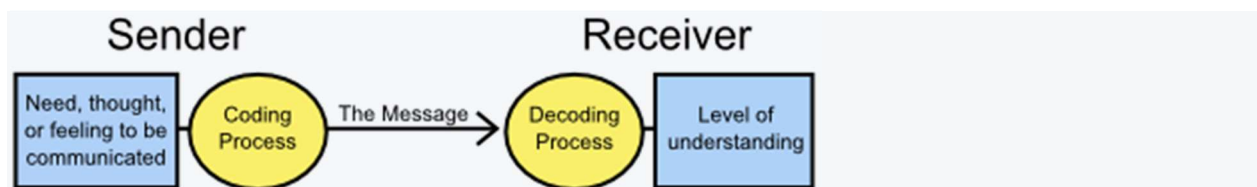


# Basics of Communication

The communication basics we all need to know

Posted July 13, 2013

A large portion of our lives is spent communicating with others. Sharing your thoughts and understanding another person's feelings are essential skills for functioning in any society in the world. It is no surprise then that difficulty with communication is the #1 issue that brings people to couples counseling, and is at the core of many other things that we struggle with. The following is a simple model of communication that can help illustrate how communicating with others really works, all the places it can go wrong, and what we can do to be better.



## Overview

The picture above is a really simple map of how any type of communication works. The necessary pieces are a sender, a receiver, and a message. For human communication, each person has an added step of either coding or decoding a message. The two basic ways of coding messages are putting it in some kind of language (speech or writing) and/or nonverbally communicating it (body language, tone, etc). The receiver then interprets (decodes) the words and nonverbals, hoping to arrive at an understanding of what the sender really means.

To put it all together, an example would be Person A notices she is hungry so she puts her hand on her stomach and says, "Wow, I'm getting huuuuuungry." Person B sees and hears this, and interprets it to mean that Person A is hungry. Simple right?

## Communication Problems

The way we encode and decode messages is based on how we learned to communicate in earlier stages of life. Without getting overly complicated about it, all words are really just symbols that represent certain things, and every person can have a slightly different understanding even at the individual word

level. Furthermore, the actual number of words we know and complexity of language changes with more experience, and the ways we code and decode messages are determined by our culture, family patterns, and other experiences. Communication problems can then emerge at every step of the above model because no two people have had exactly same life experiences that shape communication patterns.

**Sender Problems:** The most common problem that we can make as message senders is coding our thought, feeling or need in a way that has a low chance of being understood by the receiver. Consider how you might code the message of feeling hungry differently to a 3 year old, someone who doesn't speak the same language as you, and your best friend. Those should look and sound completely different. Thus, choosing the best way to code a message is important to make sure the receiver gets a good understanding.

Another common problem is that sometimes our thoughts, feelings, or ideas are extremely complex, and we may not even have a good sense of them ourselves. Thus, sending messages outward about things we don't understand well within ourselves also has a low likelihood of being understood by the receiver.

**Receiver Problems:** The biggest problem that happens when we receive messages is in decoding things inaccurately, which can be caused by 1) not really attending to the sender, 2) not having the skills necessary to decode the message, or 3) adding your own meaning to the message that was not really intended by the sender. For the first, if you don't really pay attention completely to the message (including the nonverbal aspects), you can miss critical elements of it, and then have a misunderstanding. For the second, if you don't know certain words or the message is too complex, then there is a low chance of really understanding it.

For the third, we can automatically add things to the message that make us miss what was intended. From the earlier example, suppose Person A is truly just hungry, but Person B was late making dinner and decodes the message as criticism and takes offense. There would likely be a conflict after that, and it would be due to a misinterpretation from the receiver (and also a poor reading of the context from the sender). Think about how much this happens in text and emails.

## Two Person Problem

Without exception, *all communication problems are two person problems.*

Yes. Anytime there is a misunderstanding, it is the fault of both the sender and the receiver.

Let's go back to the example from the last section. Person A could have thought ahead and remembered that Person B gets touchy when he is late in making dinner, and Person A could then have said something like "Wow that smells amazing! I can't wait to have some, I'm starving!" instead. Person B could also have been better at decoding the message and knowing that Person A really means no harm but was just speaking truth that she was hungry and meant nothing more by it, and thus would not have taken offense. The point is that no single person is 100% at fault for any communication problem.

## How To Communicate Better

So how can we get better at communicating based on all of this? I don't think we need to learn a bunch of tricky ways to phrase things, or subscribe to rules like using "I Statements" or any of that. Instead, we just need to have better awareness of how messy communicating is, and being more thoughtful about sending and receiving messages.

1. Be Aware of your own communication errors. We are all susceptible to sending confusing messages and to missing the boat in terms of what someone else was trying to tell us. When we are aware that all of us can make all of the communication mistakes in this article, we can adjust how we send and receive messages.
2. Choose your words (and actions) wisely based on who the receiver is. As much as we would love for our partners, parents, and employers to just automatically be able to know what our needs and feelings are, or interpret all of our questions and comments with complete accuracy, they can't. We can become better senders by thinking about how the specific person at this specific time would be receive a message, and then deliver it in that form.
3. Check in with the sender when you are decoding messages to make sure you have the right understanding. After hearing something, especially if it strikes you strangely, ask the sender if you are hearing it correctly instead of trusting your interpretation completely. Think about how many arguments can be prevented with just that one!

Counseling can be a great option to understand more about your interpersonal style, and how to communicate better. And for more communication ideas on this page, check out my post on [The Interpersonal Matrix](#).

-

*Will Meek PhD is a [psychologist in Providence, Rhode Island](#). Get notifications of all his new posts through [Facebook](#).*