

Compassionate Communication

“Intimacy” refers to those qualities associated with friendship, trust, and compassion. When we feel intimate toward another, we willingly suspend self-protective attitudes that we normally use when closely interacting with others. Intimacy fosters acceptance, and greater degrees of intimacy are correlated with greater personal health.

Compassionate communication helps individuals express vulnerable thoughts while maintaining mutual sensitivity and respect for each other. Here, “compassion” means the neurological ability to resonate to the emotional feelings of others, to share their suffering and their joy. Compassion is a fundamental tenet of nearly every spiritual tradition. Compassion also implies the neurological ability to express kindness, empathy, and forgiveness. Like intimacy, compassion is associated with greater emotional and psychological health. From a neurological perspective, it is generated and regulated largely by the anterior cingulate, and this unique part of the human brain enhances social awareness, recognizes feeling states of others, and decreases our propensity to express anger and react with fear. The anterior cingulate is also one of the core neural mechanisms responsible for our deepest feelings of romantic love. It allows us to feel emotionally connected and attached, but if it functions poorly, a person’s ability to resonate to the feelings of someone else will be impaired.

At first this may sound counterintuitive, but many long-term studies have shown that the complex demands of marriage increase the degree of stress between couples. An intimate conversation can easily bump up against unaddressed conflicts, so a natural reaction is to avoid those issues – and specifically, those conversations – that may threaten marital attachment. Substantial neurological and psychological research has demonstrated the necessity of eye contact and intentional gazing for generating empathy and social responsiveness. Mutual eye contact stimulates the same circuits as meditation and is considered integral to human mirror-neuron theory.

Evidence from university research has demonstrated that couples who use a mindfulness-based meditation separately are more likely to respond empathically toward each other. In another study, those who practiced mindfulness meditation showed “improved levels of relationship happiness, relationship stress, stress-coping efficacy, and overall stress.” Other awareness-based meditations and neurofeedback training have been integrated into psychotherapy to foster relationship empathy and improve parenting skills. Compassionate communication helps deepen spiritual bonds within relationships. Spiritual practices -- even when stripped from their religious components and applied to secular situations – take people inward, where they often realize the importance of compassionate values and humanitarian ideals, qualities that are found at the heart of most religious traditions.

All you have to do is maintain consistent eye contact and stay physically relaxed and mindful of your responses as you participate in a flow of spontaneous conversation. Your own state of awareness and relaxation will influence the other person’s mood. Human brains are designed to resonate to the inner emotional states of others, so as long as one of you maintains a posture of openness and serenity, the other person will unconsciously respond in kind. Maybe not as much as you desire, but when it comes to something as complicated as personal relationships, every little bit helps.

Human communication is one of the most complex neural processes in the brain. It involves face and voice recognition, language processing, memory recall, speech coordination, concept recognition imagery mapping, emotional regulation, deceit and fairness evaluation, strategic planning, and the activation of neural circuits governing volitional activities. Any degree of stress will interfere with the integration of these internal processes, so the first step in effective communication is to remain calm and relaxed. Relaxation is an essential key to virtually every aspect of social interaction. If you integrate breathing, awareness, observation, optimism, and emotional neutrality into your conversation, a far more meaningful and constructive dialogue will emerge.

Relaxation heightens our visual and auditory skills, which means we can listen more carefully to others and better ascertain the subtle facial cues that are indispensable to the communication process. Increased attentiveness will positively affect your partner, and this will encourage a greater willingness for him or her to disclose more intimate feelings and thoughts. But intimacy brings with it vulnerability, and if the other person reacts with anxiety, the conversation will be derailed. Relaxation lowers the neural reactivity in your brain. In addition, when the circuits relating to social awareness and compassion are stimulated, pleasure-enhancing neurochemicals are released, and these also decrease the risk of reacting with anger or fear.

Compassionate communication is easy to learn. Before you speak to someone, for example, take a slow deep breath and consciously relax all of the muscles in your body. Then speak slowly and briefly, letting the other person respond. While he or she talks, stay quietly focused on your state of relaxation. When the other person stops, take a subtle breath and respond. You might think that your slower talking will attract undue attention, but when you try it, you'll discover that other people will experience your slowness as being more attentive and receptive. If you ask them, they'll probably tell you that they felt you were deeply interested in what they said. And then, if you tell them what you were doing, you'll have the pleasure of passing on a valued technique that someone else can use.

To learn more about compassionate communication and self-regulation, visit our web site: www.affectiveneurosciences.com, or call our office for an appointment.