

Conscious Communication

How to Establish Healthy Relationships
and Resolve Conflict Peacefully
while Maintaining Independence



A Language of Connection

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Introduction

Why Consciously Communicate?

There are few things more important now than learning to communicate with each other in a way that supports our individuality while also recognizing our interdependence. Most of our familiar social rules are changing so rapidly that it is difficult to pinpoint what is essential in our relationships with other people. We are experiencing an unprecedented degree of personal independence, yet the price we are paying is an increased sense of isolation from each other. This leaves many of us feeling confused about where we belong, and with whom we feel genuinely connected.

The old formulas for relationships are failing because they do not allow for each of us to be our own person. And, our new emphasis on personal growth and individual freedom has left us without a good way to connect with each other.

We think we cannot be ourselves
and maintain close relationships with other people.
Yet this is not so;
we simply have not yet learned how.

The aim of *Conscious Communication* is to provide a clear way for us to invest in our relationships with other people, while also investing in ourselves.

The Dilemma of Relating to Other People

All of us are in relationships of some kind. We each have family, and most of us have neighbors, friends, and people with whom we work or socialize. Nations relate to other nations, and communities relate to other communities. In spite of being surrounded by people, however, many of us have a nagging sense of being alone.

No matter how close we are to others, it seems they frequently do not understand us. At the same time, *they* often baffle *us* with their annoying complexities and contradictions. It is easy to become disillusioned with other people when they fail to provide the kind of

support we want, or when we just don't understand them. We may then find ourselves wishing that everyone would just go away.

But, when everyone does go away, we get scared. Few of us are comfortable in isolation, and while we may condemn the failings of our neighbors, friends, or family, *we need them*. It seems that we can't live with other people, yet we also can't live without them. We often cope with this dilemma by trying to keep a safe distance from others, only to end up hopelessly trapped in relationships that do not work.

Caught between our need for connection,
and our desire for freedom,
we are not able to fully realize either.

Many of us today are perplexed about relationships and confused as to why they can be so difficult. From couples to corporations, and neighbors to nations, we are experiencing more conflict, and few of us want to look at it directly because we don't know how to respond. We tend to avoid these tense situations with other people, or charge into them aggressively, hoping to make them go away as quickly as possible. But these tactics only make matters worse, and we find ourselves with a closet full of broken and discarded relationships that ultimately undermine our sense of peace and security in the world.

A Fatal Habit

While our society has made impressive advances in technology that enable a level of material comfort unthinkable to our ancestors,

our way of relating to each other
has not changed much since the Stone Age.

Most of us rely on our instincts of fight or flight when we feel threatened, and still believe that attacking or withdrawing will resolve our conflicts with other people. Yet withdrawing from other people or forcefully trying to get them to change doesn't work. And, we can see the tragic result of our lack of relationship skills all around us today, from the epidemic of divorce to the frequent outbreaks of war throughout the world.

With more than six billion of us now sharing the resources of our small planet, tensions between people can only increase, and our inability to cooperate with each other may be the largest threat we face to our survival as a species. In an age of nuclear weapons, global climate change, massive environmental pollution, and a worldwide economy, it is clear that the actions of each one of us affect everyone else here on earth. Given the condition of our world and the consequences of perpetuating conflict, our reliance on primitive survival instincts to manage our relationships makes no sense. If we continue to choose competition over cooperation, we insure our own eventual demise.

Analysis Is Not Enough

Relationships are so basic to our existence that it is surprising how little training we have in how to make them work. Our efforts to resolve conflict are often focused on diagnosing a problem from a rational perspective. While psychology can help us understand how relationships work and why people do the things they do, this kind of theoretical understanding does not actually change anything. We may think we have changed because we have a new story that explains what is happening. Yet we are still judging each other, and the only thing different is that we have a more sophisticated basis for our evaluations.

In the end, behavioral analysis does not resolve the problem of feeling separate from each other, because we have not shifted our fundamental orientation. We are still trying to sort everything into categories of right and wrong, thinking this will somehow solve our conflicts. Yet, this approach of dividing the world into good and bad *creates* much of the tension we feel between ourselves and other people. When we try to categorize human behavior, we are using the same mental process that is the *cause* of our conflict.

Adopting a new set of rules or establishing a universal moral code cannot resolve our differences. Knowing that polarized conflict is ultimately destructive has not changed our ways. Something draws us into power struggles with each other even though we know it doesn't work. We may have a firm intention to cooperate, yet when strong emotions are stirred, we end up fighting with each other because we cannot help ourselves.

Getting to the Root of the Problem

Why do we keep trying the same approach even though it causes so much damage? It seems that by now that we should be civilized enough to know how to get along. Yet no amount of knowledge or idealism has changed our basic human nature. This is because the conditions that cause conflict are ingrained in the way we think, and if we want to be free from conflict we have to question the usual way we explain our disagreements.

Notice how children typically respond to conflict between themselves. When asked to explain what is happening, their normal answer is to blame someone else. Each child is convinced that their actions are justified by the wrongs of another child. With children, it is easy to see that this kind of response does not make sense, and doesn't solve anything. However, it is much harder to see this in our own behavior.

