



KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH OTHERS

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Our lives are enriched by communication with others, whether face to face, on the telephone or by the written word. Good communication skills are important, whether with family members and friends, at school, in church, in club meetings or on a job.

Most of us don't have a clue what we sound like when we communicate. However, we all like to listen to someone with a good voice. That person is easy to understand, speaks at a low comfortable pitch, shows enthusiasm and expression in their voice and speaks at a controlled volume and speed (not too soft or too loud, not too fast or too slow).

Improving your voice is one of the easier self-improvement tasks. Use a good tape recorder and record your voice while reading, using the telephone or talking with someone. Then sit down quietly and listen to the tape. You may wish to ask a family member or a couple of good friends to listen to the tape and be frank about what they hear.

If you feel that your voice could stand improvement, consult with a local speech or drama teacher or a speech therapist. There are also organizations, such as toastmasters clubs, that provide training and encouragement to those wishing to improve their speaking voice. Check at your local library to see if there are good audio and video cassette tapes that describe how to breathe properly and give simple exercises to improve the tone, quality and pacing of your voice.

Introductions

Knowing how to introduce other people is a part of good manners. Practice introductions until you can do



them comfortably and make people feel good. If you are in doubt about whether to introduce someone you know to someone standing near you, go ahead and introduce them. Everyone will feel more comfortable. And remember, everyone makes mistakes in introductions at some time or other. If so, simply acknowledge the error and, if appropriate, add a bit of humor to the situation.

You will need to put on your thinking cap when deciding who gets introduced to whom. In general, you will introduce the younger or the less important to the older or more important person. A young person is introduced *to* an older person, and a person is introduced *to* someone of a higher position or rank — regardless of sex. The old rule that a man is *always* introduced to a woman is no longer valid. For instance, an 14-year-old girl is introduced to a 40-year-old man, while a young man in his teens would be introduced *to* a young woman because they are more or less equal in age and in rank. A middle-aged woman would be introduced *to* a 35-year-old town mayor; however, the young mayor would be introduced to an 80-year-old woman.

There are no hard and fast rules except in military and diplomatic protocol. Simply introduce one to another on

the basis of good sense or of good feeling. It's usually a nice idea to add a short comment or compliment about those you are introducing. Information about a special hobby or achievement, where the person is from or other tidbit will help the other person remember them and will give them a start on conversation topics.

When introduced, women have traditionally remained seated, unless the other person was much older, a member of the clergy or very prominent. Now, however, everyone in a small group rises to greet newcomers, extends a hand and says hello to each person. The handshake is as important as the smile and warm tone of voice in greetings. Your grip should be a firm one of two or three seconds. Whether you are a man or a woman, extend your hand.

The Art of Small Talk

What is small talk? It is casual conversation while you pass time, exchange thoughts and opinions and learn things you had never known (and may never need to know). You make small talk while waiting for a meeting to begin, waiting for an appointment, meeting a casual acquaintance in church or in a store or while riding in an elevator. Small talk is important and helps to make people pleasant to sit next to at lunch or at a meeting.

An important thing to remember about small talk is to smile and keep it light and upbeat. Consider the interests and the occasion. Ideas for small talk include:

- *Taking an item from a current newspaper that's fun to talk about or brings up an unusual topic of interest.*
- *Providing happy news about mutual friends.*
- *Telling people to be sure to watch a future television program that is supposed to be very good.*
- *Discussing news of major sports events, such as the Super Bowl, the Olympics or the local school team.*
- *Asking parents about their new baby or how their granddaughter enjoys being in the school play.*
- *Talking about a new play, movie or music concert that is supposed to be very good or that you have attended.*
- *Starting an informed discussion on local civic problems.*

Be aware of overdoing a good thing. Don't talk endlessly on a subject, ask personal questions, make insulting remarks or relate the gory details of your operation. If an argument comes up, change the subject. If in a group where someone makes a bad remark or off-color joke that silences others in the group, pick up the conversation and talk.

Remember, too, the importance of actually listening to others and not interrupting. It also helps to show a sense of humor and to be able to laugh at oneself when appropriate.

Giving and Receiving Compliments

A compliment graciously and sincerely given and received has great power. It can stimulate conversation, help you meet people and help make everyone feel better. "You look really special," "Your speech was very effec-

ive," "What wonderful news about your son," "You look so pretty today," "Your entry was sensational," and "You're the kind of friend that everyone should have" are just a few of the phrases that make us feel good. When someone says something nice to you, don't deny the compliment or feel embarrassed. This is a put-down to the person giving the compliment. Simply smile and say "Why, thank you!" or "Aren't you nice to say that!" or something similar. You may want to write down some of the compliments you have received and tuck them away for another day when you are feeling down.

Making Things Right Again

When you make a minor social error, simply apologize promptly and sincerely. Show that you are concerned and really care about the other person's feelings. If someone else makes an error, show that you have a sense of humor and that you are a good sport.

If the error is larger or perhaps you forgot about a party being planned by friends, you may telephone a really sincere apology. Respect their right to be angry and acknowledge their embarrassment or discomfort. Make amends whenever and however possible. You may also wish to go to the person's house or office to give an in-person apology. You may also wish to send or leave a note along with flowers or a gift.

