

CHAPTER 1

Introducing Interpersonal Communication



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Interpersonal communication is the bridge that connects us to others.



chapter outline

[What Is Communication?](#)

[What Is Interpersonal Communication?](#)

[What Is Interpersonal Communication Competence?](#)

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“I GOT IN!!!”

This bellowing shout was followed by a thud, and “OOOWWW!!” Our eldest son, Kyle, had just received a congratulatory email notification—complete with virtual confetti—announcing his college admission. His joy and surprise had led him to run and leap high into the air, smacking his hand painfully on the hard ceiling.

Hearing the commotion, the entire family—Kelly, Steve, and their two other sons Colin and Conor—flew into the kitchen, bear-hugging and whooping, beaming with smiles and brimming with tears, and then *immediately* began calling and texting distant family members to share the happy news. Kyle’s hand would ache for days. And in a few fleeting months, after Kelly and Steve had held it for years, this same hand would be achingly released.

You hold their hands for a little while, keeping them close, so that you can let them go.

Kelly’s mom often referenced this wisdom about raising children, and we have returned to it repeatedly as our sons have grown from toddlers to teens to the men they are today. Our minds are filled with snapshots: the times we held their hands tightly as they crossed the street until they were old enough to cross alone; hugged them goodbye as they left for their first “full” days of school, and then grinned with glee as they eagerly leapt into our arms

when we picked them up; visited the mailbox daily, seeking the *promised* letters that were never sent because they were too busy having fun at camp; held our hands and collective breath through games, recitals, and performances; dried their tears and whispered words of comfort to carry them through disappointment until these roles were fulfilled instead by friends and partners.

For Kyle—as for millions of students across the United States each year—getting accepted into college was the culmination of hopes and dreams. Your college admission experience may have been similar to Kyle’s, or it may have been different. Like our sons, you may now be far from home. Or you may be reading this book *in* your home, or down the road from home. You may be a first-time college student, or you may be returning to complete your degree. No matter the path that brought you here, your college experience represents a novel chapter in your life, one that is full of fresh opportunities and challenges. This is a time when you will likely meet dozens of new people: friends, acquaintances, perhaps mentors and romantic partners. And as you learn to navigate these relationships and the demands of your college workload, you may at times struggle to keep in touch with the family and friends who have helped you get where you are today.

Although each of our “boys” is now far from us, all living in different states, we have managed to keep them close and sustain our intimate connections with them. How? By using our interpersonal communication knowledge and skills to bridge the distance. In this chapter—and throughout the rest of this book—you will learn how to apply interpersonal communication skills to cultivate closeness with the people you care about.

If you are reading this book, chances are that you are a college student in an introduction to interpersonal communication course. While your sense of home may be a geographic location, it also is a group of people. They may be the people you grew up with, or people you have encountered and collected along the way as you’ve discovered who you are. Visualize these people and ask yourself: *Why* are they close? Is it because of place—because they live geographically nearby, and proximity has bred familiarity? Is it because of impact—because they live in your thoughts, in carefully tended memories that impart special meaning into your life? Is it because

of history—because they have always been there? Or are they close because you communicate with them frequently and intimately?

As we will explore later in this book, all of these experiences can create close ties between people. But the most important way we connect with others is through our interpersonal communication. Think again of the people closest to you, and reflect on the different ways you communicate with them. You may connect from the other side of the country—or from another country—through video calls, which allow you to hear their voices and see their faces. You may frequently text or email. You likely use a variety of social media platforms and apps to share memes, pictures, stories, or videos. You may send cards, letters, or care packages through the mail.

But regardless of how, where, or with whom we communicate, one fact inescapably binds us: *our communication choices powerfully influence the personal, interpersonal, and relationship outcomes that follow*. When we draw on our communication skills to communicate competently, we are more likely to experience desirable outcomes, such as positive emotions, satisfying relationships, and encounters that we like to linger over longer in our minds. When we do not effectively utilize the communication skills we have, we are more likely to experience negative outcomes, such as interpersonal conflict, dissatisfaction with a relationship, and regret over words we wish we could take back. By studying interpersonal communication, you will acquire knowledge and skills that will boost your interpersonal competence, allowing you to build and maintain satisfying relationships and, ultimately, improve your quality of life.

In this chapter, we begin our study of interpersonal communication. You'll learn:

- What communication is and the different models for communication
- The nature of interpersonal communication, the role it plays in relationships, and the needs and goals it helps us fulfill
- How to improve your interpersonal communication competence, both online and off
- Major issues related to the study of interpersonal communication

What Is Communication?

How we create and exchange messages with others

One question students often ask about communication classes and the communication major is “Isn’t this all just common sense?” Because communication is something we all do every day, studying communication research and theory in a more formal fashion strikes some students as counterintuitive. Why study something that we already know how to do?

