

## **Mindful Communication**

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What we say, why we say it, and how we say it matters. Every time we communicate, whether by speaking or in writing, we either foster connection or cause harm. The words we choose, our intention in communicating, and the tone of how we deliver those words all play out in the effect that those words have on others, on ourselves, and on our families, and communities. In the words of Desmond Tutu “Language is very powerful. Language does not just describe reality. Language creates the reality it describes.”

In his book, *Say What you Mean: A Mindful Approach to Nonviolent Communication*, Oren Jay Sofer writes that **“True dialogue is more than the mere exchange of ideas. It is a transformative process based on trust and mutual respect, in which we come to see another in new and more accurate ways.”** This statement points to the possibility that communication, any communication, offers the possibility of strengthening our connection to one another in ways that create understanding—even when we disagree.

At its simplest, mindful communication means bringing full attention to our conversations—full attention to our own thoughts and emotions, to the words and emotional cues of the other person, and to our typical inclinations when we are engaged in conversation.

In this workshop, participants will have the opportunity to explore communication from the perspective of mindfulness. Topics to be explored include:

- The role of presence in communication and strategies for staying focused and present.
- Curiosity and care as attitudes that foster mutual understanding
- The role of needs and emotions in conflict and communication
- Strategies for working with nervous system activation in the context of communication
- The role of self-awareness in aligning verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal cues
- Ethical considerations in communication

### **Mindfulness and Communication**

Mindfulness can be defined as the capacity to pay attention to one’s moment to moment experience with openness and curiosity. Mindfulness is a natural capacity that we have as humans and also a skill which can be strengthened with a bit of patience and practice. As it turns out, not only is mindfulness a key communication skill but communication also provides many excellent opportunities to practice mindfulness!

In his book, *Say What you Mean: A Mindful Approach to Nonviolent Communication*, Oren Jay Sofer offers a three-step guide to cultivating mindfulness in the context of communication.

1. Lead with Presence
2. Come from Curiosity and Care
3. Focus on What Matters

Each of these skills is supported by the state of mindfulness which is, as defined by Jon Kabat Zinn, is “...paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and without judgement.” Paying attention in this way supports presence, a curious and caring mindset, and the capacity to skillfully focus on what is most important in the moment.

## **Presence**

Giving someone our full attention is the most precious gift we can give another person and having someone give us their full attention is the most precious gift we can hope to receive. However, when we begin to pay attention to the quality of our conversations, we might notice that full attention is as rare as it is precious. How often do we find ourselves having a conversation with someone who is checking their phone or glancing behind us to see what else is going on in the room? How often are we that person?

Being present for conversations and sustaining that presence isn't easy. The environments in which we live and work are filled with distractions. There are also many internal distractions that can come into play. In communication, some of the ways distraction might show up include mind-wandering, multi-tasking, or thinking about what to say next while the other person is talking. When we are aware of this, attention oscillates back and forth and does so at a cognitive cost. We miss important details that can lead to missteps in our conversation, misunderstandings, and even conflict.

Oren Jay Sofer defines presence as the “embodied awareness of our direct sensory, mental and emotional experience”. In other words, when we are fully present, we are able to monitor what we are observing, what we are thinking and what we are feeling in real time. This is made possible by the capacity of meta-awareness which is what allows us to observe what we are thinking, what we are feeling, and what we are sensing—separate from the raw experience of thinking/feeling/sensing. Meta-awareness is what underlies not only our capacity to be self-aware but also the capacity to be aware of when we are not aware—when we are lost in thought, or flooded by emotions, or not paying attention to pertinent sensory information. Meta-awareness lets us know when we've “left the building”, as it were, so that we can course-correct and return to mindful presence.

But presence is hard when we are face to face with another person. Some of the reason for this include:

- We feel very vulnerable when we are face to face with another human being because our evolutionary biology is gauging the situation— is this friend, foe or mate?
- Social engagement activates the sympathetic nervous system—triggering fight or flight and causing us to lose focus and connection.

