

CHAPTER 3

Sexual Communication

FEATURES



Multicultural Dimensions

Female and Male Subcultures?



Communication Dimensions

Adult Sexting



Ethical Dimensions

Ethics, Communication, and Date Rape



Gender Dimensions

Sexual Behavior in Marriage



Communication Dimensions

Clarity in Sexual Communication



Global Dimensions

International Differences in Discussing Sexuality



Communication Dimensions

Guidelines for Healthy Sexual Communication

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

1

Describe the process of sexual communication, including nonverbal communication.

2

Identify barriers to sexual communication, including gender differences, attitudes about sexuality, and sexual language.

3

Discuss techniques for improving sexual communication.



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Attitudes About Sexuality
Learning Assertiveness
Global Dimensions: International Differences in Discussing Sexuality

INTRODUCTION

Two for the Road (1967) is a movie starring Audrey Hepburn as Joanna and Albert Finney as Mark. When they first meet on the road in Europe, Joanna is in a touring girls' choir and Mark is a struggling architect. The film follows their life together—through courtship and marriage, infidelity, and parenthood—all on the road in a variety of cars (hence the title), through a score of time-shifting vignettes.

The film presents a lovely portrayal of a young couple growing in—and eventually out of—love. It not only shows the life cycle of a 12-year relationship, but also brilliantly portrays how communication changes during that life cycle.

As the couple meets and falls in love at a dizzying pace, conversation flows. It seems there is nothing that Joanna and Mark cannot talk about. They openly share their worlds together, delighting in the pleasure of each other. They communicate with touch, holding hands, kissing, making love (although in a 1967 family movie the lovemaking is only implied).

In one blissful scene, the young lovers are shown to their table in a French restaurant. Joanna and Mark hold hands, giggle, smile, make eye contact while walking across the restaurant. But they notice an older married couple who are eating their dinner. The couple is simply eating—no conversation, no touching, no eye contact. Mark turns to Joanna and suggests, “I guess married people don’t talk.”

But as their relationship and life change, so does their communication style. In time, Joanna and Mark have experienced life together, and they do not talk about it as much as they used to talk about their lives before they met. The mistakes they made as youths disappear into their sophisticated adulthood. There are no silly mistakes to giggle about anymore.

In time, they begin to know each other so well that each can anticipate what the other is going to say or wants to do. Verbal expression becomes infrequent, because it no longer seems very important.

And their lives change, too: They become parents, and Mark becomes a well-known architect. Children and work decrease the amount of time they have for each other. Again, life changes alter communication styles.

Eventually, Joanna and Mark are back in the same French restaurant, but this time as a married couple—no talk, no touch, no eye contact. A young couple, holding hands and giggling, looks at them; he whispers something in her ear. Joanna and Mark have come full circle—they are the married couple who do not talk!

Of course, one of the pleasures of being in a long-term relationship is that there is such a high level of comfort that sometimes you do not have to talk. Yet the very essence of a relationship is communication. Over time, if you rely on your assumptions about what the other person wants, needs, or thinks, the relationship begins to break down—and knowing what your partner wants all the time can become old hat. As people do in real life, Joanna and Mark fail to bridge the gap between not needing to talk constantly and not communicating.

Joanna and Mark's relationship deteriorates. They meet new people, have affairs—all in an effort to relive those days of carefree expression, of newness and excitement. Eventually the marriage ends; the full cycle of the relationship has been portrayed in less time than it may take you to read this chapter!

Many of you who have had long-term relationships can probably relate to the story of Joanna and Mark. When partners fail to communicate freely about sexuality or other topics, their relationship is bound to be limited—in scope and time. You have a great opportunity to enrich your relationships and sexual experiences when you can communicate with your partner about arousing mind and body experiences, your feelings about each other, and the other's preferences in life and in sexuality.

■ The Process of Communicating Sexually

Effective communication begins with an understanding of how communication works. The basic communication model (Figure 3.1) illustrates the five steps of the communication process. Let us consider how the basic communication model might work in a relationship in which partners are participating in some sexual activity.

First, the sender has an idea. Partner A (the sender) does not want to have sexual intercourse. The nature of the idea is influenced by many factors, such as the context of the situation and the sender's mood, background, culture, and frame of reference. For example, Partner A may be too tired or upset, perhaps it is already too late at night, or perhaps Partner A does not know enough about Partner B. Whatever the reasons, Partner A does not want to participate.



The movie *Two for the Road* (1967) explores the life cycle of a relationship, as well as the way communication changes through the cycle. From your own personal experience, does communication change in a relationship over the long term?

Second, the sender encodes the idea in a message. **Encoding** means converting the idea into words or gestures to convey meaning. Partner A says, “I do not want to have sexual intercourse.” A potential problem is that words have different meanings for different people. If misunderstandings result from missed meanings, that process is called **bypassing**. For example, Partner B may think all forms of sexual behavior except sexual intercourse are acceptable to Partner A. It may also be possible that Partner B thinks Partner A is just “saying” this and does not really mean it.

Third, the message travels over a channel. Channels include speech, telephones, fax machines, computers, and written correspondence. In this case, the channel contains speech and gestures. Partner A’s voice tones, inflections, and gestures are part of the channel.

Fourth, the receiver (Partner B) decodes the message. **Decoding** means translating the message from its symbol form into meaning. Communication can be successful only when decoding is accurate. Various forms of “noise,” however, can distort the message. In its simplest sense, the noise of a crowded room makes hearing difficult. Noise can also be represented by misinterpretation of words, voice tones, or gestures; emotional reactions; or the use of alcohol or other drugs. In our

example, after having several drinks, Partner B hears, “Come and convince me.”

Fifth, the receiver responds verbally or nonverbally—this is called **feedback**. Feedback helps the sender know whether the message was received and understood. In view of what Partner B heard, feedback is sent in the form of further sexual advances, because “noise” disturbed the transmission of Partner A’s message.

Note that in Figure 3.1 the model provides for continual sending, receiving, and feedback. In our example, it is likely that the feedback provided by Partner B will result in additional communication from Partner A, and so the process continues.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication includes all unwritten and unspoken messages. These may be sent intentionally or unintentionally. These silent signals exert a strong influence on the receiver in our basic communication model, but interpreting them can be difficult. For example, does the fact that Person A is looking down indicate modesty or just fatigue? Do crossed arms indicate that a person is unwilling to communicate or that a person feels cold?

The vast majority of message meaning (some experts say

encoding

Converting an idea into words or gestures to convey meaning.

bypassing

When misunderstandings result from missed meanings.

decoding

Translating the message from its symbol form into meaning.

feedback

When the receiver responds verbally or nonverbally.

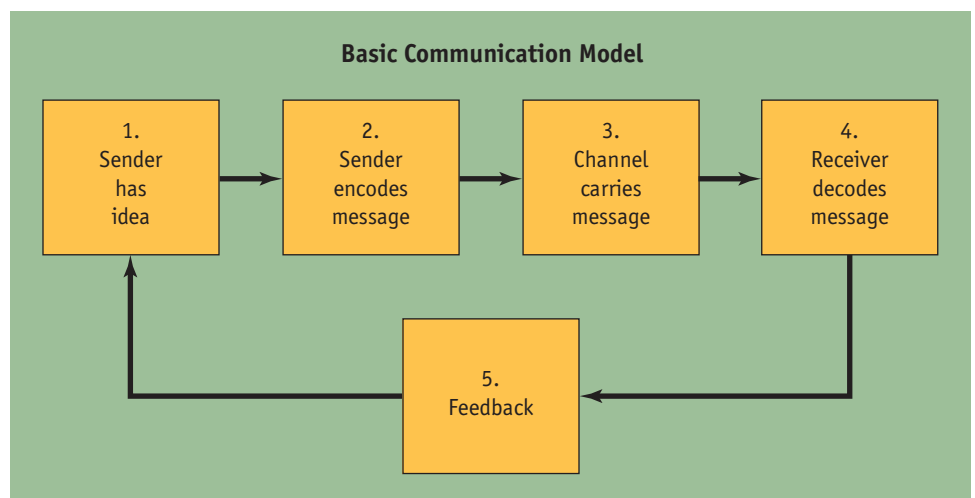


FIGURE 3.1 The basic communication model.



You can show interest in your partner with nonverbal communication. Gazing into each other's eyes, leaning in toward each other, smiling, and touching are all ways of conveying interest in one another.

as much as 93%) (Guffey, 1999) is sent nonverbally. Messages can be difficult to decipher when verbal and nonverbal messages seem to contradict each other. For example, if Person A says it is acceptable to participate in sexual intercourse but then

is not very responsive, Person B may have a problem knowing what Person A is really communicating.

When verbal and nonverbal messages conflict, receivers often have more faith in the nonverbal cues than what is said. It is important to recognize the significance of nonverbal communication, but it is unwise to attach a specific meaning to each gesture in every situation.

Note the body posture of your classmates. During an interesting class activity, most of them will probably be leaning or looking toward the lecturer or the center of the group, indicating that they are involved in what is happening. During a boring class, they will probably be leaning away from the lecturer or group. We call this physical behavior *body language*. Communicating by body posture often conveys as much as, or more than, the spoken word. When people feel uncomfortable about expressing their thoughts or feelings verbally, body language may be the only form of communication in which they participate.

We all recognize the importance of communicating nonverbally: We smile when we say hello, scratch our heads when perplexed, and hug a friend to show affection. (We also have an array of body terms to describe our nonverbal behavior: "Keep a stiff upper lip," "I can't stomach him," "She has no backbone," "I'm tongue-tied," "He caught her eye," "I have two left feet," "That was spine-tingling.") We show appreciation and affection, revulsion and indifference with expressions and gestures. We tell people we are interested in them by merely making eye contact and, as the male peacock displays his feathers, we display

our sexuality by the ways we dress and walk and even by the way we stand.

Unfortunately, the nonverbal expression of feelings and thoughts is easy to misinterpret.