It’s true that we all come to communication classes with a lifetime of hands-on experience communicating. But *personal experience provides a different type of knowledge than does guided study*. When you’re formally educated about communication, you gain knowledge that goes far beyond your intuition, allowing you to broaden and deepen your skills as a communicator. Communication is like any other form of expertise. Just because you may know how to throw a baseball and may have done it dozens (or even hundreds) of times does not mean that you have the knowledge and skills to pitch for the Chicago Cubs (Kelly’s favorite team). Similar to any other type of expertise, competent communication requires knowledge and skills coupled with hard work, self-reflection, and practice.

self-reflection

Is good communication just common sense? Does experience communicating *always* result in better communication? When you think about all the communication and relational challenges you face in your daily life, what do you think would help you improve your communication skills?

Our goal for this text is to provide you with knowledge so that you can hone your communication skills, becoming your best version of an interpersonal communicator. This process begins by answering a basic question: What *is* communication?

DEFINING COMMUNICATION

In this text, we define **communication** as the process through which people create messages, using a variety of modalities and sensory channels to convey meanings within and across contexts. This definition highlights the five features that characterize communication.



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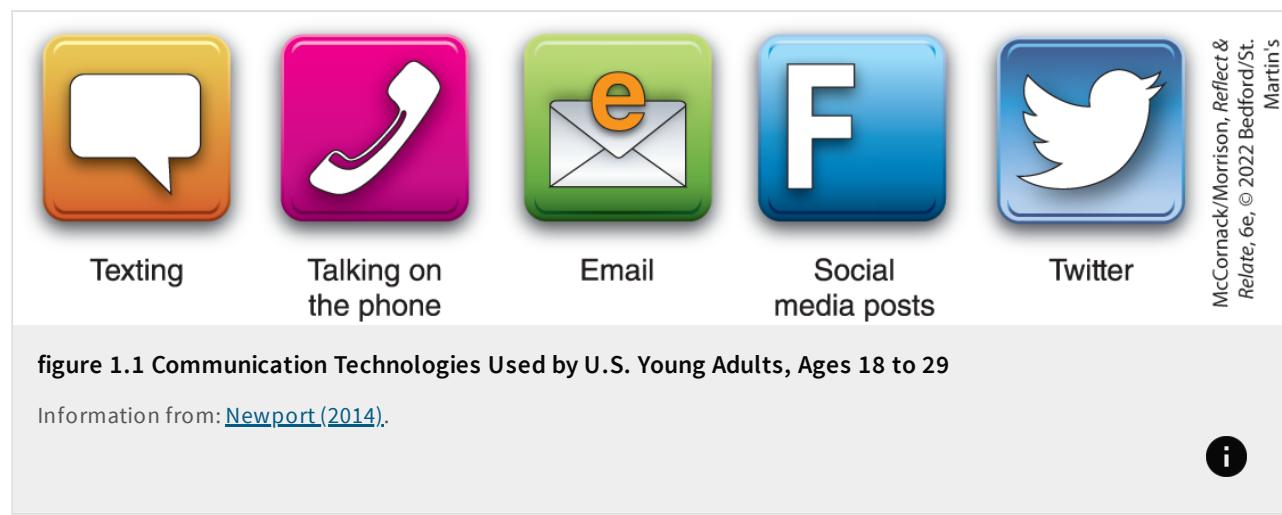
Whether we are starting a new romance, visiting with friends, or maintaining our connections with family members (as in this scene from *Black-ish*), communication plays a significant role in our everyday experiences.

i

First, communication is a process that unfolds over time through a series of actions that connect the participants. For example, your friend tweets that they¹ are going out to a movie, you text to see if you can join, and so forth. Because communication is a process, everything you say and do affects what is said and done in the present and in the future.

Second, those engaged in communication (“communicators”) create messages to convey meanings. A **message** is the “package” of information that is transported during communication. When people exchange a series of messages, the result is called an **interaction** ([Watzlawick et al., 1967](#)).

Third, to convey meanings, communicators choose from many different **modalities**—forms of communication used for exchanging messages. These include the variety used by us (Kelly and Steve) for staying connected with our friends and family members, as we described in our chapter opener: video calls, texting, social media, and email, along with other forms such as handwritten letters and face-to-face interaction. Nowadays, many of us seamlessly integrate digital technologies with more traditional methods of communication, sometimes using multiple forms simultaneously, like when you chat on the phone with a family member while also checking your Instagram (see [Figure 1.1](#) for the most commonly used communication technologies among young adults in the United States).



