

A large, stylized speech bubble graphic with a red outline and a white interior. The word "MESSAGES" is written in red, serif, all-caps font, slanted upwards from left to right, following the curve of the bubble. The background is a solid red color.

MESSAGES

The  
Communication  
Book

Matthew McKay, Ph.D.

Martha Davis, Ph.D.

Patrick Fanning

**MESSAGES:**

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Book**

**By Matthew McKay, Ph.D.**

**Martha Davis, Ph.D.**

**Patrick Fanning**

We wish to thank  
Kirk Johnson for  
his thorough and  
professional editing  
of the text.

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To Jude Landis,  
Nancy Kesselring,  
Ray and Kay Davis

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## Introduction

Communication is a basic life skill, as important as the skills by which you make your way through school or earn a living. Your ability to communicate largely determines your personal happiness. When you communicate effectively you make and keep friends. You are valued at work. Your children respect and trust you. You get your sexual needs met.

If you're less effective at communicating, you'll find your life deficient in one or more areas: Work may be all right but your family shouts at the dinner table. Sex can be found but friendships never seem to work out. You bounce from job to job, your mate is often cool, but you have a great time with your old political buddies. You get a lot of laughs at parties but go home alone.

Effective communication makes life work. But where can you learn it? Parents are often dismal role models. Schools are busy teaching French and trigonometry. Often there's no one to show you how to communicate your wants, your anger, or your secret fears. No one shows you how to fight fair instead of blaming others, how to listen actively, or how to "check out" someone's meaning instead of mindreading.

These skills have been known and available for years. They can and should be taught right along with the three R's. Young adults, for example, should learn parent effectiveness skills in school before having children of their own—not years later when a teenage son is a truant or a daughter runs away. Colleges should provide core courses in the *skills* of communication in addition to the more traditional courses in communication theory.

This book gathers the most essential communication skills into one volume. They are presented in condensed form, but with sufficient examples and exercises so that you can begin practicing the skills you want to acquire. The book tells you what to do about communicating rather than what to think about it. Pure theory is omitted unless it contributes directly to your understanding of a particular communication skill.

Looking over the Table of Contents, you will see that the emphasis on skills is reflected in the book's organization. The first three chapters cover Basic Skills. Everybody needs to know how to listen, how to disclose thoughts and feelings, and how to express what's really true.

The section on Advanced Skills contains five chapters that teach you about using and understanding body language, decoding paralanguage and metamessages, uncovering hidden agendas, applying Transactional Analysis to your communications, and clarifying your own and others' language.

The next section contains three chapters covering skills which are essential in conflict situations: assertiveness, fair fighting, and negotiation. The Social Skills section that follows contains two chapters on avoiding the pitfalls of prejudice and making contact.

The section on Family Skills teaches you how to communicate with your sexual partner, your children, and with your whole family. The final section offers two chapters about skills required for effective communication in small groups and when you are called upon to make a speech.

Obviously, you should read the basic and advanced skills chapters first, then go on to the specific chapters appropriate to your relationships and position in life. Not so obviously, you have to do more than read. If you merely read, you will miss the main point of this book—that communication is a skill. The only way to learn a skill is experientially. You have to *do it*. You actually have to perform the exercises, follow the suggestions, and make these skills your own through practice.

Just as you wouldn't expect to become a skilled woodworker after leafing through a back issue of *Popular Mechanics*, so you can't expect to become a glib, fascinating conversationalist after just perusing the chapter on making contact. Learning by doing applies to communication skills just as much as to woodworking, skiing, or playing a musical instrument. Skill requires knowledge. The knowledge is in this book. But you must put it to work in your everyday life.



# BASIC SKILLS



# Listening

You're at a dinner party. Someone is telling anecdotes, someone is complaining, someone is bragging about his promotion. Everyone there is anxious to talk, to tell his or her story. Suddenly you get the feeling that no one is listening. While the talk goes on you notice that people's eyes wander. They are perhaps rehearsing their own remarks. It's as if they have secretly agreed: "I'll be an audience for you if you'll be an audience for me." The party may be a success, but people go home without hearing or knowing each other.

Listening is an essential skill for making and keeping relationships. If you are a good listener, you'll notice that others are drawn to you. Friends confide in you and your friendships deepen. Success comes a little easier because you hear and understand people: you know what they want and what hurts or irritates them. You get "lucky" breaks because people appreciate you and want you around.

People who don't listen are bores. They don't seem interested in anyone but themselves. They turn off potential friends and lovers by giving the message: "What you have to say doesn't matter much to me." As a result, they often feel lonely and isolated. The tragedy is that people who don't listen rarely figure out what's wrong. They change their perfume or cologne, they get new clothes, they work at being funny, and they talk about "interesting" things. But the underlying problem remains. They aren't fun to talk to because the other person never feels satisfied that he or she's been heard.

It's dangerous not to listen! You miss important information and you don't see problems coming. When you try to understand why people do things, you have to mind-read and guess to fill in the gaps in your listening skills.

