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Family Communication: Overcoming Obstacles

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As the pace of life continues to accelerate, it can be more difficult to find time to share everyday feelings with family members. Concerns related to work, relationships, and money can add to the stress a family experiences. Communication is the process of giving and receiving information. That sounds simple enough, but communication is actually a very complicated process.

Many families live far apart and do not see each other frequently. Even within a home, everyone's schedule may be so full that it is difficult to find enough time to eat a meal together, let alone sit down to talk.

Although today's technology simplifies many tasks for us, it is ever present in our life. Cell phones, e-mail, and new technology bombard us, creating many interruptions to family time. Yet, in other ways, this same technology helps us connect with those living farther away. The challenge is to make time to interact face-to-face with family.

Consider the possibility of two or three family members eating meals together, gathering to talk, or participating in a favorite activity. Some families actually set a date with each other on a weekly or monthly basis. This might be a time to talk, work, or relax together.

How We Communicate

People communicate their feelings and attitudes through physical gestures as well as by words. Tone of voice, body language, and listening are important parts of communication.

Tone of voice may provide a hint of the feelings that the other person is unable to put into words. Are they angry, happy, sad, frustrated, enthusiastic, tired, full of energy, bored, or interested?

Body language gives an additional clue. Look at the facial expression. Sometimes even hands can express what the person is feeling. How is the body positioned? Are they standing, sitting, reclining, or leaning forward? Sharpening observation skills may allow you to better understand those around you.

Listening can be even more important than talking. Here are some suggestions for overcoming obstacles to family communication when listening.

- Allow the person speaking a chance to express his or her thoughts and feelings without interrupting.
- When listening to someone express feeling or thoughts, remember to pay close attention to what is being said, making eye contact when appropriate.
- When a very intense emotion is expressed, it is helpful if the listener restates what he or she thought was said. At other times the message being expressed is very clear or simple, requiring no need to repeat it.

Male and Female Communication Styles

Men and women have been misunderstanding each other for generations—probably since the beginning of time. Many research studies and books have been written on the subject, drawing the same conclusion; men and women speak different languages.

Heredity and environment are at the top of the list to explain gender differences in communication styles. A part of language differences are due to genetic makeup. Babies are born male or female; their brains develop differently and at different rates.

Language differences are also due in part to our social experiences. We respond to boys and girls in different

ways. Our expectations of them are different. Behavior we tolerate from one sex may be less acceptable from the other sex. For example, boys yell, girls cry.

These same gender differences, whether genetic or learned, become part of the communication pattern that stays with us for life. Although there are always exceptions, boys and men are seen as aggressive, independent, and objective; girls and women are seen as submissive, dependent, and subjective.

In general, men talk to give information or to report. They talk about things—business, sports, and food—rather than people. They convey facts, not details. They are goal-oriented. They focus on solving problems and are less likely to ask for help or directions. Men compete.

Women, on the other hand, tend to talk to get information and connect or to gain rapport. They talk about people rather than things. They convey feelings and details. They are relationship oriented. They are quicker to ask for and accept help or directions. Women cooperate.

These differences can create conflict between the sexes socially and emotionally, at home and at work. The advice most frequently given is for men and women to understand and respect their differences and similarities. We all belong to the same human race. Effective communication depends on our willingness to understand and to be understood.

Communication Basics

Through continued communication, many misunderstandings can be avoided as family members learn to express more accurately what is meant and to understand more fully what others are saying. Remember it is difficult to read someone else's mind. Family members need to hear about the thoughts, feelings, and expectations of each other. Assumptions can create misinformation and result in more conflicts to be resolved now and later.

Learning to identify, accept, and understand feelings can be difficult to accomplish. Each person in the family is unique. Their characteristics have been influenced by a combination of inherited traits and personal experiences. Everyone experiences a range of emotions from love, to fear, to anger, but different people have different

ways of expressing their feelings. For everyone though, the goal is to express feelings in a positive way. Usually people communicate in the way they were taught. But learning to communicate effectively is an ongoing process for both children and adults.

Open and honest communication allows individuals to express themselves in order to be better understood. Studies have shown that couples who think they can overcome disagreements tend to be more committed to their marriage. So thinking positively about communication is very important. Sometimes you may be able to come to an agreement. At other times you just need to agree to disagree.

Improving communication skills involves a continuing process of learning, practicing, and further refining the skill. The time spent is well worth the effort.

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