

# MOTIVATED

## JUST LISTEN

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The second issue of *Motivated* on the topic of communication was published in 2002. My, how the world has changed since then. In those days, we communicated mostly via landlines, and when abroad, many of us still used public payphones to communicate with loved ones back home.

With all the technology and gadgets available today, you'd think that our communication skills, and as a result, our relationships, would have improved tremendously. But have they?

Of course, it is much easier now to communicate, and we can even see each other when using camera phones or communication programs like Skype, Messenger, WhatsApp, etc. Still, some might argue that the same gadgets that should facilitate communication can also distract and keep us from truly and deeply connecting with those around us.

In the editorial of that early issue I wrote, "Good communication is one of the vital foundation stones of any relationship. If the weight is shifted off this building block, if our priorities are directed to more trivial matters, then the building becomes unstable and the foundation is no longer able to properly support the structure."

This is still true, and perhaps more needed than ever in our high-tech world.

While our gadgets have their time, place, and purpose in our daily lives, I hope the articles and stories in this issue of *Motivated* will inspire you to retry some of the old-fashioned communication skills they talk about, and that as you do, your relationships—whether at home, at work or with friends—will be renewed and refreshed.

Happy communicating!

Christina Lane  
For *Motivated*

# Mother's Vase



Author Unknown, adapted

One day I was lying on my bed, reading, when my mother came into the room. She held out a vase—a rather ugly one—and asked, “Would you like to have this vase?”

I replied quickly, “No, I don’t want it.”

As she turned to walk away, something said to me, “Wait a minute, not so fast.” So I asked, “Where did you get it?”

She said, “Oh, I got it when I filled an order.” Filled an order? I thought. So I asked, “What do you mean, filled an order?”

“Well,” she said, “when I was a little girl, the Smith Company mailed catalogs to people. I would take the catalog around the neighborhood, and I’d get people to order from it. When I filled an order and sent it in, they gave me a prize. One time, I got a porch swing for my family.”

Now you have to understand that my

mother is 81 years old. She is one of six children in a family that her father deserted when she was quite young. Money was real hard to come by. My grandmother managed to keep the family together through the years, although I don’t know how. For my mother to win a luxury like a porch swing was a significant accomplishment. Although she no longer had the swing, she had the vase—a vase full of meaning—which she offered to me.

“Mom, I want the vase,” I said spontaneously.

The vase now has a prominent place in my living room. It symbolizes a precious moment that my mother and I shared. I learned that day that unless we are sensitive to another person, and take time to hear the meaning in what they are saying to us, we may well miss a precious moment to connect. ■

# Top 10 Ways to Improve Your Communication Skills



By Melanie Pinola, adapted

**E**ffective communication is one of the most important life skills we can learn—yet one we don't usually put a lot of effort into. Whether you want to have better conversations in your personal or social life, or get your ideas across better at work, here are some essential tips for learning to communicate more successfully.

## 1. Watch Your Body Language

You tell your partner you're open to discussion, but your arms are crossed; you say you're listening, but haven't looked up from your phone yet. Our non-verbal communication often reveals more than we think it does. Whether it's how you make eye contact or how you hold yourself during a video interview, don't forget that you're constantly communicating, even when you're not saying a word.

## 2. Get Rid of Unnecessary Conversation Fillers

Ums and ahs do little to improve your speech or everyday conversations. Cut them out to be more persuasive and feel or appear more confident. One way is to start keeping track of when you say words like "um" or "like." You could also try taking your hands out of your pockets, or simply relaxing and pausing before you speak. Those silences seem more awkward to you than they do to others.

## 3. Have a Script for Small Talk and Other Occasions

Small talk is an art that not many people have mastered. For the inevitable, awkward silences with people you hardly know, it helps to have a plan. The FORD (Family, Occupation, Recreation, Dreams) method might help you come up with topics to discuss, and you can also turn small talk into conversation by sharing information that could help you and the other person find common ground. Hey, all that small talk could make you happier in the long run.

## 4. Tell a Story

Stories are powerful. They activate our brains, make presentations less boring, make us more persuasive, and can even help us ace interviews. Learn the secrets of becoming a phenomenal storyteller by researching the topic. Everyone's got at least one great story in them.