Listening is a commitment and a compliment. It's a commitment to understanding how other people feel, how they see their world. It means putting aside your own prejudices and beliefs, your anxieties and self-interest, so that you can step behind the other person's eyes. You try to look at things from his or her perspective. Listening is a compliment because it says to the other person: "I care about what's happening to you, your life and your experience are important." People usually respond to the compliment of listening by liking and appreciating you.

## Real versus Pseudo-Listening

Being quiet while someone talks does not constitute real listening. Real listening is based on the *intention* to do one of four things:

1. Understand someone
2. Enjoy someone
3. Learn something
4. Give help or solace

If you want to understand someone, you can't help really listening to them. When you're enjoying a conversation or you intend to learn something, listening comes quite naturally. When you want to help someone express his or her feelings, you are involved, listening. The key to real listening is wanting and intending to do so.

Unfortunately, a lot of pseudo-listening masquerades as the real thing. The intention is not to listen, but to meet some other need. Some of the typical needs met by pseudo-listening are:

1. Making people think you're interested so they will like you
2. Being alert to see if you are in danger of getting rejected
3. Listening for one specific piece of information and ignoring everything else
4. Buying time to prepare your next comment
5. Half-listening so someone will listen to you
6. Listening to find someone's vulnerabilities or to take advantage
7. Looking for the weak points in an argument so you can always be right, listening to get ammunition for attack
8. Checking to see how people are reacting, making sure you produce the desired effect
9. Half-listening because a good, kind, or nice person would
10. Half-listening because you don't know how to get away without hurting or offending someone

Everyone is a pseudo-listener at times. Problems develop when real listening (the intention to understand, enjoy, learn, help) is happening a lot less than pseudo-listening. In general, the more real listening you do,

the better your relationships feel. Use the following chart to assess the real versus the pseudo-listening you do with significant people in your life. Estimate the percentage of your listening that is *real* for each of the following:

**WORK**

Boss \_\_\_\_\_ %  
Coworkers \_\_\_\_\_ %

\_\_\_\_\_ %

\_\_\_\_\_ %

\_\_\_\_\_ %

Subordinates

\_\_\_\_\_ %

\_\_\_\_\_ %

\_\_\_\_\_ %

**RELATIVES**

Mother \_\_\_\_\_ %

Father \_\_\_\_\_ %

Siblings

\_\_\_\_\_ %

\_\_\_\_\_ %

Others

\_\_\_\_\_ %

\_\_\_\_\_ %

\_\_\_\_\_ %

**HOME**

Mate \_\_\_\_\_ %  
Children \_\_\_\_\_ %

\_\_\_\_\_ %

\_\_\_\_\_ %

\_\_\_\_\_ %

Roommate \_\_\_\_\_ %

**FRIENDS**

Best friend \_\_\_\_\_ %

Same-sex friends

\_\_\_\_\_ %

\_\_\_\_\_ %

\_\_\_\_\_ %

Opposite-sex friends

\_\_\_\_\_ %

\_\_\_\_\_ %

\_\_\_\_\_ %



To use the information on your chart, ask yourself these questions:

1. Who are the people you listen to best?
2. Who are the people with whom you do more pseudo-listening?
3. What is it about these people that makes it easier or harder to listen to them?
4. Are there any people on the chart with whom you want to do more real listening?

Choose one person you could relate to better. For one day, commit yourself to real listening. After each encounter, check your intention in listening. Were you trying to understand them, enjoy them, learn something, or give help or solace? Notice if you were doing any pseudo-listening, and what needs your pseudo-listening satisfied.

Habits form easily. If you continued this exercise for a week, attention to the quality of your listening would begin to be automatic.

## Blocks to Listening

There are twelve blocks to listening. You will find that some are old favorites that you use over and over. Others are held in reserve for certain types of people or situations. Everyone uses listening blocks, so you shouldn't worry if a lot of blocks are familiar. This is an opportunity to become more aware of your blocks at the time you actually use them.

### 1. Comparing

Comparing makes it hard to listen because you're always trying to assess who is smarter, more competent, more emotionally healthy—you or the other. Some people focus on who has suffered more, who's a bigger victim. While someone's talking, you think to yourself: "Could I do it that well? . . . I've had it harder, he doesn't know what hard is. . . I earn more than that. . . My kids are so much brighter." You can't let much in because you're too busy seeing if you measure up.

### 2. Mind Reading

The mind reader doesn't pay much attention to what people say. In fact, he often distrusts it. He's trying to figure out what the other person is *really* thinking and feeling. "She says she wants to go to the show, but I'll bet she's tired and wants to relax. She might be resentful if I pushed her when she doesn't want to go." The mind reader pays less attention to words than to intonations and subtle cues in an effort to see through to the truth.

If you are a mind reader, you probably make assumptions about how people react to you. "I bet he's looking at my lousy skin. . . She thinks