Fourth, when communicating, people transmit information through various **sensory channels**: perceptual pathways corresponding to our five senses. These include auditory (sound), visual (sight), tactile (touch), olfactory (scent), and oral (taste). For example, your manager at work smiles while complimenting your job performance (visual and auditory channels). A friend who is blind reads a message you left, touching the Braille letters with their fingertips (tactile). Your romantic partner

shows up at your house exuding an alluring scent and carrying delicious takeout, which you then share together (olfactory and oral).

Finally, communicators *convey meanings* within and across a seemingly endless assortment of **contexts**, or situations. We communicate with others at sporting events, while at work, and in our homes. In each context, a host of factors influences how we communicate, such as how much time we have, how many people are in the vicinity, and whether the setting is personal or professional. Think about it: you probably communicate with your romantic partner differently when you're in class than when you're watching a movie at home and relaxing on the couch. And if you're communicating through synchronous video calls, you may be blending contexts (e.g., school and home) and may experience fatigue from the additional effort required for sustained attention, eye contact, and verbal focus ([Sander & Bauman, 2020](#)).

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION MODELS

Think about all the different ways you communicate each day. You text a sibling to find out how they're doing. You give a speech in your communication class to an engaged audience. You exchange a knowing glance with your best friend at the arrival of someone you mutually dislike. Now reflect on how these forms of communication differ from one another. Sometimes messages flow in a single direction, from sender to receiver, as when we create a text and send it to a sibling. The message originates in your phone and arrives at its intended destination: your sibling's phone. In other instances, messages flow back and forth between senders and recipients, as when you deliver a speech to your classmates and they signal to you that they've received and understood your presentation. Still other times, you and another person mutually construct the meaning of a message, as when you and your best friend exchange knowing glances or finish each other's sentences. In such situations, no individual serves as a "sender" or "receiver"; instead, you're both co-communicators. These different ways of experiencing communication are reflected in three models that have evolved to describe the communication process: the linear model, the interactive model, and the transactional model. As you will see, each of

these models has both strengths and weaknesses. Yet each also captures something unique and useful about the ways we communicate in our daily lives.

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Noise

Watch this clip online to answer the questions below.



i

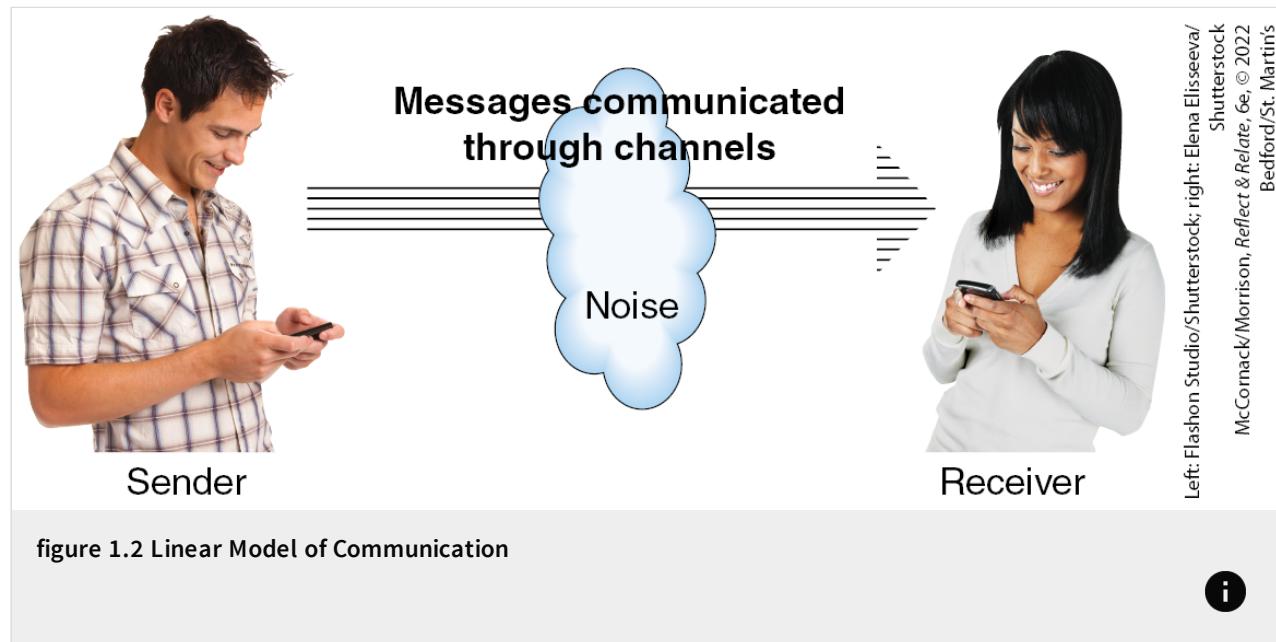
What examples of noise can you identify in this video? On what sensory channels did they occur? What type(s) of sensory channel(s) distract you the most? Why?