College students often indicate

that they think there are differences in male and female nonverbal communication. Many males and females say that women are more expressive and better at sending and receiving nonverbal messages. This might include smiling, having an expressive face, using hands to communicate, and having an expressive voice. In contrast, men might be louder, more likely to interrupt, and be more uneasy about the use of nonverbal behaviors.

Consequently, to depend on nonverbal communication alone to express yourself sexually is to risk being misunderstood. Furthermore, if your partner is depending on nonverbal communication to express feelings to you, it is up to you to find out—verbally—whether you are getting the right message. Without such a reality check, your partner, although totally failing to connect, might assume that he or she is communicating effectively. For example, imagine that a man and woman on their first date begin hugging, kissing, and caressing each other after a movie. The woman's breathing speeds up, and the man, taking this as a sign of sexual arousal and interest, presses onward. When the woman suddenly pushes free and complains that the man is too impatient, he is confused. The problem here is one of interpretation rather than incompatibility: The rapid breathing that the man took as a sign of arousal was really a sign of nervousness. If these people had been more effective verbal communicators, they would have been able to clarify the situation in the beginning. Instead they reached a silent impasse, with him confused and



Misinterpretation of your partner's body language can often lead to conflict in a relationship.



Multicultural DIMENSIONS

Female and Male Subcultures?

Male–female communication is related to gender issues. In the business world males and females seem to be members of different subcultures: Even though meetings in the executive suite increasingly are coed gatherings, there are often real differences in the behavior of females and males.

It could be called the “bad-boy/good-girl” clash. Men seated around conference tables often start acting like adolescents—putting on a show of bravado while trading “witty” put-downs to protect themselves from the pain of criticism. As a prerequisite to success, their culture has taught them to be both self-effacing and self-promoting.

Women, by contrast, have learned from their culture to be earnest perfectionists, eager to show they have done all their homework by explaining every point; yet they are quick to admit mistakes. A woman executive reported seeing this at a meeting where a female colleague began her presentation with many apologies. She told the group that all the information she needed was not available, that she had been rushed, that her slides probably contained typos. She said she was sorry several times but then went on to give a flawless presentation with perfect slides. The man who followed her launched right into his presentation with no apologies whatsoever—and his slides were much less well put together.

On average, men talk more at meetings than women, and so their ideas typically are adopted more often. Men also are more comfortable making up things, so if someone asks about a particular financial figure, for example, they may offer one. A woman is more likely to say, “I’m not sure about that.” Women give the impression that they do not know what they are talking about, whereas many men seem confident whether they know a little or a lot.

However, it is probably possible to change behaviors and expectations in different cultures. For example,

at Eddie Bauer & Co. in Seattle, where half of all managers are women, female executives report a “comfort level” about speaking freely at meetings that they did not feel working at other places. Style differences seem to relate more to job categories than to gender.

Of course, we cannot assume that all males or females will behave exactly as those described do. We also have to remember that possible communication differences are not always a result of being a male or a female. For example, the differences might be related to status rather than gender. The point is that we need to be aware of possible subcultural differences in our personal relationships as well as in our business relationships. Understanding these possible differences can be helpful in improving communication in all relationships.

On a very different note related to possible female and male subcultures, it is known that many women pretend, or “fake,” orgasm, but is this also true for men? Among 180 male and 101 female college students, it was found that both men and women pretended orgasm (28% and 67%, respectively). Most pretended during penile–vaginal intercourse, but some pretended during oral sexual activity, manual stimulation, and phone sex. Frequently reported reasons for faking were that orgasm was unlikely, they wanted the sexual activity to end, and they wanted to avoid negative consequences (for example, hurting their partner’s feelings) and to obtain positive consequences (for example, pleasing their partner). Results also suggest a sexual script in which women should orgasm before men and that men are responsible for women’s orgasms.

Note the implications in this study related to communication between sexual partners before and during sexual activity.

Source: Data from Hymowitz, C. Men, women fall into kids’ roles in meetings, *The Birmingham News* (December 20, 1998), D1–D2; Muehlenhard, C. L., & Shippee, S. K. Men’s and women’s reports of pretending orgasm. *Journal of Sex Research*, 47, no. 6 (Nov.–Dec. 2010), 552–567.

her resentful. It can work the other way around, too; both people may want to touch each other but feel too awkward to show it and thus are disappointed.

There are many forms of nonverbal communication. Segal (2008) listed eye contact, facial expression, tone of voice, posture, touch, intensity, timing and pace, and sounds that convey understanding (such as “ahhh,” “ummm,” and “ohhh”) as the most

important nonverbal clues. Probably three of the most important forms of nonverbal communication are proximity, eye contact, and touching.

Another name for proximity is *nearness*. Even in our example of students’ leaning in the direction of the speaker if they are interested, they are showing nearness. Most often, however, proximity refers to the face-to-face distances between people. Although



Body position can be a barrier to effective communication.

there are differences, in most cultures moving closer indicates increased interest or intimacy, and moving farther away indicates the opposite.

Making eye contact with another person shows interest. This can be true when one is simply listening to another person; however, making eye contact with another person for a little longer than usual can also be a signal of interest in a relationship.

Touching can be very important in a relationship, and it can show interest, intimacy, and emotional closeness. It can range from a slight touch to show concern or connection to the intimate touching associated with sexual relationships. Touch must be used with caution. For example, if someone you do not know very well touches you, that action could be offensive to you. Also, in social and work situations it is important to be careful in using touch to prevent appearing overly intimate and to avoid giving any suggestion of sexual harassment.

Van Wagner (2009) provides some nonverbal communication tips. Here are a few of them:

1. Pay attention to nonverbal signals. This will help improve communication for both the sender and the receiver.
2. Look for incongruent behaviors. When words don't match up with nonverbal signals, people tend to ignore what is said and

focus instead on nonverbal expressions of moods, thoughts, and emotions.

3. Use good eye contact. Do not stare fixedly into someone's eyes—but note that failing to look others in the eye makes it seem like there is something to hide.
4. Ask questions about nonverbal signals. If there is confusion about a person's nonverbal signals, it can help to ask questions.
5. Be aware that signals can be misread. A person's overall demeanor tells a lot more than a single gesture.

Barriers to Effective Sexual Communication

The basic communication model is successful only when the receiver understands the message as intended by the sender. In real life, that is hard to accomplish. Consider all the times that you thought you had delivered a clear message, only to be misunderstood. Most messages reach their destination but are disrupted by communication barriers. The most common barriers to successful communication are bypassing, frame of reference, and lack of language and listening skills (Guffey, 1999). To this list we add mind-altering drugs (which include alcohol). Figure 3.2 summarizes ways that barriers play a part in sexual miscommunication.

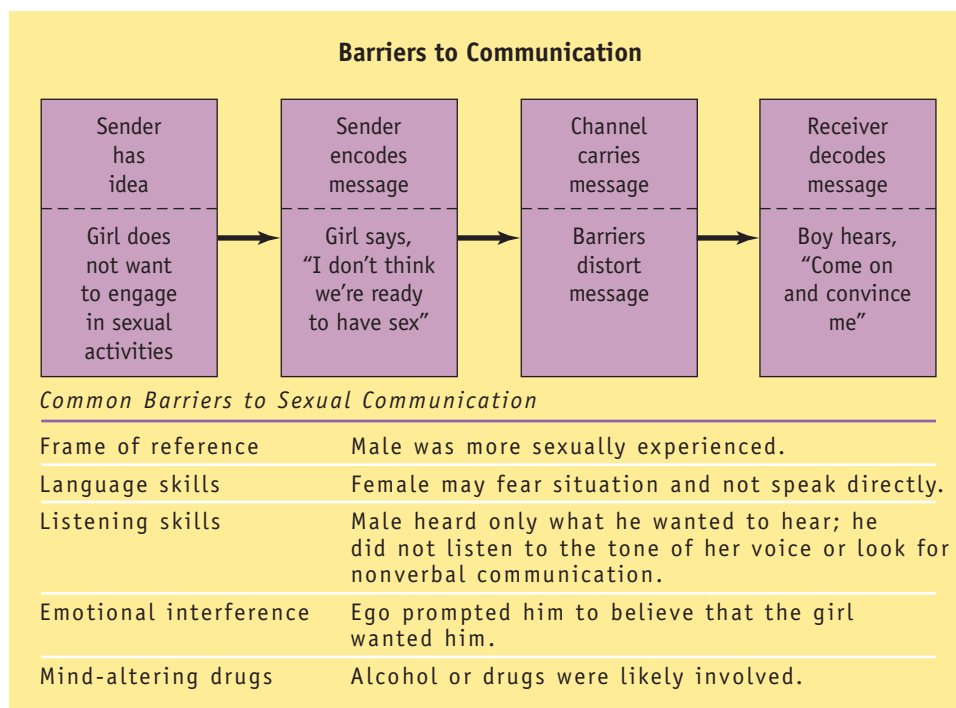


FIGURE 3.2 Common barriers to communication.

- *Bypassing*: We all attach meanings to words, but individuals may attach different meanings. Consider the confusion that results if your partner does not want to engage in “sexual relations.” You may back off all physical contact. Yet some people—including the former President Bill Clinton—consider sexual relations to refer only to penile–vaginal intercourse. So it is important to understand what meaning your partner attaches to a word.
- *Frame of reference*: Your frame of reference is your unique set of experiences. Your sociocultural upbringing strongly influences your style of communication. A belief in the sexual double standard, in which men pursue women and women “give in” to men, affects the male’s frame of reference in our example. For example, the Korean culture often discourages open discussion of feelings and seeking out of psychological counseling. Therefore, a Korean woman might not be comfortable telling her boyfriend that she was afraid she might be pregnant.
- *Lack of language skills*: In a new situation, you may not be prepared to communicate effectively. For example, one partner may fear the situation and not know how to communicate effectively that the other’s sexual pursuit is unwelcome.
- *Lack of listening skills*: We often listen selectively and interpret messages to our advantage. In our example, the male heard only what he wanted to hear (“Come on and convince me”). He failed to listen to the tone of his partner’s voice or look for nonverbal cues.
- *Mind-altering drugs*: Use of alcohol and drugs creates a powerful barrier to communication. More than half of all date rapes involve alcohol. As your inhibitions and ability to communicate clearly fade, so does your ability to control the situation.

