



Every family needs ongoing communication about shared interests and concerns—running the household, recreational activities, and solving problems—to name just a few.

Family members also need to be able to express feelings to each other, emotions such as happiness, anger, sadness, concern, and anxiety. ►

**E**ffective communication serves as preventive maintenance, reassuring family members that they care about each other and appreciate each other's efforts. Good everyday communication can also make it easier to bring up issues, make requests when needed, and resolve conflict when it arises.

### **How Can Co-occurring Disorders Affect Communication in a Family?**

When a family member has co-occurring disorders, communication may take extra effort and awareness on everyone's part. Sometimes a psychiatric disorder can hinder an individual's communication. For example, the person may

- withdraw and not talk when feeling depressed
- feel irritable, have angry outbursts, or behave unpredictably because of mood instability
- perceive other people inaccurately, which can lead to social anxiety or paranoia
- make unreasonable demands of others, or show a lack of concern for them, because of preoccupation with fears or anxiety
- miss or misinterpret common social cues, such as facial expressions or hints, which can lead to misunderstandings

These problems can be magnified when the person also has a substance use disorder. For example:

- Interactions with others can be influenced by the immediate effects of substance use, cravings, or withdrawal symptoms.
- Addiction-related conflicts with others can arise, resulting from lies, broken promises, or failure to meet obligations.

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- Substance use can worsen the symptoms of psychiatric disorders and interfere with following treatment recommendations.

Communication problems can raise any family's stress level, leading to conflicts that strain relationships and detract from the general quality of family life. Unfortunately, family stress and tension can worsen the course of the co-occurring disorders, resulting in more relapses of both the psychiatric and substance use disorders.

### **Strategies for Good Communication**

Try these strategies for improving communication, resolving conflict, and building a supportive family environment.

#### ***Get to the Point***

Be brief and up-front when you're talking with someone with co-occurring disorders. Long-winded, roundabout statements are hard for anyone to follow, but especially someone who has trouble concentrating—as do many people with mental health disorders and/or substance use disorders. Get to the point quickly to be sure you are heard and understood.

#### ***Express Feelings Clearly with "I" Statements***

Describe your own feelings and avoid putting others on the defensive. By using words such as "angry," "happy," "upset," or "worried," you can tell your own truth and help prevent the misunderstandings that can occur when people have to guess each other's feelings. "I" statements, such as "I feel anxious when . . .," are direct, and they make an impression. When upset feelings are involved, "I" statements work better than blaming "you" statements. For example, instead of saying "You pissed me off when you were late for dinner last night" (a blaming statement), try this: "I was angry when you came home late for dinner last night. I'd appreciate it if you'd be on time or call if you're going to be late."

***Speak for Yourself and Not for Others***

People often speak for others because they think they know what the other person is feeling. In some families this takes the form of indirect “backchannel communication” (for example, “Your mother is angry with you”). Be alert to these habits and try to change them. If you are on the receiving end of a backchannel message, you might want to gently question it as well. All of these habits naturally lead to misunderstandings—since each person is truly an expert on only his or her feelings. Such problems can be avoided if everyone is responsible for expressing only their own feelings—nobody else’s. This may seem hard at first for family members who are not used to direct communication. But in the long run, it can be helpful to everyone.

***Focus on Behaviors Rather Than on Traits***

People can change their behavior—what they do—more easily than they can change internal qualities or traits such as personality, attitudes, or feelings. When you are upset with someone’s actions, focus your communication on behavior rather than on traits, making it clear what you are upset about. Make it a complete statement, linked to behavior. For example:

*Instead of saying:* “I’m concerned about your health.”

*Say:* “I’m concerned about your health because you’ve started drinking again.”

*Instead of saying:* “You’re thoughtless because you only think of yourself.”

*Say:* “I sometimes think you don’t care about me because you rarely ask about my feelings. I wish you would show more concern by asking how I’m feeling more often.”

## Listen to the Other Person



### **Nobody knows another person like a family member—or so they think.**

Close relatives often know each other so well that they think they know what someone is going to say even before it is said. So they sometimes cut each other off in the middle of a sentence, or just don’t really listen. But what a person assumes about another person may be wrong. And simply making the assumption can interfere with the change that both people desperately want.