## 5. Ask Questions and Repeat the Other Person

Let's face it, we've all drifted off when someone else was talking, or misheard the other person. Asking questions and repeating the other person's last few words shows you're interested in what they say, keeps you on your toes, and helps clarify points that could be misunderstood (e.g., "So to recap, you're going to buy the tickets for Saturday?").

## 6. Put Away the Distractions

It's pretty rude to use your phone while someone's talking to you or you're supposed to be hanging out with them. Maybe we can't get rid of all our distractions or put away technology completely, but just taking the time to look up could vastly improve our communication with each other.

## 7. Tailor Your Message to Your Audience

The best communicators adjust how they talk based on whom they're speaking to; you'd probably use a different style of communication with co-workers or your boss compared to when you're speaking with your significant other, kids, young people, or elders. Always try to keep the other person's perspective in mind when you try to get your message across.

## 8. Be Brief, Yet Specific

There's actually a BRIEF acronym—Background, Reason, Information, End, Follow-up—to help you keep your emails short without leaving anything out. It's a good policy for both written and verbal communication. Clear and concise are two of the 7 Cs of communication, along with concrete, correct, coherent, complete, and courteous.

## 9. Up Your Empathy

Communication is a two-way street. If you practice putting yourself in the other person's shoes, you can reduce the difficulty and anxiety that sometimes arises when trying to communicate with others. (For example, knowing what your significant other really means when she says she's too tired to talk.) Developing empathy helps you better understand even the unspoken parts of your communication with others, and helps you respond more effectively.

## 10. Listen, Really Listen

Finally, going hand-in-hand with most of the points above, the best thing you can do to improve your communication skills is to learn to really listen—to pay attention and let the other person talk without interrupting. It's hard work, we know, but "a good conversation is a bunch of words elegantly connected with listening." Then, even if your communication styles don't match, at least you're both working off the same page. And hopefully the other person will be attentively listening to you, too. ■



# Assumed Identities

Author Unknown, adapted

**M**aking myself comfortable in a small swivel chair, I searched for a chat room for people locally. I found one easily and clicked on the friendship section. I needed to feel cared about at that moment, even if it was all phony. When asked to enter a log-on name I typed in Lonely Heart, for that's what I was. There's no way I would ever give out my real name on the internet. Too many crazy people out there.

"Hello Lonely, what brings you here this afternoon?" came a message on my screen.

I looked closer for the name of the person. Loneliness. "Well I see we have something in common. I just came to find someone to talk to," I typed back in my slow hunt-and-peck method.

"Same here," came his quick reply. "What do you want to talk about?"

Then on the spur of the moment I just told him everything bad about my day and my life. The words came out freely and I really didn't expect him to understand my feelings. Men never understand.

"I know how you feel," magically appeared on my screen a few seconds later. I couldn't believe it. "I feel much the same way as you do. I have no friends. My wife died some years ago, and my children, they will never understand how much I really love them," he typed quickly.

"Why don't you just tell them?" I asked.

"I can't."

I decided not to push him any further about it. We made small talk about our feelings and what we wanted from life.

Then, "Lonely, I'm dying."

I didn't quite understand. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"What I said. I'm dying and I'm scared." There were no words exchanged for a minute or two. I knew what he was saying. I just didn't want to believe it.

"How so?" I responded after an eternity.

"I went to the doctor a few months ago. I have cancer. He said I might live for thirty days or thirty years. There's just

no way to tell.”

My heart suddenly dropped. Somehow I felt a special bond with this man. He was like an old friend. He couldn't be dying. It just wasn't fair.

“I don't know what to say,” I answered back honestly.

“Don't say anything. I haven't told anyone yet. I am so scared and worried of what will become of my family. I love them so much.” Another silence. “And they don't even know it.”

Suddenly I knew what I needed to do. I needed to meet this man in person to let him know that someone does care.

“Loneliness?” I typed.

“Yes?”

“I have enjoyed this so much but I have to leave soon. I feel silly for asking this. Is there any way we can meet in person later today or this week?”

There was no hesitation this time. “I would like that very much. Maybe we can meet at the coffee shop downtown?” he asked.