Gender Communication Issues

In a popular magazine, Scheidlower (1997) indicated that communication difficulties between the sexes are related to a lack of vocabulary. Men and women are unable to reach a mutual understanding of certain concepts because they cannot describe them to each other. He compares the reality of situations with the words women use in their language (“she-speak”).

Here are two examples (*the authors recognize that these examples are quite sexist, but we include them because many people, unfortunately, believe in these stereotypes*):

- “He-speak”: A new car has “331 horsepower, five-speed transmission, V-8, four valves per cylinder, dual overhead cam, and a twin turbocharger.” “She-speak”: “It’s red.”
- “He-speak”: A new amplifier has “twin mono-blocks, low THD, only 40 watts per channel, but it’s a small room, so the low-impedance speakers will still work; it’ll be expensive if we blow any Gold Aero KT-88 output tubes.” “She-speak”: “That thing is not going in *my* living room.”

Scheidlower’s point is that if we want to have high-quality relationships, we have to make an effort. Whether there is really a difference in vocabulary between the genders is for each of us to decide, but we can also do our part to reduce the possibility of a problem of miscommunication.

Gender roles can strongly shape our communication patterns. Because men have traditionally focused on their place in the hierarchy, they tend to be good at public speaking. Women, who have traditionally focused on nurturing relationships, tend to be better at speaking in private. On the emotional level, women tend to be good at verbalizing thoughts and feelings in close relationships. Men, in contrast, tend to be good at dismissing their feelings or keeping them to themselves. For men, expressing feelings does not help determine their status or help them compete in the outside world. It can be helpful to be aware of the context and the power of gender roles to influence what we hear, what we say, and what is the purpose of our communication (Worden & Worden, 1998).

Do males and females naturally communicate differently, or are their communication behaviors learned just as other behaviors are? Some people believe that males are socialized to be more assertive and direct, in both verbal and nonverbal communication. Eye contact, body placement, and rough physical contact by males can communicate intention, superiority, and territoriality. Historically, women have generally been socialized to have a less pronounced presence. They tend, for example, to listen empathetically, communicate and elicit emotions, and process conflict. As a result, a familiar complaint of women in heterosexual relationships is that male partners “never want to talk about things,” “aren’t sensitive to their needs,” and “just don’t understand.” Conversely, males often wonder how a seemingly innocuous comment could cause their female partner’s sudden silence or desire



Communication DIMENSIONS

Adult Sexting

In recent years there have been a number of examples of adult sexting—even some that involved prominent politicians, sports stars, and other celebrities. Is adult sexting just a new form of pornography? When is it a harmless way to communicate, and when is it damaging or even dangerous? Is it different for people in their 20s as opposed to older adults? Six experts gave their opinions on some of these questions.

Pepper Schwartz, professor of sociology at the University of Washington, said that adult sexting is a form of flirtation. It is a dangerous flirtation if pictures are being sent that you might not want 200 million people to see, but it can be sexy and playful among mutually consenting adults. If sexting is not performed in the context of a mutually collaborative and intimate relationship, it can feel like an act of sexual aggression. People should have the right to block unwanted pictures and gross messages.

Michelle Drouin, assistant professor of psychology at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, indicated that her research with 745 U.S. college students showed that sexting is a popular means of sexual communication within both committed romantic relationships and casual sexual relationships. For those with insecure attachments, sexting may help fulfill relationship needs and demands. This may be especially true for emotionally distant men, who were less likely to call, text, or engage in face-to-face sexual conversations with a partner.

S. Craig Watkins, professor at the University of Texas at Austin, said that he is not convinced that the raunchy behavior online is equivalent to porn. However, sexting certainly reveals how our sexual norms and the expression of our sexual selves are evolving in ways that make all of us vulnerable.

Susan Lipkins, a psychologist in Port Washington, New York, said that for most people sexting is a form of flirting. For some, it is a form of gossip; for others a form of harassment. For those born around 1987 or later, sexting is simply a form of communication. However, for those a little older sexting may have different implications. Adults who sext may be doing so to assert their power within a group or toward a particular person, to increase their popularity, to use their status and enhance it, or to display their aggression. In general, sexters view sexting as harmless and fun, whereas nonsexters see it as dangerous.

Finally, K. Jason Krafsky and Kelli Krafsky, coauthors of *Facebook and Your Marriage*, indicated that there is a double standard that applies to the virtual world and real world, with two different sets of rules, acceptable behavior, and consequences. Making unwanted sexual advances virtually is called “cyberflirting,” but in the real world it is sexual harassment. Being sexually active with multiple partners on the Internet is called “virtual sex,” but in the real world it is engaging in high-risk and irresponsible behavior. Sending lewd pictures of your private parts online is called “sexting,” but in the real world it is a crime called indecent exposure. They point out that we should not buy the lie that we can have dual citizenship in both worlds, breaking the rules in one without consequence in the other.

What do you agree with or disagree with that these six experts have said? What does all of this have to do with communication about sexuality?

Source: Data from Room for debate: A running commentary on the news. What's wrong with adult sexting? *The New York Times* (June 9, 2011). Available: <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/06/09/whats-wrong-with-adult-sexting?nl=todaysheadlines&emc=thab1>.

to talk about where the relationship is going. People internalize the values attached to gendered communication to the point that men become used to living within conflict and women prefer the roles of peacemaker and relationship builder. Some people argue that looking at gender exclusively as the source of different communication styles is a mistake and that such elements as upbringing, socioeconomic status, culture, and ethnicity must be considered within this context (Do women and men communicate differently?, 2003).

Reeder (2005) pointed out that research findings regarding communication differences related to gender are simply contradictory. For example, some studies show men to be more assertive, while others find women to be as assertive or even more assertive than men. When it comes to most communication behaviors, such as leadership style, sociability, or displays of power in intimate relationships, Reeder indicated that academic research reveals little to no difference between genders. Mehl et al. (2007) reported further evidence that there may not



Ethical DIMENSIONS

Ethics, Communication, and Date Rape

One example of potential communication difficulties is sexual behavior on a date. Keeping our basic communication model in mind, let us consider some ethical issues related to communication and date rape.

It has been found that 69% of men and 54% of women believe that some women like to be talked into having sexual intercourse. Because bypassing (misunderstanding that results from a mixed message) can occur if a male believes this, there can be an ethical responsibility for the male or the female to be sure certain messages are accurately interpreted.

Some cultural images of romantic interaction in sexual situations may lead to many ethical questions about date rape. For example, is it part of a dating ritual for a woman to resist a man's initial sexual advances? What is her ethical responsibility to be sure she is sending accurate—and not misleading—messages?

If a woman is drunk or has used other chemical substances that can influence judgment, what is the ethical responsibility of the male in regard to his actions? Should the female have considered the ethics of putting herself (and the male) in that situation in the first place? If she is under the influence of chemical substances, she may send (encode) a message in a way she does not intend.

If a male is drunk or has used other chemical substances that can influence his judgment, the “noise” (see the communication model in Figure 3.2) can interfere with his ability to decode the message being sent accurately. What is his ethical responsibility for accurate communication in this situation?

The feedback being sent is an important part of our communication model. If a woman goes to a man's apartment or invites the man to her apartment for a drink and then participates in heavy petting, do her actions suggest consent? Is it ethical for her to do these things if she

has no intent of participating in sexual intercourse? How should she provide accurate feedback so there is accurate communication?

How about if a woman is dressed in revealing clothing? Is it ethical for her to do this if she is not interested in sexual activity? Is it ethical for a man to interpret the wearing of revealing clothing as an invitation for sexual activity?

Date rape may be a result of miscommunication. Following the steps of our basic communication model (sender having an idea, sender encoding the message, message traveling over a channel, receiver decoding the message, and feedback traveling to the sender) and considering how bypassing can occur and how noise can interfere with accurate communication give us many ethical issues related to communication and date rape to consider. Clear communication is needed to help prevent date rape.

Relatedly, what is the prevalence of implied versus verbal consent at first intercourse among U.S. college students? Higgins et al. (2010) found that among those with consensual first intercourse experiences, 49% provided nonverbal consent. Respondents who used condoms at first intercourse were more likely to provide verbal consent, suggesting that condoms may prompt sexual discussion (or vice versa). In contrast, those who provided nonverbal consent were less likely to have used contraception. It seems, then, that college students who do not discuss whether to engage in vaginal intercourse for the first time are less likely to use contraception.

Source: Data from Is there a date rape crisis in society? In *Taking sides: Clashing views on controversial issues in family and personal relationships*, 4th ed., Vail, A., ed. Guilford, CT: Dushkin/McGraw-Hill, 1999; Higgins, J. A., Trussell, J., Moore, N. B., & Davidson, J. K. Sr. The language of love?—Verbal versus implied consent at first heterosexual intercourse: Implications for contraceptive use. *American Journal of Health Education*, 44, no. 4 (July/August 2010), 218–230.

be the gender differences previously thought. They had 396 participants wear voice recorders for several days. It was found that women and men both spoke about 16,000 words per day. Overall, communication research suggests that male–female differences are actually quite small. Gender seems to account for only 1% of the variation in communication behaviors. Other factors play a more significant role, such

as the type of relationship and the context within which the communication takes place.

Attitudes About Sexuality

Some people are prevented from communicating openly by attitudes learned at home. Some parents “protect” young children from references to sexuality.



Gender DIMENSIONS

Sexual Behavior in Marriage

Listen to this couple in their mid to late 20s, married 9 years:

Wife: I don't understand him. He's ready to go any time. It's always been a big problem with us right from the beginning. If we've hardly seen each other for two or three days and hardly talked to each other, I can't just jump into bed. If we have a fight, I can't just turn it off. He has a hard time understanding that. I feel like that's all he wants sometimes. I have to know I'm needed and wanted for more than just jumping into bed.

Husband: She complains that all I want from her is sex, and I try to make her understand that it's an expression of love. I'll want to make up with her by making love, but she's as cold as the inside of the fridge. I get mad when that happens. Why shouldn't I? Here I'm trying to make up and make love, and she's holding out for something—I don't know what.

