles become patterns of conflict

Communication styles can become locked into cycles. The more one person pursues a conversation, the more the other withdraws; the more one withdraws, the more urgently the first person pursues. One person's detailed explanation may make another feel overwhelmed, while the other's short answer may make the first feel dismissed. Identifying the cycle allows the couple to work against the pattern rather than against each other.

When additional support can help

Relationship counselling or couples therapy can help when communication differences repeatedly turn into distress, defensiveness or disconnection. Where autism or ADHD is part of the relationship, it can be particularly important to work with someone who understands neurodivergent communication and does not assume that one communication style is inherently healthier than another.

Books to explore

Nonviolent Communication by Marshall B. Rosenberg offers a framework for discussing observations, feelings, needs and requests. **Hold Me Tight** by Sue Johnson explores emotional connection and recurring relationship cycles. **The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work** by John Gottman and

Nan Silver draws on relationship research and includes practical exercises. Use any model flexibly: relationships, cultures and neurotypes differ.

**You do not have to communicate in exactly the same way to understand one another.
Sometimes the most important shift is moving from 'Why don't you communicate like me?' to
'Help me understand how communication works for you.'**

This resource provides general information and reflection rather than individual clinical advice. Communication strategies are not a substitute for specialist safety support where there is abuse, coercive control, intimidation or fear.