“Sure. Four o'clock this afternoon if you can make it.”

“Okay, it's a date then,” came the seemingly cheerful reply.

“I can't wait!” I typed in and said out loud at the same time. “Gotta run now though. Meet me at the little table by the front window. See ya then!” I stood up from the swivel chair and stretched for the first time in hours. I hadn't gotten up for anything. I passed by my Dad's study room and saw the light creeping from under his door. I didn't stop to say goodbye before rushing out the door.

The day went by pretty fast. I was going to meet the nicest, kindest man I had ever known in just a few hours. I wrote him

a letter during my study break to let him know that someone did care and that he was loved. Even if it was only by me, a complete stranger.

The final bell finally rang. It was three forty-five. I had fifteen minutes to walk to the coffee shop downtown. I was so scared all of the sudden. What if this man didn't like me? What if he was just some sick person who wanted to hurt me? What if he was twelve years old or eighty years old? It didn't really matter, I supposed. We were meeting in a public place and I said I'd be there. Besides, I just knew he was telling the truth. He was dying. He needed me.

The coffee shop was almost empty when I finally stepped inside. I told the man behind the counter that I was just waiting for a friend. He smiled and nodded slightly.

I slid into one of the seats by the front window with my back to the door. Two minutes after four. My new friend wasn't coming. I was disappointed but a little relieved too.

Then I heard the little bell above the front door ring. There was a strong hand on my shoulder. He spoke the name he knew me by softly, almost like he was crying. “Lonely Heart.”

I finally had the courage to look up at him. He was crying. His right hand was covering his forehead like he was lost from the world.

Then I cried with him. We hugged and sat there for hours, talking and just enjoying each other's company. There wasn't a single moment when tears weren't shed.

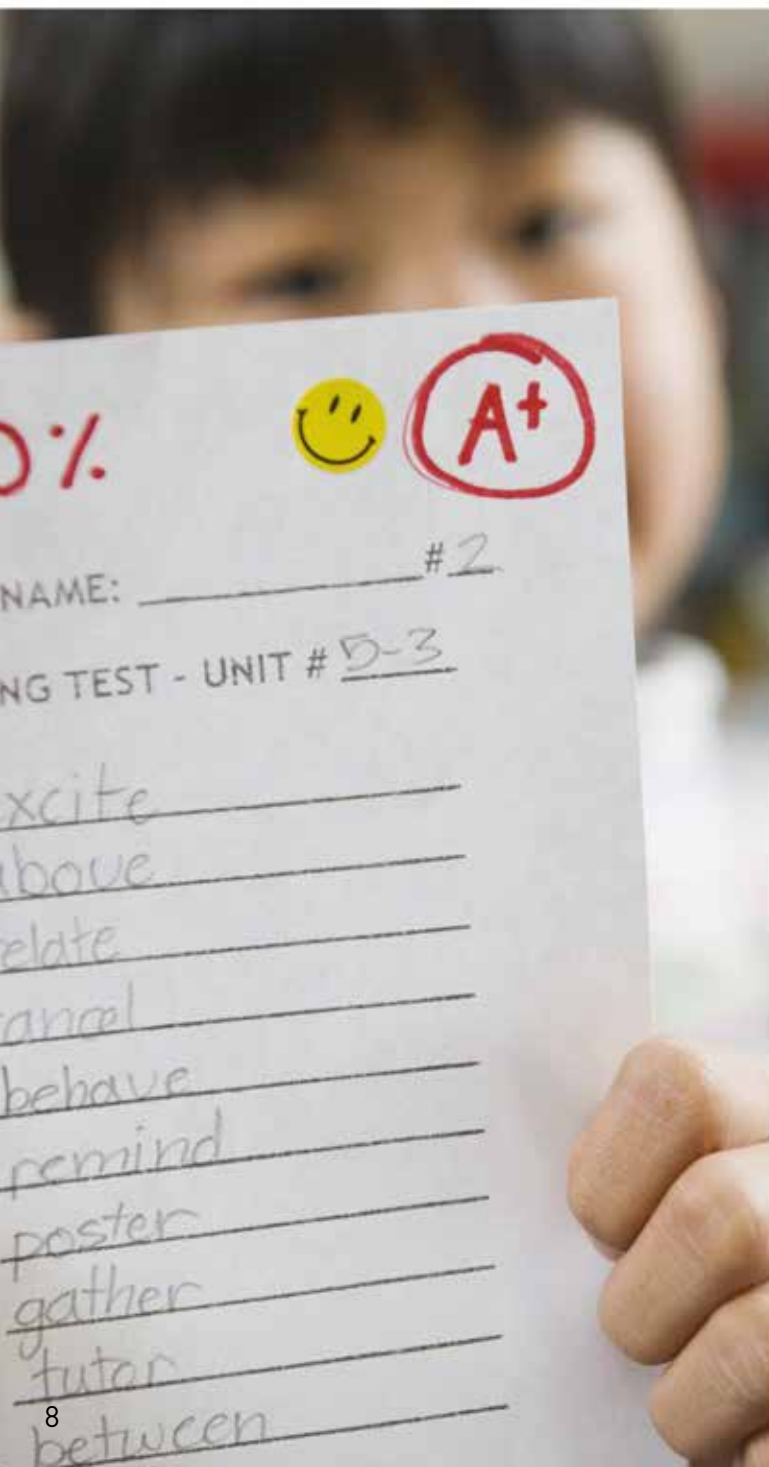
This man was perfect. This man was my father. ■