Wife: He keeps saying he wants to make love, but it just doesn't feel like love to me. Sometimes I feel bad that I feel that way, but I just can't help it.

Husband: I don't understand. She says it doesn't feel like love. What does that mean, anyway? What does she think love is?

Wife: I want him to talk to me, to tell me what he's thinking. If we have a fight, I want to talk about it so we could maybe understand it. I don't want to jump in bed and just pretend it didn't happen.

Husband: Talk! Talk! What's there to talk about? I want to make love to her and she says she wants to talk. How's talking going to convince her I'm loving her?

In sexual behavior, as in other matters, the barriers to effective communication are high and the language people use only further confuses and mystifies them. He says he wants to make love, but she says, "It doesn't feel like love." Neither quite knows what the other is talking about; both feel vaguely guilty and uncomfortable, aware only that somehow they're not connecting. He believes that he has already given her a profound declaration of love: He married her and they share a home.

Yet she says, "Just once, I'd like him to love me without it ending up in sex. But when I tell him that, he thinks I'm crazy."

For him, perhaps, it does seem crazy. Sexual activity may be the one way in which he can allow himself the expression of deep feeling. His wife, however, finds it difficult to be comfortable with her feelings in the same area. She keeps asking for something that she can understand and is comfortable with—a demonstration of his feelings in nonsexual ways. He keeps giving her the one thing he can understand and is comfortable with—his feelings wrapped up in a blanket of sex. Thus some husbands and wives find themselves in an impossibly difficult bind, one that stems from the cultural context in which girls and boys grow to adulthood.

We are suggesting that the man's ever-present sexual readiness is not simply an expression of urgent sexual need but is also a complex response to a socialization process that restricts the development of the emotional side of his personality. Conversely, the woman's insistent plea for a nonsexual emotional statement is a response to a process that encourages the development of the emotional side of her personality.

When as teenagers these children are exposed to talk about sexuality—on the street or at school—they often feel guilty for participating in or eavesdropping on such forbidden conversations. When parents fail to acknowledge our sexuality as children, we should not be surprised if suppressed feelings permeate our adult sexual lives.

Some writers suggest that men often do not communicate well with women because they have a "fear of intimacy" that is really a fear of rejection. One way to deal with this is for men to learn to talk about their lives more openly, as women have learned to do. Developing their own friendships with other men can help men acquire personal skills that will also improve their relationships with women (Dickson, 2000).

Parent-Teen Communication

An excellent example of the importance of good communication is that between parents and their children—especially their adolescent children. Karofsky (2001) reported a correlation between the level of adolescent-parent communication, as perceived by the teenager, and abstinence from initiation of sexual intercourse. High levels of communication with mothers were most closely associated with abstinence. The amount of parent-teen communication declined as the teen got older. The authors suggest two possibilities: (1) As communication declined at home, teenagers sought a replacement for intimacy with their parents and then participated in sexual



Many teens would welcome communication with their parents about sexuality.

intercourse; or (2) as teenagers became sexually active, they were reluctant to discuss these and other personal issues with their parents, and therefore communication declined.

Dailard (2001) reported that teenagers who feel their parents are warm, caring, and supportive are more likely to delay sexual activity than their peers. Teens who feel highly satisfied with their relationship with their mother are more likely to use contraception and to delay sexual activity and are less likely to have an unplanned pregnancy.

When it comes to communicating with their children about sexuality, many parents consider the task a daunting one, for which they feel ill equipped. Parents often do not have meaningful conversations with sons and daughters because they do not know what to say or how to begin, fearing that talking to children about sexuality may either scare children or encourage them in sexual behaviors at a young age. Most parent–child discussions about sexuality are limited, indirect, and uncomfortable. Yet, parents’ failure to provide adolescents with appropriate information and decision-making skills may place teens at risk for negative outcomes such as pregnancy or STI. Only about 15% of adolescents have had conversations about sexuality with their parents. Mothers are more likely than fathers to discuss birth control, adolescent pregnancy, and sexual morality with both sons and daughters (Filomeno, 2002).

Parents and teens also seem to have different estimations of how often they have discussed sexuality (Grunbaum et al., 2004). Forty-two percent of parents said they talked to their teenagers about sexuality and sexual relationships “very often,” 43% said they talked “somewhat often,” 12% said “not too often,” and 2% said “never.” In contrast, 11% of teens of those same parents said they talked to their parents about sexuality and sexual relationships “very often,” 30% said they talked “somewhat often,” 40% said “not too often,” and 18% said “never.”

Albert (2004) reported that 90% of parents said they did not know how to discuss sexuality with their children. He also pointed out that parents are selling themselves way too short, and that they need to have conversations about sexuality with their children at earlier ages. In fact, 91% of adults and 87% of teens think it would be easier for young people to delay sexual activity and avoid unwanted pregnancy if they could discuss sexuality with their parents.

There are many reasons for good parent–child communication about sexuality. However, the association between parent–child communication and adolescent pregnancy risk remains unclear (Sample lesson plan using JSR, 2005). One difficulty in studying this relationship is that there is little or no agreement between what parents and teens perceive to have communicated between them. Measures of communication content, as well as the frequency, timing, and quality of communication, vary so much across studies that it is hard to establish a pattern of findings.

El-Shaieb and Wurtele (2009) surveyed 214 parents of young children about their plans for sexual discussions with their children. Parents reported being educated mostly by their mothers and rated both of their parents as ineffective educators. Compared to a similar survey of parents conducted over 25 years earlier, these parents intended to discuss sexual abuse at an earlier age, but to delay discussing genital differences, birth, and reproduction. Compared to fathers, mothers intended to discuss sexuality at earlier ages and anticipated this to be more effective. Parents’ intentions to discuss varied between sons and daughters for certain topics, and there were two topics (masturbation and nocturnal emissions) many parents did not intend to discuss with their children.

Because many college students eventually decide to become parents, here are some tips about talking with kids about sexuality (Silverberg, 2008). Perhaps the most important one is to make talking with your children about sexuality a lifelong conversation. Instead of just having a “big sex talk,” recognize that many small moments of learning and teaching about sexuality happen throughout a child’s development. El-Shaieb and Wurtele (2009) indicated that parents

need guidance about when and how best to discuss sexual issues with their children. To help them get ready, parents need to: (a) learn about healthy sexual development, (b) consider the influence of their own experiences learning about sexuality, (c) understand the impact of ineffective sexuality education in one generation leading to poor sexuality education in the next, (d) understand the role of demographic influences on their communication styles, and (e) discuss with other parents various dilemmas confronting them in their sexuality education efforts. Also, it is important to be comfortable when it comes to talking about sexuality. Many things, such as reading this book and taking a sexuality class, can greatly help to increase your comfort level with this topic. It is also good to make it OK for your kids to ask about sexuality. All children have such questions, and it helps to create an environment where they feel comfortable asking them. Finally, it is important to use age-appropriate information. A number of excellent resources, such as many of those mentioned throughout this text, are available that can help people understand more about age-appropriate sexuality information.

Sexual Language

One of us was invited to speak with a group of elderly people about sexuality. Proceeding with undaunted courage, he began the session with exercises designed to neutralize the emotional impact of sexual words. He showed slides containing one or two words and instructed the participants to shout in unison the word appearing on the slide. The first slide was shown and the audience shouted *love* with much enthusiasm. Buoyed up by the group's cooperation and interest, he projected the next slide—*hug*. The audience again shook the room with their shouts. From that point on, however, it was all downhill. With each successive word, the decibel level of the voices lowered—no small wonder, considering the remaining words: *kiss*, *caress*, *pet*, *sexual intercourse*, *oral sex*, *penis*, and *vagina*. The point was made. Many people are uncomfortable with sexual language. How can sexual communication be effective if we cannot even speak the language?

When discussing sexual topics, people often find that the words themselves prevent rational, thoughtful, comfortable interaction. Some words evoke such strong emotions—embarrassment, guilt, shame, or anger—that they interfere with thoughtful discourse. Generally, the greater the emotion, the greater the interference.

For example, it may be that the term used influences what a partner hears: “Penis,” “dick,” and “cock” may all have different connotations for different people. Calling a vagina a “vagina” may sound

very clinical to one person, whereas calling it a “pussy” or a “cunt” may sound sexy, dirty, or just fine to someone else. The sexual language used can promote communication and relationships, or it can inhibit them.

In addition to being comfortable with language related to sexuality, it is also important to be sure we are talking about the same thing when we use sexual terms. For example, what does “having sex” mean? It can be interesting to discuss this question with college students. Does “having sex” include only penile–vaginal intercourse? Does anal sexual activity count? How about oral sexual activity? Mutual masturbation? Does intense petting and body contact constitute having sex? It is common to hear college students as well as other people refer to “having sex.” But to be sure we are communicating clearly we have to be sure we have the same definitions for the terms we are using.

■ Techniques for Improving Sexual Communication

As we have discussed, there are many reasons for good sexual communication. One of these includes a need to communicate about desires related to sexual activity. Miller and Byers (2004) interviewed 153 heterosexual couples about their actual and ideal duration of foreplay and intercourse, as well as their partners' desired duration of foreplay and intercourse. Both men's and women's perceptions of their partners' ideal duration of foreplay and intercourse were found to be more strongly related to their own sexual stereotypes than to their partners' self-reported sexual desires. This suggested that people rely on sexual stereotypes when estimating their partners' ideal sexual scripts. Improving communication about sexuality could help eliminate such misperceptions. There are no magical methods for attaining free, open, and comfortable communication about sexual topics, but we do have some suggestions.

First, Owen (2008) provides some suggestions to improve the overall atmosphere for communication. She indicates that it is important to realize that one does not know everything. This leads to asking good questions. Also, it helps to ask the right questions. For example, “Is this what you like?” can be a great question that also shows concern about the other person. Being open-minded and nonjudgmental is helpful as well. Maintaining care and trust also leads to better communication. One person is much more likely to open up to another if there is confidence that the information will not be shared with others. Other suggestions for improving communication are found in the following pages.