All of us become angry at one time or another, whether justified or not. Some suggestions for helping to control and deal with your anger include:

- *Talk privately with your dog about your feelings. Dogs are great sympathizers. Your cat would also work.*
- *Write an absolutely furious letter to the person who has angered you. Read the letter aloud at least five times and then tear it into shreds.*
- *Do something physically demanding. Go golfing and hit the ball as hard as you can. Clean house like you've never cleaned it before. Go through an aerobics or yoga routine. Follow this with a nice warm bubble bath.*
- *Play or listen to music. Soothing, beautiful music is a wonderful way to calm down.*
- *Go to a movie. The story will help divert your attention.*

Helpful Hints on Letter-Writing

A beautiful letter is a work of art and a compliment to the person receiving it. It means that someone has taken the time and effort to create a personal message that tells feelings, emotions or events that can be kept on record. Cards are always welcome, too, especially if you have taken the time to add a few hand-written thoughts. Be sure funny cards are in good taste, however.

To write a good letter, pick a time when you're relaxed and feeling up. Find a comfortable chair, writing surface and a good light. Use a good pen with dark ink and good stationery. A typewriter or word processor may also be used. Be neat. Think before you actually write down words.

No letter is too brief. Just a note with a few words can mean a lot. Add a bit of humor if possible. Edit your letter and make neat corrections with white correction fluid (if using white paper). Then sign and mail it.

The holidays always seem to bring a variety of correspondence from a simple season's greeting card to overly long holiday letters relating in detail the triumphs of each family member. Update your list of holiday card recipients each year and make any corrections, additions or deletions as needed. Always sign your cards.

People often enjoy a photo card or a color photo included with a card if they are good friends or relatives and if the photo is of good quality (not overexposed). Subjects may be the entire family, the children or an adorable new puppy. Holiday "newsletters" that are reproduced for all can be great fun to read. Keep them to one page, however, and add a personal hand-written note to each.

The Well-Mannered Answering Machine

Many people feel that answering machines are intimidating or tacky. However, they are being used extensively in the '90s and allow you to communicate with someone at any time.

For owners of answering machines, give thought to your outgoing message. Talk distinctly in a low, clear voice. Keep your message brief and to the point. This is not the time for long jokes or endless thoughts about the economy or politics.

Try to keep your wits with you if you make a call answered by an answering machine. (You are not alone if you have ever hung up, collected your thoughts and called back with your message.) Talk slowly and distinctly, repeating any telephone numbers that are given. Give your name, the date and the hour of your call. Give your message briefly and quickly. Be creative if you want. (Some close friends even sing "Happy Birthday" to a recorder.) Include a special thought or something nice, such as "Hope all goes well for you," and sign off with an upbeat "Good-by." If you abruptly stop without signing off, the other person may think you were cut off.

Be sure that your answering machine is kept in good operating condition. Place it out of reach of small children. Otherwise, someone may have called back, but the tape ran out or someone may have accidentally erased the message, and you will not know what happened.

When Illness Strikes

No matter how busy you are, it's important to take five minutes out of your busy schedule and check in with a friend who is ill. It's nice to telephone or send a note at least once a week. Especially welcome are those people who are cheery and ready to run errands, take a person out shopping, send a little something (such as a favorite ice cream) to make the patient feel good and just generally show that they care.

In the Hospital

If your friend or relative is hospitalized, be considerate about things you do and don't do. For instance, be hesitant about calling the patient. Call the patient's family or office instead. The patient may be too sick or the timing inconvenient for them to really enjoy your call. Check with the family to see if there is already a supply of fresh flowers in the room. If there is, plan to send fresh flowers, a plant or a basket of fruit after the patient goes home.

If you're considering a gift of food, check on any diet restrictions first. A box of candy or basket of fruit may be offered to visitors, however, even if the patient cannot eat it. Humorous, attractive get-well cards along with a brief note are always welcome, as are upbeat, easy-to-read magazines tied up with a colorful ribbon.

If the patient will be in the hospital for a lengthy stay, a cassette player with a recorded cassette of the voices of family members or people at the office will be greatly appreciated. (One patient who was hospitalized for three months received a weekly cassette tape from family members. The sign-off signal at the end of each recording was his dog barking.) When visiting hospital patients, keep your voice low, share the latest gossip and amusing stories, be upbeat and be brief. Long, drawn-out visits can be exhausting to patients.

Life-Threatening Illnesses

It can be particularly difficult when a good friend develops a life-threatening disease. Since time is precious, act quickly and talk with someone knowledgeable about the situation to see how serious the condition is and whether or not they want the information known. Base your actions on your friend's wishes.

Your quiet, unpublicized assistance to a family who is coping with serious disease is an invaluable gift. Help may include answering mail, making telephone calls, sending over meals, helping with nursing chores, finding out about legal concerns or any other job that needs to be done. When talking with your friend, sympathize with them but remain upbeat. Mention others who have had the same disease and are now in tip-top health and share any current research related to their condition. If chemotherapy has caused hair loss, ignore it or any wig unless the patient brings it up. Don't tell them they look really great if they actually look seriously ill. They'll know you're insincere. And don't keep bringing up past illnesses once they are cured.

When someone is actually dying, the upbeat approach is not appropriate. Brief visits to the patient and the family can be a great comfort. Your patience and solid support will be greatly needed. Talk quietly to the patient when they feel like it. Let them guide the conversation. Otherwise, just quietly be there. Don't be afraid to hold the patient's hand or touch them. Family members will appreciate your thoughtfulness if you leave your telephone number along with a note to call if assistance is needed.

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