# And, and, and...

PARENTING  
FROM THE HEART



By Robin L. Silverman, adapted



Peeking out from the corner of my desk blotter is a note, slowly yellowing and bent from time.

It is a card from my mother, containing only four sentences, but with enough impact to change my life forever.

In it, she praises my abilities as a writer without qualification. Each sentence is filled with love, offering specific examples of what my pursuit has meant to her and my father.

The word “but” never appears on the card. However, the word “and” is there a half dozen times.

Every time I read it—which is almost every day—I am reminded to ask myself if I am doing the same thing for my daughters. I’ve asked myself how many times I’ve “but-ted” them, and me, out of happiness. I hate to say that it’s more often than I’d like to admit.

Although our eldest daughter usually got all A’s on her report card, there was never a semester when at least one teacher would not suggest that she talked



too much in class. I always forgot to ask them if she was making improvement in controlling her behavior, if her comments contributed to the discussion in progress, or encouraged a quieter child to talk. Instead, I would come home and greet her with, “Congratulations! Your Dad and I are very proud of your accomplishment, but could you try to tone it down in class?”

The same was true of our younger daughter. Like her sister, she is a lovely, bright, articulate and friendly child. She also treats the floor of her room and the bathroom as a closet, which has provoked me to say on more than one occasion, “Yes, that project is great, but clean up your room!”

I’ve noticed that other parents do the same thing. “Our whole family was together for Christmas, but Kyle skipped out early to play his new computer game.” “The hockey team won, but Mike should have made that last goal.” “Amy’s the homecoming queen, but now she wants \$200 to buy a new dress and shoes.” But, but, but.

Instead, what I learned from my mother is that if you really want love to flow to your children, start thinking “and, and, and” instead.

For example: “Our whole family was together for a special dinner, and Kyle mastered his new computer game before the night was through.” “The hockey team won, and Mike did his best the whole game.” “Amy’s the homecoming queen, and she’s going to look gorgeous!”

The fact is that “but” feels bad; “and” feels good. And when it comes to our children, feeling good is definitely the way to go. When they feel good about

themselves and what they are doing, they do more of it, building their self-confidence, their judgment and their harmonious connections to others. When everything they say, think or do is qualified or put down in some way, their joy sours and their anger soars.

This is not to say that children don’t need or won’t respond to their parents’ expectations. They do and they will, regardless of whether those expectations are good or bad. When those expectations are consistently bright and positive and then are taught, modeled, and expressed, amazing things happen. “I see that didn’t go so well. What do you think can be done differently next time?” Or, “You’ve been spending hours on that project, and I’d love to have you explain it to me.” Or, “You know that we work hard for our money, and we know that you can help figure out a way to pay for what you want.”

It’s not enough just to say we love our children. In a time when frustration has grown fierce, we can no longer afford to limit love’s expression. If we want to tone down the sound of violence in our society, we’re going to have to turn up the volume on noticing, praising, guiding, and participating in what we appreciate in our children.

