

Say What You Mean

Speak up, set boundaries, and communicate
with confidence in 5 simple steps

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Poor communication skills can limit your ability to express yourself—especially when asserting your voice. This guide outlines a simple yet powerful five-step process to help you communicate your needs and desires with clarity and confidence. When practiced regularly, these skills will enhance your relationships, build self-esteem, and help you earn the respect you deserve.

In over 30 years as a psychotherapist, I have worked with countless individuals who struggle with communication—what to say, how to say it, and finding the courage to say anything at all. Many avoid speaking up to escape confrontation, to be liked, or out of fear of saying the wrong thing. But effective communication is essential to getting your needs met, asserting your voice, and engaging in meaningful, productive dialogue.

This guide will teach you how to express your needs confidently, set clear boundaries, and prioritize yourself—without guilt. You will learn how to communicate assertively and navigate conversations in ways that foster both understanding and mutual respect.

Mastering Communication: The Key to Strong Relationships

A fulfilling life is built on successful relationships. Your ability to communicate effectively—with family, friends, partners, coworkers, and even strangers—is essential to forming and maintaining those connections. Healthy relationships depend on each person's ability to express their needs clearly, while also listening and responding to the needs of others.

But what happens when outdated communication styles from childhood—such as staying silent and not offering an opinion—continue to influence your adult interactions? These learned behaviors leave you anxious, uncertain and frustrated. My goal is to help you build communication competence, so you can assert yourself and speak your truth—without fear.

With knowledge and practice, you can master communication skills that empower you to set boundaries, say “no” when necessary, and speak up with clarity. At the

core of this process is the belief that you—like everyone—deserve to be heard. The rewards of effective communication are lasting: increased confidence, higher self-esteem, and the assurance that your voice matters.

The 5-Step Plan for Effective Direct Communication

Step 1: Your Communication Style—Observe Your Behavior

The purpose of communication is to express your internal experience to others—people who will not know how you feel unless you tell them. Facial expressions and body language offer clues, but clear communication requires that you *explicitly* share what you want or need.

If you tend to stay silent even when something bothers you—or only speak up when you have reached your breaking point—you risk “snapping” and saying things you do not mean. Or you might rely on guilt, sarcasm, hints, or indirect questions to avoid confrontation. These roundabout methods lead to confusion and ineffective communication.

People who struggle with assertiveness often hold back to avoid “rocking the boat,” appearing too pushy, or feeling vulnerable. While indirectness may feel safer, it often leads to misunderstanding and unresolved feelings. The most respectful and empowering way to communicate is to speak honestly and say what you mean.

Asking questions—especially “why” questions—is usually an ineffective way to express feelings. It shifts the focus from your emotions to the other person’s behavior or motivations, which can feel accusatory and put them on the defensive. This often derails the conversation, making it about their justification rather than your needs.

Instead of asking, “Why did you do that?” express how their behavior made you feel. For example: **“I felt hurt when you did that.”** This creates a more open dialogue and encourages mutual empathy and understanding.

Examples: Indirect Communication vs. Direct Expression:

- Indirect: “Why didn’t you wait for me?”
Direct: “I wanted you to wait for me, and you didn’t.”

- Indirect: “Could you try to be more quiet when I’m trying to sleep?”
Direct: “I want you to stop making noise when I’m trying to sleep.”
- Indirect: “Why are you yelling at me?”
Direct: “I want you to stop yelling at me.”

Notice the difference. The indirect approach is vague and leaves room for misinterpretation. The direct version communicates the feeling clearly and opens the door for resolution.

Exercise:

Over the next seven days, observe how you communicate. Do you ask questions instead of making clear statements? Do you use guilt, sarcasm, or hinting instead of expressing your needs directly? Take notes. This is a time to simply observe, without judgment.

Step 2: Transform Your Question Into a Statement

Now that you have observed your communication habits, it is time to shift them. The next time you are about to ask a question instead of making a clear statement—pause. Ask yourself:

- “How do I feel about what they did?”
- “What do I actually want to say?”

Then reframe your question into a direct “I feel...” statement.

Owning your emotions allows you to express yourself without aggression. You are simply describing your experience—which you have every right to do.

Try this format:

“When you do _____, I feel _____.”

Examples:

- “When you don’t wait for me, I feel unimportant to you.”
- “When you make noise while I’m trying to sleep, I feel like you don’t care about me.”

- “When you yell at me, I feel disrespected and unloved.”

Note: If you are unsure whether the person you are addressing is emotionally safe or trustworthy, you can use “become” or “get” instead of “feel” to maintain more emotional boundaries. Also, it is generally best to avoid expressing personal feelings at work.

Step 3a: Add a Condition

Now that you have stated how you feel, add a clear condition that outlines how you want things to change going forward.

Examples:

- “When you don’t wait for me, I feel unimportant. Going forward, when you say you’ll wait, I want you to follow through.”
- “When you make noise while I’m trying to sleep, I feel uncared for. Going forward, I want you to be mindful of the noise during those times.”
- “When you yell at me, I feel disrespected and unloved. In the future, I want you to take a breath before responding and keep your voice calm.”

Step 3b: Get Buy-In

To complete your direct communication, ask for the other person’s agreement. This ensures they understand your request and are willing to respect it.

Examples:

- “Will you agree to that?”
- “Will you do that for me?”
- “Are you willing to do that?”

Securing agreement promotes accountability. If the person resists, deflects, or refuses to take responsibility, that tells you something important about the dynamic—and gives you information to consider when evaluating your relationship.

Step 4: Plan, Practice, and Proceed

When you are ready to have a direct conversation with someone important (and potentially difficult to approach), prepare in advance.

- Write out your message and refine it.
- Practice saying it out loud—alone, or with a trusted friend or therapist.
- Keep it as simple and direct as possible.

When you are ready to speak:

- Ask, “Is now a good time to talk?”
- If not, ask when would be a better time.
- At the agreed time, ground yourself—feel your feet on the floor.
- Deliver your message with calm and clarity.

The other person may react—and that is okay. Their opinion is valid, but it does not override yours. Stay grounded and remember your right to speak your truth.

Do not justify, over-explain, or apologize. If someone is used to controlling or overriding your voice, they may push back—accusing you of being “too sensitive” or “difficult.” Stay alert. Hold your ground. Remain calm.

The more you practice direct communication, the easier it gets. Your confidence will grow as you prioritize your voice without shame or regret.

Step 5: Stand By Your Statements—and Practice, Practice, Practice

Assertive communication is a skill that improves with time. It is not about being aggressive—it is about being clear. Each time you fall into old patterns, simply notice, reset, and try again. The key is consistent awareness and practice.

Bringing It All Together: The Power of Direct Communication

Learning to communicate directly transforms not only your interactions, but your relationship with yourself. As you practice standing by your own words, you will strengthen your relationships, reduce conflict, and create space for your voice to be truly heard.

Assertiveness allows you to live authentically. It empowers you to be seen, respected, and valued—first by yourself, and then by others.

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This guide is a resource for anyone seeking to strengthen communication and assertiveness. These five practical steps are designed to support you at any stage of personal growth.

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