Communication DIMENSIONS

Clarity in Sexual Communication

In the communication process, the idea sent and the message actually received are ideally the same. But as you likely know from experience, matters do not always work that way. Often, the words chosen, the tone of voice, the body language, or the context in which the message is delivered blurs the true intent of the sender. When you add the ambiguity of sexual language, communicating clearly becomes even more difficult.

Consider former President Bill Clinton and his now-infamous words in a press conference on January 26, 1998: “I did not have sexual relations with that woman—Miss Lewinsky.” To President Clinton, “sexual relations” specifically referred to penile–vaginal intercourse, sexual activity in which he and Monica Lewinsky did not participate.

In his own parlance, Clinton was telling the truth. Yet few would agree with him. One reason was the context of the comment—a formal press conference in the White House. Also, the delivery of the comment—with strong body language and tersely delivered words—made it appear that there was no relationship at all between Clinton and Lewinsky.

Now consider how such language ambiguity might affect a newer relationship.

Let us say that you suggest beginning a more “serious relationship” with someone. Your partner responds that the relationship is not ready for “sexual relations.” At this point, it is not clear what either party has said. A “serious relationship” could imply having sexual activity, but it could also imply seeing each other more often or not seeing other people. The “sexual relations” comment in the context of an intimate conversation could be construed to refer to any sexual activity.

Thus it is important to be clear in communicating about sexuality with a partner. If you or your partner cannot talk about sexuality, that may be a sign that you are not ready to be involved in a sexual relationship.

A good way to start a conversation is to talk about sexual histories. By starting the conversation and opening it up for participation, you will make it more comfortable for your partner. Talk about sexual activities that you have enjoyed and would like to share with your partner.

Before entering into a sexual relationship, you should talk about any STIs that you or a partner may have had, and any STI and/or HIV testing you have had (and why you had it done). In addition, you should discuss using latex condoms to prevent STI transmission as well as using a contraceptive method to prevent pregnancy.

Planning

One common barrier to good sexual communication is the complete avoidance of the subject by both partners. We suggest that partners set aside time to discuss sexuality as they would any other topic of mutual interest and of significance to their relationship. In setting up a time for such a discussion, it is wise to make the following plans.

1. Make sure you have plenty of time for your discussion. Do not be cut short when one of you has to run off somewhere.
2. Do not allow others to interrupt your discussion by calling you or by barging in on you.
3. Accept all feelings and the right to express these feelings verbally. For example, it is just as appropriate to say, “I feel angry when ...” as it is to say, “I feel terrific when ...”
4. Take a risk—really describe your thoughts and needs. Do not expect your partner to guess what they are.
5. Approach the discussion with both people understanding that the goal is to improve your relationship rather than to see who can shock whom.
6. Expect changes but not miracles. Sexual communication requires continued dialogue. You might want to seek the help of other family members, friends, peer counselors, members of the clergy, psychologists, sexuality counselors, or others who can contribute to your ability to communicate sexually.

Working to improve your sexual communication will help you and your partner develop a deeper trust, a greater sense of intimacy, and a feeling of adventure about your relationship.



It can take work to have good sexual communication.

Flooding

A technique for learning to use and become comfortable with sexual language is called **flooding**. In

flooding

Experiencing something so frequently that you no longer are aroused by it. This is a technique used to become more comfortable with sexual terminology.

one use of this technique, people stand in front of a mirror, look themselves in the eye, and repeat over and over again the words they feel uncomfortable using.

We are not necessarily referring to profanity. We are talking about sexual language. Learning to feel comfortable with these words and being able to use them should be your goals.

Learning Assertiveness

Some people just have a tough time communicating—period. Inevitably they have trouble communicating sexually. When this is the case, working to improve only the sexual side of communication is a mistake. Therefore, we turn now to a topic that concerns one's ability to express oneself with confidence in all areas—the quality of assertiveness and the means to develop it.

The first step toward grasping what it means to be assertive is to distinguish assertive, aggressive, and

assertiveness

Standing up for one's basic rights without violating anyone else's rights.

aggressiveness

Standing up for one's basic rights, but at the expense of someone else's basic rights.

nonassertive behaviors. **Assertiveness** means standing up for your basic rights *without violating* anyone else's. **Aggressiveness** means standing up for your basic

rights (or more) *at the expense* of someone else's rights. **Nonassertiveness** means *giving up* your basic rights so that other people can achieve theirs.

nonassertiveness

Giving up one's basic rights so others may achieve theirs.

For example, an assertive style of verbal sexual communication would be one in which you stand up for your own sexual rights and needs by expressing your wishes, while allowing your partner the same freedom.

Body language, too, can be aggressive, nonassertive, or assertive. Aggressive body language includes a pointing finger, leaning toward the other person, glaring, and using a loud, angry tone of voice. Nonassertive body language is characterized by slumped posture, a lack of eye contact, hand-wringing, hesitant speech, nervous whining or laughing, and not saying or doing what you want to. Assertive behavior, by contrast, entails sitting or standing tall, looking directly at the person you are talking to, speaking in explicit statements with a steady voice, and using the gestures or physical contact that is right for you.

As a first step toward learning to be assertive, consider this formula, developed by Bower and Bower (1976), for organizing assertive verbal responses. The formula, which they call DESC, involves

1. **D**escribing the other person's behavior or the situation as objectively as possible (as in sentences taking the form "When you...")
2. **E**xpressing your feelings about the other person's behavior or the situation that you just described (as in statements beginning with "I feel...")
3. **S**pecifying changes you would like to see made ("I would like..." or "My preference is...")
4. **C**hoosing the consequences you are prepared to accept (a) if the situation changes to your satisfaction and (b) if it does not ("If you..., I will..." or "If you don't..., I will...")

Using the DESC form, then, let us look at an example of assertive sexual communication: "When you expect me to become sexually aroused in two minutes of foreplay (Describe), I feel as though I'm being used (Express). I would like us to spend more time touching, kissing, and hugging (Specify). If you agree to devote more time to foreplay, I will relax and pay special attention to your sexual needs. If you don't agree to devote more time to foreplay, I won't have intercourse with you (Choose)." Note that our imaginary speaker describes the situation from a personal point of view, expressing his or her own

feelings and preferences, as well as the consequences of the listener's choice.

The form of the DESC message just described suggests the philosophical basis of the assertion theory: We are in control of ourselves alone; we have no right to tell others how to behave; we need not tolerate the other person's behavior when it is contrary to our own desires. The basis of assertive behavior is the combination of self-respect with respect for others. One could find no better formula for effective sexual communication.

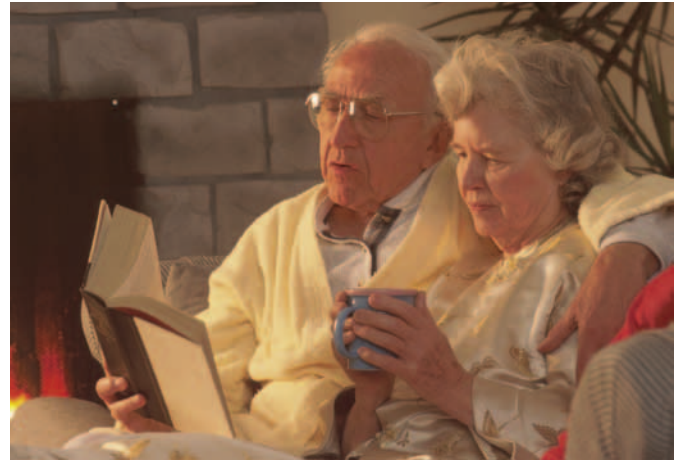
Expressing Yourself Nonverbally

Words are important, but they do not say it all. Do not be afraid to smile, wink, hug, touch, kiss, or in other ways communicate your affection for another. As we said earlier, in the way you walk, sit, gesture, and so on, you are “talking” to your partner, whether you intend to or not. But you can also consciously use those gestures to help get your message across.

Seeking Information (Listening)

Verify your interpretation of the other person's verbal, and especially nonverbal, communication. Listen actively, and ask whether your understanding of your partner's feelings and intentions is accurate. Listening is often hard and takes real skill. If you want to hear what others say effectively, make sure you are not a

- *Mind reader:* You hear little or nothing as you think, “What is this person really thinking or feeling?”
- *Rehearser:* Your mental tryouts for “Here's what I'll say next” tune out the speaker.
- *Filterer:* Some call this selective listening—hearing only what you want to hear.
- *Dreamer:* Drifting off during a face-to-face conversation can lead to an embarrassing “What did you say?” or “Could you repeat that?”
- *Identifier:* If you refer everything you hear to your experience, you probably did not hear what was said.
- *Comparer:* When you get side-tracked assessing the messenger, you are sure to miss the message.
- *Derailer:* Changing the subject too quickly tells others you are not interested in anything they have to say.
- *Sparrer:* You hear what is said but quickly belittle it or discount it. That puts you in the same class as the derailer.



Sitting close together, touching, and smiling are all ways to show you care. Nonverbal communication is important; expressing feelings in words is also vital.

- *Placater:* Agreeing with everything you hear just to be nice or to prevent conflict does not make you a good listener (Why don't we hear others?, 2005).

The leadership expert Stephen Covey speaks of “attentive” and “empathetic” listening—not the fake or manipulative kind but rather “listening with the intent to understand.” Covey speaks and writes about situations related to business; however, the basics of good listening skills apply to intimate relationships as well. Good listeners are rare; most of us have to squelch our natural inclination to talk.

The characteristics of good listeners are as follows:

1. The most visible characteristic is body language—nodding encouragingly, perhaps leaning into the conversation, not glancing around the room or looking for something.
2. Good listeners demonstrate that they are mentally engaged in what the speaker is saying by making brief comments from time to time and asking focused questions—patiently waiting for the answer before providing one.
3. They listen with the “third ear,” seeking to understand those thoughts that are not expressed.
4. They try to understand, rather than first being understood. They try to see the topic of conversation from the speaker's standpoint first. Good listeners push back the urge to express personal opinions until they are asked or until the time is appropriate.
5. Good listeners have to be trusted. They never repeat confidences and personal problems without consent of the party involved (Listening to understand, 1998).



