

Chapter 3

Blocks to Connection

We all learned to communicate initially by copying the people around us. And rarely do people take the time to examine their communication or learn different approaches to relationships. As a result, many of us share the same habits that have been passed along unconsciously for many generations. Our natural ways of responding to other people may sound right and good because we are so used to hearing them. But they often don't work to meet our needs, help the other person, or bring us closer together.

In this chapter, we will look at some of our most common responses to other people and how they affect our relationships. I call these learned responses Disconnects because they tend to distance us from other people, especially when one or both of us are feeling strong emotions. To illustrate Disconnects, each of these responses is given in the context of the following conversation, which begins when a friend calls us up and says:

“Things at work are really tough right now. My boss keeps telling me I’m not taking enough initiative, and then he tells me I always do things without asking him first. I just can’t seem to please the guy. It’s been going on like this for years, and I’m getting sick of it. I’m thinking of quitting, and we are even considering moving. It may be time to start all over in a new place.”

Possible responses to this statement that illustrate each of the Disconnects will be centered in italics following the descriptions below.

Referring to Yourself

This is the tendency to refer back to your own life circumstance as soon as the other person has finished talking. If the other person is talking about job struggles, you immediately talk about *your* own job struggles.

“Yeah, bosses can really do you in. My boss right now is not so bad, but every so often, he gets weird on me and I think about moving on, too.”

This habit is quite natural because listening to another person’s experience tends to stimulate you to think of your own similar experiences. However, it makes for superficial conversation in which you both simply talk about yourselves, and there is little understanding of what is really going on for each other.

Digging for Facts

If you think it is your responsibility to offer the other person an opinion about the situation, there is a tendency to ask fact-oriented questions in order to establish your perspective.

“How long have you worked there now?” or

“So, where would you move to?”

While these questions are genuine and show interest, they focus on facts and tend to distract the person who is speaking from their immediate experience. Listening supportively does not require that you understand all the facts of the other person’s circumstance. Connecting with other people happens when you understand how *they* relate to *their own* circumstance, and how the situation is affecting them.

Being Logical

If you think you have enough facts, you may offer logic, thinking the other person just can’t see what is happening and hearing it from you will make everything clear.

“That may not be the best idea. Jobs aren’t as easy to find as they once were.”

Logical explanations imply that the other person is not capable of seeing their own situation clearly, so you have to point it out to them. Being logical is tempting because you can usually see parts of their

dilemma that they may not be able to see yet. This is often because they are too emotional to think clearly. In this case, it is more supportive to help them release their emotions so they can think clearly again.

Analyzing

Once you have heard enough information to form an opinion, you may tend to assume that supporting other people means telling them what you think about their situation:

“You just have not tried hard enough to get along with him. You always take things he says personally and then sulk off to lick your wounds!”

While this perspective may have some truth in it, this kind of communication tends to stop the conversation because it is so final and absolute. It is also more effective when the person speaking is able to come up with this kind of analysis on their own.

Taking Sides or Blaming

You may think that being supportive means siding with the person speaking:

“You don’t deserve that kind of treatment, and you shouldn’t have to put up with that nonsense.”

Or you might try to solve the other person’s problem by blaming someone else:

“That guy sounds like a real jerk. If he can’t be a better manager than that, he deserves to lose his employees!”

You may think that siding with someone connects the two of you so that you can be together against someone else. Yet, conflict is rarely so black and white, and there are always two sides to a story. By expressing your opinion in this way, you reinforce the struggle and opposition rather than helping other people work through their dilemmas and resolve conflicts constructively.

Using Shame and Guilt

Sometimes we even blame the person we are listening to:

“Sounds like you are really blowing it again. You just can’t seem to get along with anyone who tells you what to do.”

Or, we may use shame and guilt to try to get the person to shape up:

“Well maybe if you paid attention for once you would understand what your boss is asking you to do and get it right. You never were very good at following instructions.”

Using shame and guilt is a common way of trying to change another person. Some people fall into this habit regularly without ever realizing the impact it has. No one likes to be made to feel ashamed or guilty. While this approach sometimes works, it usually undermines the safety and trust in a relationship. In the long run, it rarely motivates people to make real changes.

Imposing Your Own Values

Some people assume that solving another’s dilemma is merely a matter of sorting out right from wrong:

“You shouldn’t think of quitting just because things are rough. Too many people believe that leaving will solve all their problems. You should think about how it will affect your co-workers, friends, and neighbors.”

There may be some truth in these statements, but they tend to polarize a situation and shut down the conversation with their sense of finality. People sometimes assume that discerning right from wrong is very important. Yet most of the time, such distinctions are arbitrary and just a matter of personal opinion with little bearing on what is really happening. In the end, they do little to help the person resolve their situation.

Disguising Judgments as Questions

Some of us express a judgment about another person's behavior in the form of a question:

"Why do you think quitting your job and moving will solve your problems?"

Which really means:

"This move is not going to solve your problems."