When tensions arise between people, we usually describe the situation in terms of a victim and a villain, thinking this will help us resolve the problem. Most of us try to explain opposition in terms of right versus wrong. And since few of us want to see ourselves as wrong, we naturally conclude that the other person is at fault. We each view *ourselves* as the victim, and then become mired in conflict with both sides, trying to prove that we are innocent and the other people are guilty. We blame the other side for causing the problem, which justifies our attacks against them and further escalates the struggle.

This urge to be right is an automatic response to controversy that does not address what we actually want, and instead leads to more conflict. It is a habit so instinctual that we barely notice it, and we often don't see the damage it causes to our relationships. When our goal is winning instead of simply meeting our basic needs, we end up creating more tension between ourselves and other people and then lose sight of our own well-being.

What is Conscious Communication?

In order to be effective in relating to each other, we have to get beyond setting up conflicts as right against wrong, and recognize that winning is not the same as having our needs met. Life is not a competition, and we do not find peace or satisfaction by getting our

way over other people. Yet, we cannot change such a fundamental habit by merely adopting new ideals of peaceful cooperation. It is only when we see for ourselves that being right does not make us happy that we naturally let go of competing, and focus instead on finding what we really want.

Being more conscious in communication begins with simply paying attention to how you relate to other people, especially when strong emotions are stirred up, and noticing if your current approach is working. The first chapters in this book highlight our most common responses to other people and help us assess how well these old communication habits work. The next chapters introduce an entirely new way to think about relationships. Simple practices are clearly laid out that unlock you from your current perspective so that you can see things from a new angle.

This approach is *not* a new set of rules for good communication. These are specific tools that interrupt the normal way we view other people. This new language merely disrupts your familiar patterns long enough for you to become conscious of them, and enables you to see the destructive effect that competition has on your relationships. This allows you to shift your attention away from your imagined fears, and focus instead on your immediate needs.

Once you have made this shift in perspective, you realize that your sense of belonging with other people is a fundamental requirement for your security and well-being, and cooperating becomes far more interesting than competing. These skills then offer a new way of relating that enables you to get your basic needs met, while also allowing other people to meet their needs.

The Skills

Conscious Communication will teach you how to address your differences directly, while maintaining your sense of connection. These tools enable you to listen to other people without becoming defensive or trying to fix their problem, and to be honest about your feelings and needs without blaming someone else or making them responsible.

At the heart of this approach are guidelines for listening with empathy, speaking responsibly, and staying connected through conflict until everyone's basic needs are addressed. These three skill sets are

presented in the main body of the book as Supportive Listening, Assertion Messages, and Collaborative Negotiation, and they follow a natural progression, with each set building on the others. The book culminates in a section on how to apply the skills in a primary intimate relationship, and concludes with an exploration of how this new language can help us achieve a more democratic and just society.

The skills and theories you will learn here apply to any type of relationship, from interactions within families and communities to those between corporations or nations. They work in any situation where two or more people have contact, because they address the basic beliefs and attitudes that govern the primary ways we interact with each other.

This approach offers a way to resolve peacefully the struggles that have plagued humanity and continue to make destructive conflicts such a tragic part of our history. It differs from many other paths to peace, however, in that it actively addresses our personal attitudes and beliefs and offers a means to grow and expand *individually* through our relationships with other people. It teaches us how to relate to each other in ways that nourish and support each of us as individuals *and* as a whole.

Making Room for a New Perspective

Consciously communicating involves questioning your own judgments and opinions and being willing to see things from a new perspective. Consider the possibility that the source of much of the conflict and struggle in your life is not the people who seem to be opposing you. Rather,

you may be stuck
in a primal, patterned way of thinking
that causes you to approach other people defensively,
assuming you are the victim
of a world that is out to get you.

Questioning your basic assumptions can be difficult, and may seem like more work than you want to take on. Yet it is far easier and more realistic than trying to change other people, live up to some ideal of harmony, or pretend that conflict does not exist at all. In the end, the

only thing you actually *can* do effectively is to face the situation in front of you honestly and allow your own attitudes and beliefs to be tested by reality.

Instead of simply challenging or avoiding people who seem to be opposing you, there is a way to learn from these struggles. If you redirect your attention to yourself when you are upset, it is possible to reveal patterns of thinking that are not working for you. In this way, you can avoid repeating the same behaviors and landing in the same place of frustration, anxiety, and despair in your life.

When we feel threatened, we often become consumed by imaginary fears that have little to do with what is really happening. You may notice that you are building a conflict up in your mind without having much solid information. Or you might recognize that you have drawn a conclusion about other people's behavior without really understanding *why* they are acting the way they are.

Most of us are viewing the world through an outdated set of conceptual filters that have programmed us for opposition. Our survival mentality interferes with our ability to see what is actually going on around us, especially when we become emotional. And, this unfortunate habit undermines our capacity for cooperation, friendship, and intimacy.

We can build new societies based on the ideals of peace and cooperation, yet if we do not learn to alter our individual responses, we will inevitably find ourselves mired in conflict again. Changing the way institutions, governments, or nations relate to each other, therefore, has to begin with transforming our own personal patterns. To bring about real change, each one of us has to let go of our habit of dividing the world into opposing sides, and be willing to question our comfortable conclusions of what is right and wrong. Once we see for ourselves how we unconsciously create or feed conflict, it becomes easier to stop these instinctive reactions that undermine our happiness and peace, and learn a new way.