Global DIMENSIONS

International Differences in Discussing Sexuality

International differences exist related to the topic of human sexuality. One way to gain an understanding of these differences is to consider how sexuality education is viewed in some countries. Here are some examples.

1. In Mexico, it is the government's policy to stabilize growth. Family planning is supposed to be implemented by means of education and public services. At the same time, the conservative Catholic church opposes sexuality education.
2. In Chile, sexuality is not a subject that is talked about by family members or in schools.
3. In China, there is virtually no institutional sexuality education. People rely on folklore, sexually explicit materials, and approved marriage manuals for sexuality information.
4. In Denmark, sexuality and social-life education has been a compulsory subject in schools since 1970, and it was a tradition long before then.
5. In Egypt, discussion of sexuality is socially unacceptable. Egypt uses an approach that emphasizes repression rather than education.
6. In Greece, sexuality education does not exist in the school curriculum. Greece is one of the few European countries without sexuality education.
7. In India, sexuality education is not offered in schools because society believes it would "spoil the minds" of children.
8. In Iran, to get a marriage license, couples must take a segregated course in family planning.
9. In Japan, sexuality education in schools (typically focused on reproductive issues) is mandated, beginning at age 10 or 11 years. The Ministry of Education believes that teachers should teach HIV and AIDS prevention to students without mentioning sexual intercourse.
10. In Kenya, the government opposes sexuality education in schools. Young people turn to their peers for sexuality information.
11. In Romania, sexuality education was removed from the schools in the early 1980s. The major sources of contraception and sexuality information are friends, mass media, and healthcare providers.
12. In Singapore, women are highly ignorant about their bodies, including being unable to locate the vagina. Women complain also of pain during intercourse because of lack of foreplay. Some women who believe they are barren actually turn out to be virgins.
13. In Sweden, sexuality education has been a compulsory subject in schools since 1955. It is well integrated into the school curriculum. In addition, Swedish children receive their first sexuality education at home, from their parents.
14. In Thailand, there are strong taboos surrounding the discussion of sexuality and disease. HIV/AIDS education has been stifled, and many do not know how the disease is spread.
15. In the United Kingdom, sexuality education has been required in secondary schools since 1993. In Northern Ireland, it is not mandated, but it is encouraged in the teaching of health education. In Scotland, jurisdiction over the provision of sexuality education lies with the local education authority. In general, teens report that they believe their parents should be their main source of sexuality information; however, in practice they are more likely to turn to their friends for information.

Although it is difficult to draw definite conclusions from this information, it appears that there can be real differences in the ability of people from various countries to engage in effective communication about human sexuality. For example, think about the differences that are likely to exist between people from Sweden and those from Thailand or from Egypt. Of course, we cannot generalize about all people from any country, because many differences are possible within countries. But these differences can strongly influence communication about sexuality.

Source: Data from Carson, S. L. *Cross-cultural perspectives on human sexuality*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1998.

Hostile settings and other communication hindrances can defeat even the best listeners. Here are a few steps to avoid those pitfalls:

1. Choose the physical environment. Find a quiet, nonthreatening place to talk if you want to ensure true understanding.



Good listeners show they are mentally engaged.

2. Cut the interruptions. It can be difficult to communicate if the phone rings or if a person pops in at the door.
3. Recognize differences. People communicate best in different ways. Some of us are primarily auditory, whereas others are visual or “hands-on.”
4. Persist. Refuse to believe that you cannot understand another person’s message.

Steps Toward Change

Counselors often work with couples to help them improve their communication skills. In summary, the counselor (1) encourages **active listening**; (2) elicits feedback from each partner by asking each to summarize what he or she just heard; (3) facilitates the expression of feelings and thoughts directly and succinctly; (4) requests the use of **“I” statements** (beginning each sentence with “I” to express personal feelings better and avoid blaming the other partner) instead of questions; and (5) prohibits interruptions and blaming (Worden & Worden, 1998). These techniques will help all of us communicate much more effectively.

active listening

Paraphrasing what someone has said to demonstrate interest and understanding.

“I” statement

Statement that begins with an “I” to express personal feelings.

Resolving Conflicts

In relationships—even the best of relationships—conflicts arise. Too often poor communication skills

(such as improper listening), a combative or offensive stance geared toward winning rather than communicating, an inability to acknowledge another’s point, or a refusal to consider alternative solutions interferes with the healthy resolution of these conflicts. As a result, conflicts threaten the continuation of the relationship and, at the least, tear little pieces from it, potentially leaving the relationship bankrupt. To gain a sense of how these poor communication skills impair effective conflict resolution, consider the following dialogue.

Paul: *Well, Barbara, as you know, I really care for you, and I hope we can continue to develop our relationship. We can’t go any further tonight, though, because I’d like you to be tested for HIV.*

Barbara: *Now you ask—right in the middle of this romantic time! Why didn’t you say something about this before?*

Paul: *You’ve got some nerve. You should have realized this is something we need to consider.*

Barbara: *I should have realized? How was I supposed to know you were concerned about HIV status? You never said anything about it.*

Paul: *Why should I take the chance of getting HIV? You’re pretty selfish, aren’t you?*

Barbara: *I’ve had it! Either we’re going to trust each other and move ahead in our relationship or you can say good-bye right now.*

Paul: *In that case, GOOD-BYE!*

In this example, both Paul and Barbara are trying to win: Paul wants Barbara to have an HIV test, and Barbara wants Paul to have faith and move ahead with their relationship. Neither Paul nor Barbara can possibly win this battle, although they are probably unaware of this. If they proceed with their relationship (including sexual intercourse and other intimate behaviors), Paul will be uneasy because of his concern about HIV. He will probably feel his concerns are not very important to Barbara, will resent her lack of concern, and will have a difficult time participating freely in the relationship.

However, if Barbara agrees to the HIV test, she will feel that Paul did not trust her and “forced” her to take the test. She may also feel he waited to spring the idea on her and wonder why it did not arise earlier.

It becomes evident, then, that regardless of which way they go, one or the other will be resentful. This resentment will probably result in a weakening, or possibly a dissolution, of their relationship. So, no matter who wins, both really lose.

This situation is not totally hopeless, though. Consider the effect on resolving their conflict if Paul and Barbara had communicated as follows:

Paul: *Well, Barbara, as you know, I really care for you, and I hope we can continue to develop our relationship. We can't go any further tonight, though, because I'd like you to be tested for HIV.*

Barbara: *Now you ask—right in the middle of this romantic time! Why didn't you say something about this before?*

Paul: *You feel we should have discussed this earlier?*

Barbara: *Yes, and HIV status is something we both need to be concerned about.*

Paul: *You have a concern about my HIV status, too?*

Barbara: *You bet! And I think it is only fair that we treat ourselves and each other equally in this situation.*

Paul: *You think that it would be a problem if you got the HIV test and I didn't?*

Barbara: *Yes.*

Paul: *Would you be embarrassed if other people knew you had taken the test?*

Barbara: *Yes, I guess I would.*

Paul: *It sounds like my request might have hurt you at least a little?*

Barbara: *Yes, I guess it did.*

Paul: *I'm glad that you also care about our relationship. But HIV is really a serious health problem today, and I am worried about it. And I'm bothered that you didn't understand my concern.*

Barbara: *I guess you do have a reason to be concerned. I'm sorry.*

Paul: *Well, let's see what alternatives we have.*

Barbara: *Maybe I should just go ahead and be tested.*

Paul: *Or perhaps we should both be tested.*

Barbara: *How about agreeing that we will honestly share the results with each other but also that the results are private and not anyone else's business?*

Paul: *That's fine with me. In fact, we don't even need to tell anyone else we took the tests. That is our private matter.*

Barbara: *Would it make sense to agree to take the tests as soon as possible so we both know the results as soon as we can?*

Paul: *That seems sensible, and since your schedule in the next couple of weeks is so busy, I'll be happy to work around your schedule.*

Barbara: *Okay. Remember, though, the next time either of us has concerns or suggestions we need to bring them up as early as possible.*

In this example, Paul took the initiative in resolving his interpersonal conflict with Barbara. He began by employing a technique known as *active listening*, or *reflective listening*. The key to this technique is that

the listener paraphrases the words of the speaker to indicate that he or she comprehends the meaning of the speaker's message. The listener tries to pick up on hidden messages and feelings not actually verbalized and paraphrases those as well. For example, Paul understood that Barbara would be embarrassed if other people knew she had taken the test, even though she never explicitly stated that. When Paul was able to understand and listen so well to Barbara—well enough to identify feelings she had not verbalized—Barbara was convinced that Paul cared enough to understand her needs. *Then* Barbara was ready to hear about Paul's needs and became more receptive to his viewpoint. Paul next expressed his opinion and the reasons for his feelings. The point of reflective listening is to enable each participant to acknowledge the other's view and to be less insistent in arguing for his or her own.

The next step in this technique is to propose as many alternative solutions as possible through brainstorming. The result is a win-win, rather than a no-win, situation, reached through a mutual agreement that it is possible to agree. Paul agrees that they both will be tested and that they will treat the testing and the results confidentially. He also shows respect for Barbara's busy schedule and says he is willing to work around it.



Communication about HIV status can be difficult, but it is very important.

Myth vs Fact

Myth: For most people, good communication comes naturally.

Fact: Although some people may seem to be naturally better than others at communication, good communication is a lot of work for almost everyone.

Myth: Because sexuality is such an open topic today, most people can discuss it rather easily.

Fact: Even though sexuality seems more open, many people still experience much difficulty in talking about sexual topics and personal relationships.

Myth: Communication skills are basically the same in all cultures.

Fact: Although most skills may be quite similar, communicating with people from another culture can be challenging. Even though the language may be the same, communication methods and meanings may greatly differ.

Myth: Because men and women now have the same rights and are equal, they communicate in the same ways.