If we don’t listen, we tend to invalidate the other person’s perspective and imply that change is not possible. But if we truly listen, we let people know that we are interested in and care about what they have to say. And we can show we understand by paraphrasing, or briefly restating, what the person just said. For example:

*John:* I feel so down and lonely that I drink to feel better.

*Mary:* It sounds like your mood really affects your drinking. Would planning some regular activities with me be helpful?

## Communication Skills



As you apply the pointers in this handout in your everyday communication, practice the following basic skills, too. They are useful for expressing feelings and resolving disagreements or conflict.

### ***Expressing Positive Feelings***

We all feel good when our efforts are acknowledged. When we give people positive feedback about what they've done, however small, we let them know they are appreciated. And that sense of being noticed and cared about can help foster further change and growth. Try deliberately expressing positive feelings using these steps:

1. Look at the person.
2. Tell the person what he or she did that pleased you.
3. Tell him or her how it made you feel.

For example:

- *"I'm proud of you for going to your meeting even though you didn't feel like it."*

### ***Making Positive Requests***

All close relationships involve doing things for each other to some extent. We all want and need things from the people we are close to. But *how* we communicate our wants and needs can have a big impact on how the other person responds. A request is most effective when it is clear, specific, and stated positively. Try these steps:

1. Look at the person.
2. Make a specific request.
3. Tell him or her how you would feel if the request were granted.

For example:

- *"I'd appreciate it if you could go shopping for groceries today."*
- *"I'd like you to come with me to my doctor's appointment this Wednesday. I'd like your help in explaining my medication side effect to her. I would be so relieved to know you can be there with me."*



***Expressing Negative Feelings***

We all have negative feelings at times. Learning to express them constructively is crucial to resolving conflicts and getting along with others. To air negative feelings in a way that will help resolve them, try these steps:

1. Look at the person and talk with a serious tone of voice.
2. Tell the person what he or she did that displeased you.
3. Tell him or her how you feel as a result—be specific.
4. Make a request for change, if possible.

For example:

- *“I was worried when you didn’t come home from work at your usual time. In the future, if you think you’re going to be late, please call me.”*
- *“I’m angry that you stopped taking your medication. Can we talk about what your concerns are and work out a way to get them addressed?”*

***Making Compromises and Negotiating***

People don’t always agree on what they want to do together, how to achieve goals, or how to solve problems. Healthy, close relationships rely on some degree of “give and take,” with each person giving as well as taking. When people disagree about something, being willing to compromise is an effective way to reach a resolution.

Try these steps:

1. Explain your viewpoint.
2. Listen to the other person’s viewpoint.
3. Repeat back what you heard (to show you understand).
4. Suggest a compromise.
5. Be open to talking over other possible compromises.

***Requesting a Time-out***

If feelings become very intense and heated, it can be hard to communicate effectively and resolve problems. Taking a break from intense feelings can provide time for people to calm down, collect their thoughts, and approach the situation as constructively as possible. To request a time-out, follow these steps:

1. Indicate that the situation is stressful for you.
2. Tell the person that the stress is interfering with constructive communication.
3. Explain that you would like to take a temporary break.
4. Say when you will be ready to talk again and problem-solve about the situation.

For example, you could say:

- *“I’m feeling stressed right now by this conversation. I’d like to take a break now and discuss this with you later when I’m feeling calmer.”*

## Practicing Communication Skills

Communicating effectively is like any other skill: it takes practice to get good at it. Change is hard for everyone. People may feel awkward or uncomfortable at first when trying out the skills and strategies discussed in this handout. With practice, the skills of good communication will feel natural over time, and the long-term rewards and benefits to the quality of family relationships are well worth the effort.

**Instructions:** Choose a communication skill you would like to practice over the next week, and try to practice it every day. Use this chart to record what you said.

Skill: \_\_\_\_\_

DAY	PERSON YOU TALKED TO	SITUATION	WHAT YOU SAID