Small Changes, Big Difference

A practical guide to making communication feel safer, clearer and more manageable

Why small changes matter

Communication difficulties are rarely caused by one person alone. Timing, sensory load, fatigue, uncertainty, different processing speeds and past experiences can all influence how a conversation unfolds. A small adjustment can change the conditions around a difficult moment without asking anyone to change who they are.

The key principle

Notice the pressure → make one small adjustment → observe what changes → keep or adapt it.

THE COMMUNICATION PRESSURE LOOP

Trigger	Interpretation	Reaction	Impact
A short reply	They are upset	Defend or withdraw	More distance

Where to interrupt the loop

Try asking what was meant before deciding what it means. If either person is overwhelmed, agree to return to the topic at a specific time. This is not avoiding the issue: it is making space for a better conversation.

Reflection: What small change could interrupt a familiar pattern?

Try this today

Choose just one adjustment: ask a clarifying question, lower the pace, or request a pause.

When assumptions take over

Move from mind-reading to curiosity without dismissing your feelings

An interpretation is not a fact

A delayed reply, a flat tone or a change of plans may feel rejecting. Sometimes that interpretation is accurate; sometimes it is only one possibility. Neurodivergent communication differences, stress and limited energy can all affect how messages are delivered or received.

Example: “Fine.”

Possible meanings: agreement, tiredness, frustration, a need for quiet, or simply a brief communication style.

THE THREE-PERSPECTIVE CHECK

1. What I noticed

Describe only what happened, without interpretation.

2. What I assumed

Name the meaning your mind supplied.

3. What else fits?

Consider two other possibilities; then check respectfully.

A helpful way to check

“When the conversation stopped suddenly, I worried I had upset you. Was that what was happening, or did you need a break?” This shares your experience while leaving room for the other person to explain.

A situation I interpreted quickly — and two other possible explanations:

Overload changes communication

Recognise the point where a conversation needs a different approach

Stress changes what is available

During overload, it can become harder to find words, listen, organise thoughts or manage competing sensory information. Someone may go quiet, speak sharply, repeat themselves or need to leave. These responses do not automatically tell us what they feel about the relationship.

A SIMPLE COMMUNICATION CAPACITY SCALE

1 Steady	Talk and listen normally
2 Strained	Slow down; use short questions
3 Overloaded	Pause; reduce demands
4 Shutdown	Allow space; reconnect later

Agree on a pause plan in advance

Use a shared phrase such as “I need 20 minutes, and I will come back at 7 pm.” A pause works best when reconnection is clear.

What are my earliest signs that communication is becoming difficult?

What would a respectful pause and return look like for us?

Words that create room

Practical scripts for clarity, boundaries and repair

Clarity can be kind

Direct language is not necessarily harsh, and gentle language need not be vague. Try saying what you noticed, what you need and what you are asking for. Give the other person room to respond, and avoid requiring an immediate answer when they are overloaded.

Instead of: “You never listen.”

Try: “I need to know you heard the important part. Can we check what we understood?”

Instead of: “Why are you ignoring me?”

Try: “I noticed you have been quiet. Would you prefer space or a conversation?”

Instead of: “Calm down.”

Try: “This feels intense. Would a break help, or should I listen without solving?”

Instead of: “You should know what I mean.”

Try: “I may not have explained that clearly. Here is what I am asking for.”

Repair after a difficult exchange

A repair does not require either person to deny their feelings. It might sound like: “I spoke more sharply than I intended. I was overwhelmed. I still want to understand your point.”

Write a sentence you could use in your own words:

Your small-change action plan

Choose a manageable experiment, notice the outcome and adapt

Start with one conversation, not every conversation

Pick a familiar situation that feels safe enough to practise with. Agree on one change, try it once or twice, and notice whether it makes the exchange easier. Progress may look like a shorter argument, an earlier pause, or a clearer request rather than a perfect conversation.

The 5-step experiment

1. Notice the pattern. 2. Choose one adjustment. 3. Try it. 4. Reflect together if safe. 5. Keep, adapt or stop.

The situation I want to approach differently:

One small change I will try (and when):

What might make this easier for the other person?

What happened? What helped? What needs adjusting?

A final reminder

Different needs can coexist. You are allowed to seek clarity, hold boundaries and ask for support. If a relationship feels unsafe, prioritise safety rather than communication exercises.