

COMMUNICATION AND RECOVERY

Introduction

"God, help me to keep my life uncomplicated. Please keep me simple and verbal."

The above quote from the CoDA Affirmations Booklet, suggests that being "simple" and "verbal" are two basic communication skills that we need to develop in recovery. We seldom think about it, but what we say to others and ourselves - and how we say it- has profound impact on our lives. Our internal and external communication habits shape our thoughts, feelings, actions, and relationships – literally everything we experience in life. Indeed, poor communication makes our lives needlessly complicated. Not speaking up for ourselves and expressing our feelings in an open, honest, and healthy manner keeps us trapped in our co-dependency, a disease that for many members, is a disease of silence.

This pamphlet suggests some ways that we can free ourselves from our co-dependent communication patterns. We can develop a new awareness of our verbal habits and learn to make healthier choices about how we communicate with others and ourselves.

What is Healthy Communication?

Healthy communication is clear, concise, and honest. To improve our communication we first need to know our hearts and minds clearly. Co-dependents continually need to ask:

"What do I think, feel, and need?"

Once we answer these crucial questions, we can empower ourselves to express our feelings openly and honestly without being controlled by our fear of the reactions of others.

What Causes Co-dependent Communication?

Co-dependent communication is caused by one primary force: fear and the need to control it. Fear is the great repressor of the human spirit and the hidden culprit behind many of our damaging beliefs about others and ourselves. Fear masquerades as truth and holds us in a false belief that we are unworthy and others' reactions will destroy us.

Our communication patterns often reflect our fear. For example, when we are with angry people, we may "walk on eggshells." If this approach

is a conscious choice to take care of ourselves, then that's OK. However, in some situations with angry people, we may discover that we have been habitually irresponsible or dishonest with ourselves and others, using manipulative 'weasel' words when we communicate. These are expressions such as "I'm not sure" (when we are) or "may be" (when we know it's "definitely") or "I'm sorry" (when we're really not), or "I guess"(when we're not guessing at all). With any of the above expressions, we may or may not be aware of our true feelings. If we are aware but are not being verbal and honest, then we are being controlled by our fear. If we are not aware of our true feelings, then such expressions may allow us to continue to stay out of touch with those feelings.

Weasel words soften the blow of our feelings and opinions and allow us to hedge our bets, and thereby, control other people's reactions. In some cases, such expressions also allow us to avoid facing our own wants and desires and never know our true feelings. It's incredible to think about, but it is possible to spend one's whole life saying, "I'm not sure," "I don't know what to do," or "I've got mixed feelings." Sometimes, we may really not know what to do or really have mixed feelings and that's OK. However, we must be careful that we are being honest with ourselves.

If we look closely at the feelings and attitudes behind most co-dependent communication, we discover a host of fears, fears of commitment: shame, a core belief in our own lack of worth, or others' anger and abandonment. The major problem with this unhealthy communication is that we dishonour ourselves. Every time we fail to honour our precious thoughts and feelings for the sake of pleasing others, we sell ourselves out as well. Our true selves may be in pain, or furious, but we walk around with plastic smiles on our faces.

How Do We Assess Our Co-dependent Communication Patterns?

Developing healthier communication habits is a process. One excellent way to begin working on this aspect of our recovery is by doing a written Fourth Step inventory of our communication history. If we do this, we may discover that many of our co-dependent verbal habits were learned from our families or in relationships with damaging, significant others. This inventory process may be painful, but it is also exciting, empowering, and has helped many recovering co-dependents make great strides in developing healthier, more loving relationships.

Many co-dependents from dysfunctional families have experienced overt or covert verbal abuse. Some useful questions to consider as we review our personal history include the following: Did our parents practice unhealthy communication? Were they dishonest with one another or their children? Did they lie to themselves or others on a regular basis? Did they rage or swear or tell us that "you'll never amount to anything?" Or was the verbal abuse more covert and subtle? Did we see verbal people-pleasing going on to control or take care of people's feelings? Were things kept hidden? Were there family secrets? Did seemingly harmless, but subtly stabbing, sarcasm rule the day? Did people often say; "I'm sorry" or "I was only joking" as justifications after remarks have been flung? Are we using any of these verbal tactics today in our own lives or allowing others to use them with us?

If we review the communication habits that once protected us, we might find that many of them still haunt us today. Once we have identified the internal and external voices that are still damaging us, we can stop empowering them and start replacing them with healthier choices. As we continue our Fourth Step we may find that other adolescent and adult experiences have influenced our communication patterns. After looking at our entire history through a Fourth Step inventory, it is useful to share our insights in a Fifth Step with a sponsor or other trusted friend. This helps improve our awareness of the ways in which our current communication patterns still affect our lives today. Also, this sharing gives us practice communicating in a healthier manner with a safe person.

How Do We Change Our Co-dependent Communication Patterns?

As the Steps teach us, learning to change our co-dependent habits begins with acceptance, willingness to change, and then action. We can't change what we don't know. Furthermore, all the insights in the world won't help unless we want to change and actually do it. As noted earlier, we can begin this process by working the Steps, but this time focusing specifically on our communication patterns. If we work all Twelve Steps in light of our verbal habits, we discover how well each Step can be applied to our communication history and patterns. The most important point to remember is that these patterns have been learned, and they can be unlearned. Our verbal habits may have run our lives for years and protected us around unsafe people, but today we can let go of them and walk through the discomfort that comes with changing old behaviours.

The following suggestions may help us develop healthier communication patterns:

- Listen carefully to our own thoughts and feelings.
- Sometimes delay our immediate responses to questions/comments to give ourselves time to think and feel.
- Monitor ourselves for weasel words as we speak.
- Prepare for difficult conversations ahead of time, yet be open for spontaneity.
- Use CoDA or personal affirmations when w're feeling the "codependent crazies".
- Note self-effacing language such as "I just", "I guess", "I think" and "I only"
- Know that if we change our minds about previous decisions, we can verbalize our current thoughts, if we need to.
- Practice using different response words and expressions; for example, are we always "fine"?
- Watch for "bargaining" patterns; for example, "I can't today, but I'll try tomorrow," (when we know that tomorrow won't be any better either).
- Speak slowly, firmly, and clearly when drawing boundaries.
- Avoid justifying or explaining ourselves, even when we feel a compulsion to do so.
- Notice how words such as "should" and "ought" may be controlling us.
- Note whether we try to control others with our words, tone, volume, or nonstop talk, or if we allow others to control us with similar verbal tactics.
- Speak lovingly with others, our Higher Power, and ourselves.
- Add our own personal patterns to this list.

Conclusion

When we are able to say "no" without feeling guilty, we have taken a major step forward in our recovery. When we inventory our own weasel words and stop ourselves in mid- sentence from using them, we have taken a major step forward in our recovery. When we catch ourselves before we habitually apologize for something, we have taken a major step forward in our recovery. When the day comes and we say, "No, I'm clear about my feelings, and I won't be going" and we don't feel a pressing need to justify ourselves, we have taken a major step forward in our recovery. When we speak clearly and honestly as we set a boundary and don't allow another's anger to control us, we have taken a major step forward in our recovery.

With time and practice, we will know. We will know when we have verbally owned our power. When our hearts and minds are clear, our speech can be simple and direct.

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