Here are some more examples:

Judgmental Question

Real Meaning

"How would you like it if someone did that to you?"

"You did a bad thing that hurt someone."

"Why don't you ever ask for help before taking on such big projects?"

"You take on more than you can handle and mess everything up because you don't ask for help."

"How come these spoons keep ending up in the knife drawer?"

"You keep putting the spoons in the wrong place."

"What were you thinking?"

"You really screwed up."

When we ask questions like these, we don't really want to know the other person's response. They aren't real questions, and they tend to confuse the situation because they *sound* like questions. People receiving our disguised judgments know that we are judging them but they cannot see the judgments clearly, and this creates an uneasy feeling in the relationship.

Responses that contain opinions or judgments tend to shut us down because most of us are afraid of being criticized or judged by another person. These disguised judgments often undermine open communication even more than clearly stated judgments because they are indirect.

Advising

Assuming it is your job to fix the other person's problem, you may offer advice:

"You should just tell him how you feel. Talking these things out can make a big difference."

Advising may be a way of showing concern and trying to help out, and the suggestions you make could be effective ideas. Yet this common Disconnect takes the problem solving out of the hands of the person with the problem and can create an unhealthy dependency over time. It also moves the conversation from direct experience to solutions and tends to close rather than open communication.

Reassuring

Sensing that other people feel bad, you may try to cheer them up:

"Your boss was probably just having some bad days and didn't realize he was contradicting himself. Just hang in there; things are bound to get better."

Other examples include:

"Cheer up, everything will work out fine in the end."

"Things can't be as bad as they seem. Just wait a few days and things will look better."

Reassuring is a frequent response when a situation appears serious and you don't know what else to say. You feel compelled to say something that will make everything seem all right. The problem with this approach is that everything is not all right, and the other person knows it. So reassurance can sound as if you are not really interested or don't want to get involved.

Praising

You may sometimes try to make other people feel better by telling them how great you think they are:

“Well, you certainly have not done anything to deserve this kind of treatment. You are a great worker and employee.”

Other examples include:

“You are such a good girl.”

“You always do the right thing. This mess couldn’t be your fault.”

Praise is often seen as a positive way to give feedback, especially with children. The problem is that praise is an evaluation. When you give praise, you are judging the other person’s behavior. Although praise is a positive judgment, it feeds the habit of relying on other people’s evaluations to know how we are doing. When you offer other people approval, you may be setting up a dependent relationship in which they need your praise to feel good about themselves.

Also, praise does not address what is actually happening for the other person. It may sound good, but if people are not feeling good about themselves, they usually don’t believe it, and praise can signal that you are not really paying attention to what is going on inside them.

Responses of reassurance and praise are common and are attempts to make a situation better by sugarcoating it. While praise and reassurance may make someone feel better for a moment, they do not address the real situation and may sound hollow or empty. They also have an air of finality and tend to end the conversation. People receiving these responses may conclude that you are not really interested in their situation.

Hinting

Indirect suggestions are often used to get someone else to do what you want:

“If you guys move, we won’t get to see you much.”

Which means:

“I don’t want you to move because if you do I will really miss seeing you.”

Other examples include:

Hint

Real Meaning

*“Boy, am I tired.
I’ve had one heck of a day!”*

“I need help with the dishes.”

*“I can’t stand this kitchen! It is
such a mess all the time that I
can’t find anything I need!”*

*“I don’t like a messy kitchen and
I need help keeping things in
order.”*

“We never go out anymore.”

*“I want to go somewhere
interesting with you.”*

Hinting is a way many of us have learned to assert our feelings and needs. While it can be helpful to let other people know what you want, hinting requires a lot of interpretation. It can create confusion and misunderstanding as they have to guess about your feelings or needs and may miss your message altogether. Hinting can cause other people to pull away because they know we want something from them, but they don’t know exactly what it is.

Demanding and Threatening

When we want people to do something, we often command them, especially if we are in a position of power and authority. This is more likely to happen with our children, spouse, parents, employees, or students, because of our familiarity.

“You can’t just quit like that. You have to try harder to make this work out.”

Such a response may also sound like:

“You have to be at meetings on time!”

“You must eat those vegetables!”

When a demand does not seem strong enough, a consequence may be attached if the other person doesn't do what we want them to do:

“If you quit your job and move away just like that, don't expect me to come visit you!”

Other examples include:

“If you don't come to meetings on time, you will be out of a job!”

“If you don't eat those vegetables, you will be grounded for the rest of the week!”

Demanding and threatening can create power struggles because they invite resistance and rebellion. They put up barriers in relationship because they rely on force to get another person to do what you want or what you think is right. These Disconnects are attempts to change other people's behavior through fear, and they usually create more distance.

Being Sarcastic

Some of us have the habit of criticizing or evaluating another person's situation through witty comments that are biting and judgmental.

“Well that sure is a good way to deal with a conflict at work – just quit and leave town!”