Fact: Conditions can be slow to change. Even though men and women have equal rights, we still need to be sensitive to differences in learning and motivation related to communication.

Myth: The most important part of communication is the meaning of the words we use.

Fact: It has often been said that “actions speak louder than words.” It is also true that nonverbal communication is often more important, and revealing, than words used.

Myth: It is a bad idea to take a risk when trying to communicate with another person. The technique may backfire.

Fact: There are risks in most things we do, and developing and using good communication skills can involve disclosing personal feelings and desires. In a trusting relationship, this should not be too risky.

In addition, Paul and Barbara have improved their relationship *because* of this conflict. The conflict instigates a discussion about their needs and, therefore, provides the opportunity for them to demonstrate their feelings for each other by organizing to satisfy those needs. Instead of threatening the relationship, the conflict has actually improved it.

To reiterate, the steps in this conflict resolution process are as follows:

1. *Active listening:* Reflecting to the other person his or her own words and feelings.
2. *Identifying your position:* Stating your own thoughts and feelings about the situation, and explaining why you feel this way.
3. *Proposing and exploring alternative solutions:* First brainstorming and then evaluating the possibilities.

Although you may feel awkward using this technique initially, and your conversations may seem stilted, with practice it will become a part of your style and will be very effective. The payoffs are huge; do not give up on it.

A similar way to resolve conflict involves four steps (Resolve conflict in four steps, 1995): (1) *Identify the interests* of each person. Ask each person, “What do you want?” Then listen carefully to the answers. (2) *Identify higher levels of interest* by asking, “What does having that do for you?” It is important to understand what each of us really wants. (3) *Create an agreement frame* by asking, “If I could show you how to get X, would you do Y?” X is the person’s real interest, and Y is what you want from the person. (4) *Brainstorm for solutions*. Do not just give a solution and expect the other person to accept it. Commitment results from being involved in finding a solution. The solutions must satisfy the interests of all parties.

Giving and Receiving Criticism

Imagine a “sex critic” planned to evaluate your sexual functioning as a movie critic critiques movies! All of us would probably feel threatened, and because of that, our abilities to function normally would most likely be compromised. Well, in a very real sense, our sexual partners are our sex critics. They evaluate what we do in terms of how pleasing it is for both them and us. It would be nice if we could receive our “sex critique” without feeling threatened by it, without feeling that it denigrated our self-esteem. It would also be nice if we were open enough both to give and to receive feedback about our sexual functioning in a way that enhanced our sexual lives and those of our partners. Well, we can learn both to receive and to give criticism in a way that is truly constructive. Here are a few hints:

1. Find a private, relaxing place to discuss thoughts and feelings about your sexual relationship. You do not want to feel uncomfortable in your environment while discussing such a sensitive topic. Feeling uncomfortable will not be conducive to either receiving or giving feedback on such a sensitive issue.
2. Devote sufficient time to such a discussion. It would be unfortunate if you were beginning to communicate well on significant matters just as one of you had to leave.
3. Limit distractions so that your attention is focused on the conversation. Rather than wondering who might overhear you or who might inadvertently hit you in the head with a Frisbee, find a quiet, private place for your discussion.
4. It is probably not wise to do these things just before or just after a sexual encounter. Plan a relaxed time for this discussion.



Communication DIMENSIONS

Guidelines for Healthy Sexual Communication

A great source of information about sexual communication is HealthySex.com. Wendy and Larry Maltz provide insights related to

many aspects of sexuality. They provide 15 communication guidelines for healthy sexual communication. In addition to the points already mentioned in this chapter, they include the following points directly related to sexuality:

- Both partners need to make a commitment to engage in a discussion about intimate concerns.
- When discussing sexual intimacy concerns, keep in mind that partners are apt to feel scared, embarrassed,

or hurt. Emphasize what you like and what works well before making a new request or discussing something that bothers you.

- See intimate problems as a normal and natural part of a relationship. Turn them into opportunities to learn and grow as a couple.
- Seek professional help when needed. Don't allow unresolved sexual issues to fester and erode your positive feelings for each other.

Source: Data from Maltz, W., & Maltz, M. Communication guidelines for healthy sex. HealthySex.com. Available: <http://www.healthyssex.com/page/communication-guidelines/>.

In addition to these general suggestions, when *giving criticism* try to remember to

1. Begin your comments on a positive note. "You know, when you kiss me I really feel great." Then move to the behavior you would like to change. "I enjoy your touches so much that it would be terrific if you could"
2. Be specific regarding the change you are recommending. Rather than announcing, "You don't hold me enough," suggest, "When we watch television, I'd really like it if you would put your arm around me."
3. Be aware of the limitations of your partner. Do not expect more than your partner is able to give. To critique something that cannot or will not be changed may harm the relationship. If your partner is slow to arouse, asking him or her to speed up is unrealistic and, we might add, unfair. It is criticism given for no useful purpose.

When *receiving criticism* try to remember to

1. Separate your partner's suggestions and recommendations from your self-worth. You are no less of a person because you might need to adjust some of your sexual behavior. In fact, if you were not open to suggestion, then you might suspect you have a problem.
2. Assume a nondefensive attitude. Rather than attempting to justify your present actions, ask questions to understand the criticism better. Then, if you disagree, you will know why you disagree.

Myth vs Fact

Myth: Being assertive means standing up for your basic rights at the expense of someone else's rights.

Fact: Being aggressive is standing up for your basic rights at the expense of someone else's. Being assertive means standing up for your basic rights without violating anyone else's.

Myth: Conflicts will always get in the way of good relationships.

Fact: It is true that conflicts are a part of life, but if we learn how to deal with them effectively they can help us grow and have better relationships.

3. If the criticism is too general, ask for specific suggestions to help you make the recommended change. In addition, inquire as to how your partner can help make this change more likely to occur. Ask your partner to participate in remedying the situation or action being criticized.
4. Whether or not you agree with the criticism, thank your partner for being honest enough to express the concern to you. Acknowledge that it is not easy to discuss such matters and you appreciate the opportunity to consider something you have been doing or not been doing that is causing a problem. Encourage future suggestions that have the potential to improve your relationship.

With these recommendations for giving and receiving criticism, your relationship should improve. That is because not only will the specific suggestions lead to actual changes, but the practice of opening

up your relationship to discussions of problems will, in itself, help foster a style of communicating that will serve you well in all aspects of your relationship. It will then be easier to discuss matters that bother you, and it will be easier to express emotions such as love, caring, and wonderment. The relationship will improve with this style of communication.

When trying to communicate effectively, it can be helpful to have some ground rules. Silverberg (2009) suggests that talking with a partner about these rules can help in developing your own set of rules. Here are some examples:

1. Check in and check out. At the beginning of the conversation, spend a minute talking about your day and how you are feeling so you know what each person is bringing into the conversation. It can also help to take a minute at the end of the conversation to say how it went.
2. Define safety for yourselves and to each other. Discuss what is needed to feel safe so partners can talk honestly and openly.
3. Listen without interrupting. This can be a hard rule to follow, but it is a very important one.
4. Respect differences in interests and desires. If one person exposes personal information, the other person should consider that a compliment, even if the desire is not something he or she is interested in doing.
5. Bring a sense of goodwill to the conversation. Neither partner should be trying to intentionally hurt the other or be mean to the other.
6. Anyone can call time-out at any time. To have a safe conversation, partners need to feel they can stop the conversation at any time. This doesn't mean that one partner should storm out in the middle of a sentence, but rather that either partner can ask for a time-out to end the conversation at that time with the agreement to pick it up at a later point.

Final Thoughts on Sexual Communication

In this chapter we have discussed the importance of word meanings, nonverbal communication, cultural and personal backgrounds, and attitudes toward communication about sexuality. We have also seen that there are many ways to improve our ability to communicate significantly but that doing so usually takes a great deal of effort.

At the same time, however, to be effective, communication must be truthful. In practice, this is often not the case. For example, lying is common in relationships involving college students (Saxe, 1991). The majority of these lies (41%) were about relations with other partners. In another study, respondents said they did not regard their lies as serious, did not plan them, and did not worry about getting caught. They averaged about two lies each day (DePaulo et al., 1996).

Communication difficulties may even increase the level of risk—especially for females. Rickert and associates (2002) reported that about 20% of women believe they never have the right to stop foreplay, including at the point of intercourse; refuse to have sexual intercourse, even if they have had intercourse with that partner before; make their own decisions about contraception, regardless of their partner's wishes; ask their partner whether he has been examined for STIs; or tell their partner that they want to make love differently or that he is being too rough. Moreover, more than 40% of young women believe that they never have or only sometimes have the right to tell a relative they are not comfortable with being hugged or kissed in certain ways. These findings show that some young women may be unable to communicate their sexual beliefs and desires clearly and are therefore at risk for undesired outcomes.

Finally, it is interesting to note what a number of leading sexologists have said about communication. They were asked to relate the most important information they had learned about sexuality over the years. Here are some of the ideas they expressed about communication (Haffner & Schwartz, 1998):

1. It is hard to be honest about past sexual experiences with a new partner.



Appropriately giving and receiving criticism will enhance communication in a relationship.

2. Some sexual secrets—unless they pose a health threat—are better left unshared.
3. Nonverbal communication often works better than words in bed.
4. Talking during sexual activity—sharing fantasies, using forbidden words—can be very sexy.
5. Couples who have nothing to say to each other in restaurants are usually married—and they may be in trouble.
6. Open, honest communication is the most important foundation for a relationship.
7. You cannot underestimate the value of humor.
8. After humor, consideration is the second most important ingredient in a sexual relationship. Most people appreciate a sensitive and thoughtful partner.
9. Most people are not comfortable talking about sexual issues.
10. Consent requires communication.
11. It is better to talk about sexual feelings, desires, and boundaries in relationships.
12. Talking about scenes in movies or books can sometimes be a good way to communicate what you like in sexual behavior and relationships.

Exploring the Dimensions of Human Sexuality

Our feelings, attitudes, and beliefs regarding sexuality are influenced by our internal and external environments. Go to go.jblearning.com/dimensions5e to learn more about the biological, psychological, and sociological factors that affect your sexuality.