- We are often distracted, which also causes us to lose the connection. Sometimes the distraction is by choice, such as when we multi-task with communication—checking text messages during a meeting or continuing to work on a medical record while responding to a question from our nurse for example. Sometimes it is difficult to maintain focus because of general distraction in the workplace—ringing phones, movement. Sometimes we are distracted by our thinking minds, lost in thought and only halfway paying attention.

To “Lead with Presence” requires a commitment to mitigate distractions—setting aside/turning off, retreating to a quiet environment when possible and a commitment to arrive bringing focused attention to the encounter.

### **Curiosity and Care**

According to Oren Jay Sofer, the second step in mindful communication is to “Come from Curiosity and Care”. This step has to do with the intention we set for our interaction with others. This intention is also explicit in the practice of mindfulness which asks us to be curious and open to whatever arises—sensations, emotions, thoughts—without judging the experience. In the same way, we can be curious in the context of communication, loosening up on the tendency to see what we expect (or want) and making space for the unexpected and unwanted. Letting go of judgement is difficult, especially since many of our judgments percolate below the level of consciousness and the brain is wired to make judgments based on past experience. Curiosity, however, offers an antidote to this past conditioning by offering a freshness to experience.

Care can be viewed as goodwill connected to empathy. Oren Jay Sofer writes that “Care means that we are open to being affected by what we learn, that we are committed to seeing the other person’s humanity, and that we are willing to include their needs in the situation rather than be rigidly fixated on getting what we want in exactly the way we want it”. Care is imbued with the attitudes of kindness and compassion. Kindness can be defined as the heartfelt wish for the well-being of another that emanates from a world view that all beings, without exception, are deserving of wellbeing. Compassion can be defined as kindness in the face of hardship and suffering where the wish for the other is that they be free of suffering. The capacity to view another as someone with whom we have a great deal in common (99.9% of our genetic make-up for starters!) is key to both kindness and compassion. When we recognize all that we have in common—a finite time on earth in these human bodies, our shared needs, and lives that are a progression of ups and downs/laughter and tears,

### **What Matters Most?**

The third step of Oren Jay Sofer’s approach to Mindful Communication is to focus on what matters most. Identifying what matters most in the context of dialogue is challenging and, moment to moment, what’s important may vary. It might be the activation of the nervous system. It might be the arising of emotional cues. It might be the arising of empathy and connection.

In the context of the non-violent communication framework, however, there is one aspect of human experience that underlies much of what arises in the context of communication. That aspect of human experience is needs.

Needs reflect universal human values that we all share and all actions, including words, can be viewed through the lens of our longing to fill a need. Needs can be categorized in various ways. Most of us are familiar with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: physiological needs, safety, love, esteem and self-actualization. However, needs can have far more nuance than this hierarchy would suggest and despite what was previously thought, the needs that we are trying to meet actually span this hierarchy. An extensive (though not exhaustive!) inventory of human needs is published on the Center of Non-Violent Communication's website.

<https://www.cnvc.org/training/resource/needs-inventory>

Even though needs are universal, needs that are met and unmet are constantly in flux and, even if two people are trying to meet the same need, it is likely that their strategies will vary. This is key. Needs are integral to our shared human experience, but our strategies to meet those needs are personal. We might think of strategies (the things we think, say, and do) as the visible tip of the iceberg with needs lying below the water. We often mistake strategies for needs. "I need chocolate" is a strategy. Comfort is a need. "I need you to be more attentive" is a strategy. Connection is a need. Strategies are not always skillful, particularly if we are woefully unaware of what need we are actually trying to meet. And it is at the level of strategy that conflict and a sense of separation from others arise.

The good news is that between needs and strategies lie our emotions. Emotions arise in response to something that we perceive as important and are keys to our needs. Emotions like contentment, appreciation, happiness, playfulness, and enthusiasm arise in response to needs being met. Emotions like anger, discouragement, fear, boredom, confusion arise in response to needs not being met. When we meet our emotions with awareness, they provide vital clues that allow us to discern what need underlies their arising. For an inventory of human emotions in the context of met and unmet needs, visit <https://www.cnvc.org/training/resource/feelings-inventory>.