People tend to be sarcastic when they have built up an emotional charge in relation to another person. Sarcasm is often an indirect way of communicating that a feeling or need of your own is not being met

and you want the other person to do something about it. Yet because it is indirect, it often creates confusion and distrust in a relationship and rarely results in you getting your needs met or encouraging the other person to change.

The Nature of Disconnects

Some Disconnects are ways we have learned to get other people to meet our needs without making ourselves too vulnerable. They tend to be either indirect or forceful, and they often undermine the trust between people and create a sense of discomfort in the relationship.

We use other Disconnects because we think they are ways to demonstrate that we are good listeners and helpers. The assumption is that being helpful and supportive means fixing other people's problems. We come up with solutions, offer our perspective, or say things we hope will wrap up another person's dilemma in a neat bundle. We often sense that these responses are not working, but we don't know any other way. We *do* want to help, yet we don't know how to do it effectively.

We may think we are being helpful when we try to solve other people's problems, yet we are really signaling that we don't trust them to find their own solutions. Most people's problems are too personal and complex for anyone else to solve. Trying to do so does not work in the long run, and actually tends to undermine other people's own efforts to help themselves.

We use other Disconnects as a way to appear helpful when we don't want to take the time to listen or are afraid of becoming too involved. Our own personal dilemmas may be so pressing that we don't want to devote the effort required to effectively help another. So instead, we reach for instant solutions, offering judgments or conclusions that make the problem seem simple or easy to solve.

Beware of Judging Yourself and Others

Once you understand these ineffective communication habits and how they affect relationships, it is easy to judge yourself and others for being bad communicators. Despite having learned about Disconnects, you will probably find yourself still using them on a regular basis. And when you notice other people using Disconnects, it may be tempting to point it out to them.

However, if you call others on using Disconnects, it will only create more confusion and separation in your relationships. They won't know what you mean and will only hear your judgment and disapproval. If someone close to you has a habit of using Disconnects, the Assertion skills described later in this book will help you to address the situation directly and constructively.

You also may feel guilty or self-critical when you notice yourself using a Disconnect. You may think you should have known better, or that you should no longer fall into old habits like these now that you know how they can undermine the connection you want. Keep in mind that you have spent most of your life learning Disconnects, and they are not likely to disappear overnight. The fact that you are noticing them is a big step forward. Once you become aware of a habit like this, it has already begun to change.

What Do You Really Want?

In order to become more aware of Disconnects, it helps to recognize what you really want out of your interactions. You usually have some intention when you interact with another person. A Disconnect is when your communication does not do what you intended it to do. So the first step is to ask yourself:

“Why am I communicating with this person?”

Once you know why you are communicating with another person, you can ask:

“Is my communication doing what I intended it to do?”

Answering this question will allow you to evaluate how your communication is working so that, if necessary, you can change your approach to make your relationships more fulfilling. Since there are many reasons for communicating, this question obviously does not have one right answer. The important thing is to check in with yourself and recognize what you want so you are more likely to achieve that outcome.

The Need for Connection

I went through a time in my life when I felt a deep discontent with my family, friends, and society in general. I knew that something essential was missing, yet I could not tell what it was. As I explored my frustration, I realized that I was approaching my interactions as an exchange, like a business deal. I entered relationships focusing on what other people could do for me, or what I could get out of the situation. Even when my intention was to help other people, there was an unconscious motivation to benefit myself by being the hero and rescuing them.

This way of viewing other people was so familiar that I did not recognize I was doing it until I began to be more aware of my own internal process. As I began to ask myself why so many exchanges felt empty and unsatisfying, I realized that I was constantly measuring how much I was getting from each interaction. And, the scale I was using seemed to indicate that most of the time I was losing.

I made a choice at this point to focus on my sense of connection with each person rather than on the business or emotional exchange that seemed to be the reason for the interaction. I gave up trying to get people to like me or respond in ways that *I* wanted. I put aside my good intentions to be helpful in emotional situations, or my wish to get a bargain in business deals, and focused on relating for the sake of companionship in the moment.

This shift in focus made all the difference in my relationships. Instead of measuring interactions according to the results and weighing each outcome as a gain or loss, I concentrated on the value of feeling connected to the other person during the conversation. I discovered that this sense of connection was what I really wanted, whether in a personal friendship or a business exchange. Once I recognized this, my relationships worked better and became more satisfying.

My experience suggests that what most of us want out of our interactions with others is a sense of belonging or connection. We communicate primarily so that we do not feel so alone or isolated. Disconnects are communications that fail because they leave us feeling more separate rather than more connected. So, a simple way to tell if you are using Disconnects is to ask yourself:

“Does the way I am communicating help me feel more connected to this person or does it put more distance between us?”

In the following chapters, we will explore some of the attitudes that underlie Disconnects and the often damaging results that follow. We will also consider new communication patterns to replace these familiar ways. It is much easier to move away from old habits when we replace them with new and more effective ones.