“No more buts!” is a clarion call for joy. It’s also a challenge, the opportunity fresh before us every day to put our attention on what is good and promising about our children, and to believe with all our hearts that they will eventually be able to see the same in us, and the people with whom they will ultimately live, work, and serve.

And if I ever forget, I have my mother’s note to remind me. ■

# Falling Trees

By Robert Fulghum, adapted

The story goes that in the Solomon Islands in the south Pacific some villagers practice a unique form of logging. If a tree is too large to be felled with an ax, the natives cut it down by yelling at it. Woodsmen with special powers creep up on a tree just at dawn and suddenly scream at it at the top of their lungs. They continue this for thirty days. Then the tree dies and falls over.

The theory is that the hollering kills the spirit of the tree. According to the villagers, it always works.

Ah, those poor naive innocents. Such quaintly charming habits of the jungle. Screaming at trees, indeed. How primitive. Too bad they don't have the advantages of modern technology, and the scientific mind.

Me? I yell at my wife. I yell at the telephone and the lawn mower. I yell at the TV, the newspaper, and my children. I've been known to shake my fist and yell at the sky at times.

The man next door yells at his car a lot, and this summer I heard him yell at a stepladder for most of an afternoon. We modern, urban, educated folks yell at traffic and umpires and bills and banks and machines—especially machines. Machines and relatives get most of the yelling.

Don't know what good it does. Machines and things just sit there. Even kicking doesn't always help. As for people? Well, the Solomon Islanders may have a point. Yelling at living things does tend to kill the spirit in them.

Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words will break our hearts. ■



# Just Listen



By Rachel Naomi Remen, adapted

I suspect that the most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen.

Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention, especially if it's given from the heart. When people are talking, there's no need to do anything but receive them. Just take them in. Listen to what they're saying, and care about it. Most times caring about it is even more important than understanding it. It has taken me a long time to believe in the power of simply saying, "I'm so sorry," when someone is in pain—and meaning it.

One of my patients told me that when she tried to tell her story, people often interrupted to tell her that they once had something just like that happen to them. Subtly her pain became a story about themselves. Eventually she stopped talking to most people. It was just too lonely. We connect through listening. When we interrupt what someone is saying to let them know that we understand, we move the focus of

attention to ourselves. When we listen, they know we care. Many people with cancer can talk about the relief of having someone just listen.

I have even learned to respond to someone crying by just listening. In the old days I used to reach for the tissues, until I realized that passing a person a tissue may be just another way to shut them down, to take them out of their experience of sadness and grief. Now I just listen. When they have cried all they need to cry, they find me there with them.

This simple thing has not been that easy to learn. It certainly went against everything I had been taught since I was very young. I thought people listened only because they were too timid to speak, or did not know the answer. A loving silence often has far more power to heal and to connect than the most well intentioned words. ■

For more stories anecdotes and articles on communication, visit <http://www.inspirationalstories.com/communication-4.html>

# Loving Communication

NOTABLE  
QUOTES



Communication is the fuel that keeps the fire of your relationship burning, without it, your relationship goes cold.

—**William Paisley**

Before you speak, think: Is it necessary? Is it true? Is it kind? Will it hurt anyone? Will it improve on the silence?—**Sai Baba**

Without communication there is no relationship. Without respect there is no love. Without trust there is no reason to continue.—**Unknown**

The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't being said. The art of reading between the lines is a lifelong quest of the wise.

—**Shannon L. Adler**

A relationship based on people-pleasing is unbalanced and an unnecessary sacrifice of integrity, that will eventually break down.—**Peter Shepherd**

Two monologues do not make a dialogue.—**Jeff Daly**

I remind myself every morning: Nothing I say this day will teach me anything. So if I'm going to learn, I must do it by listening.—**Larry King**

Communication is a skill that you can learn. It's like riding a bicycle or typing. If you're willing to work at it, you can rapidly improve the quality of every part of your life.—**Brian Tracy**

I speak to everyone in the same way, whether he is the garbage man or the president of the university.—**Albert Einstein**

Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless.

—**Mother Teresa**