Likewise, when we employ empathy in the context of communication, the emotional experience of another can provide vital clues to the unmet needs that underlie their actions. Becoming familiar with our own emotions and underlying needs is key to being able to connect to the feelings and needs of others.

### **Empathy and Mindful Communication**

Empathetic listening includes perspective taking, letting go of enjoyment, bringing attention to emotions and underlying needs, and communicating one's understanding in some way. This can include simply giving someone your wholehearted undivided attention, paraphrasing back to them your understanding of what they are sharing, offering an empathic reflection or guess

as to what they might be feeling, offering an empathic expression of how their words are landing for you, or offering empathic support—physical touch for instance.

There are many common communication habits that can shut down empathic connection. Among them are criticizing, lecturing, giving advice, probing, and one-upping. Some habits that seem like empathy but also can shut down empathic connection include giving advice, praising, reassuring, and sharing a similar experience. All of these get in the way of empathy because they shift the focus from other to ourselves. They also compromise agency—sending the message that I know better than you, I can't trust you to figure this out for yourself. That said, advice, praise, reassurance, or sharing of a common experience can be an empathic response if offered in a timely way with the explicit or implicit consent of the other. In other words, once you have insured that the other person feels fully heard, and is open to an empathic response, one of these may be appropriate.

### **Mindful Guidelines for Communication**

In addition to cultivating the mindful communication skills of presence, curiosity, care, and the capacity to discern needs, there are some additional guideline around the choices we make around what we communicate that can be helpful. These include.

1. Speak the truth. Do not speak falsehoods.
2. Speak with the intention of being helpful, not divisive.
3. Speak with kindness—without harshness or cruelty, non-harming.
4. Speak with sensitivity to context—timely, and not idle.

Speaking the truth applies to the spoken word, the written word, and what we share on social media. The viral spread of misinformation and disinformation makes speaking the truth an especially critical guideline. Before you speak, write, or share, ask yourself, “Do I know, really know, that this is true?”

Speaking with the intention to be helpful, asks us to question whether the intention behind what we write, say, or share is the intention to foster understanding and connection.

Speaking with kindness does not mean that we don't have difficult conversations. We can bring truth and the intention to create understanding to a difficult conversation in a way that is also kind. An example of this might be a difficult conversation during a performance review. Or with a significant other.

Speak with sensitivity to context. This asks us to consider “idle” talk—the things we say without much thought, the chatter that can make up much of our day. How often do we unintentionally say something that may not be true or that is divisive (i.e., gossip)? How often do we say something that is harsh or unkind (i.e., venting)? Mindful awareness in these moments can help us choose to say things that we know are true, that are helpful, and that are kind—or to say nothing at all.

## **Key Points**

- Communication either fosters connection or causes disconnection
- The mindful approach to communication (Oren Jay Sofer)
  - Lead with presence
  - Come from curiosity and care. (Care can also be defined as kindness)
  - Focus on what matters (needs not strategies)
- All humans share the same needs. The needs that we are trying to meet at any given time and the strategies we engage in to meet those needs vary. Conflict arises around strategies. When we can connect on the level of needs, true dialogue is possible.
- Mindful guidelines for Communication: Truth, Intention to be helpful, Kindness. Sensitivity to Context.

## **References and Recommended Resources**

*Say What You Mean: A Mindful Approach to Non-Violent Communication* by Oren Jay Sofer, 2018

Oren Jay Sofer Mindful Communication Website <https://www.orenjaysofer.com/>

Center for Non-Violent Communication <https://www.cnvc.org/>

“The Dharma of our Speech: The Lessons of Relationship and Community” in *The Dharma of Modern Mindfulness* by Beth Ann Mulligan, 2017

“Communication and Connection” in *Real Happiness at Work* by Sharon Salzberg 2013

*Attending: Medicine Mindfulness and Humanity* by Ronald Epstein, M.D. 2017