Case Study

Your ability to communicate sexually plays an important role in your sexual wellness and self-image. Your capacity to discuss sexual histories, contraceptives, and safer sexual activities can help prevent unwanted pregnancy and transmission of STIs and HIV.

From a psychological standpoint, a positive self-image as a communicator gives you confidence. A negative self-image may hinder your ability to ask for dates, to ask for sexual activities that you like, or to ask for safer sexual activities.

Sexual communication is influenced by virtually all social and cultural phenomena, including religion, ethnic heritage, language, family traditions, peers, geographical region, and even mass media.

Gender plays a pervasive role: Men and women communicate in different styles and express emotions differently.

Consider the confusion of sexual language: If your partner suggested that you were not close enough to engage in “sexual relations,” you might back off any type of physical contact. It is important to talk with your partner to make sure each of you understands what the other wants.

Biological Factors

- Physiological reactions—such as blushing or erections—are nonverbal means of communicating sexual attraction.
- Alcohol or drugs can distort the communication process.
- Physical touching can indicate interest, intimacy, and emotional closeness.
- Hearing loss over time can inhibit communication and frustrate a partner.

Sociocultural Factors

- Media strongly influence sexual communication.
- Gender affects style of communication.
- Sexuality education may increase confidence.
- Cultures influence communication style.
- Religion may influence the sexual activities in which one participates.
- Family and peers set an example of sexuality.

Psychological Factors

- Emotions can overwhelm the ability to communicate.
- The role of the double standard in thinking may alter the communication process.
- Ego may get in the way of listening to a partner.
- Self-image and body image may distort communication.

Summary

- The process of communication consists of having an idea, the sender encoding a message, sending the message over a channel, the receiver decoding a message, and the receiver providing feedback.
- Nonverbal communication includes all unwritten and unspoken messages. It is a very important part of effective communication, but it can also be easy to misinterpret.
- Barriers to communication include bypassing, the frame of reference, lack of language skills, lack of listening skills, and use of mind-altering drugs.
- There are many things that parents can do to improve communication about sexuality with their children, including making conversations about sexuality ongoing, knowing individual comfort levels, and making it acceptable for children to ask about sexuality.
- Communication can be improved by planning, using flooding, learning assertiveness, using effective nonverbal communication, and using good listening skills.
- Counselors often help people improve their communication skills by encouraging active listening, eliciting feedback from each partner, facilitating the expression of thoughts directly, using “I” statements, and not allowing interruptions and blaming.
- It can be helpful to establish ground rules to help promote good sexual communication. Examples include listening without interruption and respecting differences in desires and interests.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the steps of the communication process. Explain how they would work in discussing specific relationship or sexuality issues.
2. What are the barriers to effective sexual communication? How can they be overcome?
3. How can you improve your communication abilities? Which techniques would work best for you? Which would not work for you? Explain why.

Application Questions

Reread the chapter-opening story and answer the following questions.

1. If you were teaching this course, and Joanna and Mark were students, what information would you want them to leave with from your course?
2. The changes in communication style across the life cycle of the relationship can enhance or harm it. For example, anticipating what your partner wants can lead to a strengthened relationship, but it can also lead to deterioration of communication. What could Joanna and Mark have done to maintain interest in their relationship? (You may want to think about what successful couples you know do to stay happy.)

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Should sexual partners communicate all they think and feel so that they can better respond to each other's needs? Or should sexual partners be selective in relating their innermost thoughts and feelings? Explain why or why not. Would your opinion change from situation to situation?
2. You are excited about an upcoming first date when you overhear a conversation describing your date as someone who has had many sexual partners in the past. You have no idea whether the information is correct. Later, on your date, your partner implies a willingness to engage in sexual activity. Although you like the person and are sexually attracted, you are unable to forget what you overheard. How can you open the discussion of sexual histories without offending your date?
3. On the last episode of MTV's *Road Rules Latin America*, all five of the campers (three males and two females) climb naked into a Jacuzzi as a final “gathering of friends.” In real life, if you climbed naked into a Jacuzzi with some “close friends,” what kind of sexual message might that be sending? What if you climbed into the Jacuzzi with just one other person whom you wanted to get to know better?

Critical Thinking Case

The following is a true date-rape case that occurred at Georgetown University years ago. Kim and Mark (names changed) decided to go to the senior black-tie dance together. Both had agreed beforehand that it would not be a “real date.” But during the long evening of drinking and dancing, their plans changed.

They met at 8:30 and went to two parties, the dance, and a bar before returning to Mark's apartment at about 4:00 A.M. Kim had lost her

key and had agreed to go back to his apartment. "I decided I wouldn't mind kissing him." They kissed, undressed, and climbed into his bed. Kim said later that she had frequently shared a bed with her previous boyfriend without having sexual intercourse and assumed she could do the same with Mark. When Mark asked whether he should get a condom, Kim said they did not know each other well enough to have sex. At that point, the stories diverge.

Kim said she told Mark, "I've never had sex before, and I don't want to have it on a whim." Then, "all of a sudden, he was on top of me, forcing himself into [me].... I kept trying to push him off with my hands and squirming around, and I kept saying I didn't want to have sex."

Mark said in an affidavit that she was "kissing me and thrusting her pelvis against me.... At no time during our sexual activity did I use any kind of physical force against Kim. Nor did I threaten Kim verbally."

How could communication have gone so awry? Consider the dimensions of human sexuality as you explain what went wrong. Then describe what could have been done to prevent the incident.

Exploring Personal Dimensions

Measure Your Assertiveness

Indicate how characteristic or descriptive each of the following statements is of you by using the code given.

- +3 very characteristic of me, extremely descriptive
- +2 rather characteristic of me, quite descriptive
- +1 somewhat characteristic of me, slightly descriptive
- 1 somewhat uncharacteristic of me, slightly nondescriptive
- 2 rather uncharacteristic of me, quite nondescriptive
- 3 very uncharacteristic of me, extremely nondescriptive

- _____ 1. Most people seem to be more aggressive and assertive than I am.
- _____ 2. I have hesitated to make or accept dates because of "shyness."
- _____ 3. When the food served at a restaurant is not done to my satisfaction, I complain about it to the waiter or waitress.
- _____ 4. I am careful to avoid hurting other people's feelings, even when I feel that I have been injured.

- _____ 5. If a salesperson has gone to considerable trouble to show me merchandise that is not quite suitable, I have a difficult time saying no.
- _____ 6. When I am asked to do something, I insist upon knowing why.
- _____ 7. There are times when I look for a good, vigorous argument.
- _____ 8. I strive to get ahead as well as most people do.
- _____ 9. To be honest, people often take advantage of me.
- _____ 10. I enjoy starting conversations with new acquaintances and strangers.
- _____ 11. I often don't know what to say to attractive persons of the opposite sex.
- _____ 12. I will hesitate to make phone calls to business establishments and institutions.
- _____ 13. I would rather apply for a job or for admission to a college by writing letters than by going through personal interviews.
- _____ 14. I find it embarrassing to return merchandise.
- _____ 15. If a close and respected relative were annoying me, I would smother my feelings rather than express my annoyance.
- _____ 16. I have avoided asking questions for fear of sounding stupid.
- _____ 17. During an argument I am sometimes afraid that I will get so upset that I will shake all over.
- _____ 18. If a famed and respected lecturer makes a statement that I think is incorrect, I will have the audience hear my point of view as well.
- _____ 19. I avoid arguing over prices with clerks and salespeople.
- _____ 20. When I have done something important or worthwhile, I manage to let others know about it.
- _____ 21. I am open and frank about my feelings.
- _____ 22. If someone has been spreading false and bad stories about me, I see him or her as soon as possible to "have a talk" about it.
- _____ 23. I often have a hard time saying "no."
- _____ 24. I tend to bottle up my emotions rather than make a scene.
- _____ 25. I complain about poor service in a restaurant and elsewhere.

- ____26. When I am given a compliment, I sometimes just don't know what to say.
- ____27. If a couple near me in a theater or at a lecture were conversing rather loudly, I would ask them to be quiet or to take their conversation elsewhere.
- ____28. Anyone attempting to push ahead of me in a line is in for a good battle.
- ____29. I am quick to express an opinion.
- ____30. There are times when I just can't say anything.

Scoring

To score this scale, first change the signs (+ or -) to the opposite for items 1, 2, 4, 5, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 23, 24, 26, and 30. Next, total the plus (+) items, then total the minus (-) items, and, last, subtract the minus total from the plus total to obtain your score. This score can range from -90 through 0 to +90. The higher the score (closer to 190), the more assertively you usually behave. The lower the score (closer to +90), the more nonassertive is your typical behavior. This particular scale does not measure aggressiveness.

Source: Rathus, S. A. A 30-item schedule for assessing assertive behavior, *Behavior Therapy*, 4 (1973), 398, 406. Copyright © 1973 Academic Press, Orlando, FL.

Suggested Readings

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Web Resources

For links to the websites below, visit go.jblearning.com/dimensions5e and click on Resource Links.

Planned Parenthood: Educator's Update
www.plannedparenthood.org

Gives ideas that can help communication between parents and their children.

Double Your Dating: Sexual Communication Workbook
www.freewebs.com/maestro_mr/SCW.pdf

Gives hints about many aspects of sexual communication within relationships.

MindTools: Communication Skills
www.mindtools.com/page8.html

Contains numerous articles related to communication skills in many different situations.

Queendom: The Land of Tests

www.queendom.com/tests/access_page/index.htm?idRegTest=2288

You can find out how your interpersonal skills rate by taking a Communication Skills Test.

Sexual Communication & Relationships: About .com Sexuality

http://sexuality.about.com/od/communication/Sexual_Communication_Relationships.htm

Gives suggestions related to talking about sexuality with kids and teens, talking with partners, talking with medical personnel, communication in alternative relationships, and communication quick tips.

Sexual Communication: Health 24

www.health24.com/sex/Tips_techniques/1253-1254,32463.asp

Provides an overview of ways to help improve communication about sexuality with a partner.

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