Want to see more? Check out LaunchPad for clips on **channel** and the **linear communication model**.

Linear Communication Model

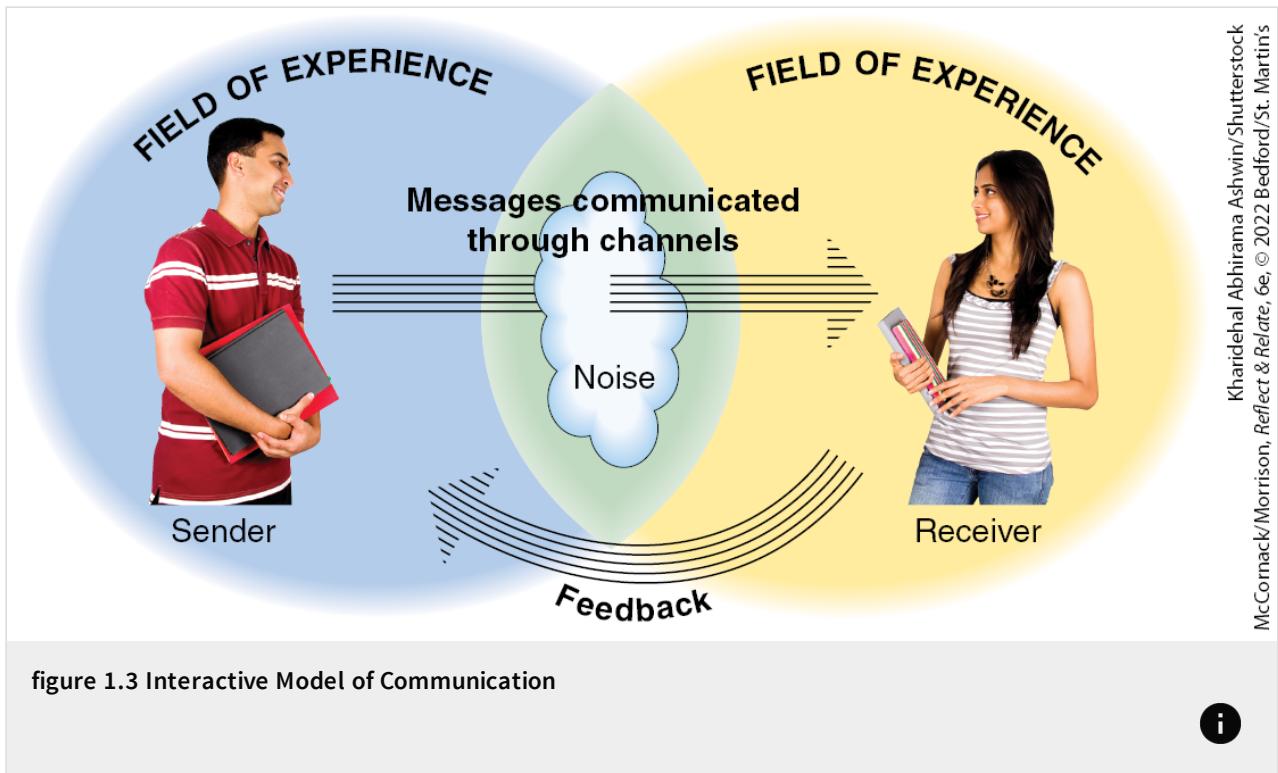
According to the [**linear communication model**](#), communication is an activity in which information flows in one direction, from a starting point to an end point (see [Figure 1.2](#)). The linear model contains several components. ([Lasswell, 1948](#); [Shannon & Weaver, 1949](#)), including a *message*, a *modality*, and a *sensory channel* (see the previous section, Defining Communication, for definitions of these terms). Additionally, there must be a [**sender**](#) (or senders) of the message—the individual(s) who generates the information to be communicated, packages it into a message,

and chooses the modalities and sensory channel(s) for sending it. But the transmission of the message may be hindered by **noise**—environmental factors that may impede messages from reaching their destination. Noise includes anything that causes our attention to drift, such as poor reception during a video call or the smell of fresh coffee nearby. Lastly, there must be a **receiver**—the person for whom a message is intended and to whom the message is delivered.



Interactive Communication Model

The **interactive communication model** also views communication as a process involving senders and receivers (see [Figure 1.3](#)). However, according to this model, transmission is influenced by two additional factors: feedback and fields of experience ([Schramm, 1954](#)). **Feedback** is composed of the verbal and nonverbal messages (such as eye contact, utterances such as “Uh-huh,” and nodding) that recipients convey to indicate their reaction to communication. **Fields of experience** consist of the beliefs, attitudes, values, and experiences that each participant brings to a communication event. People with similar fields of experience are more likely to understand each other compared to individuals who lack these commonalities.



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Transactional Communication Model

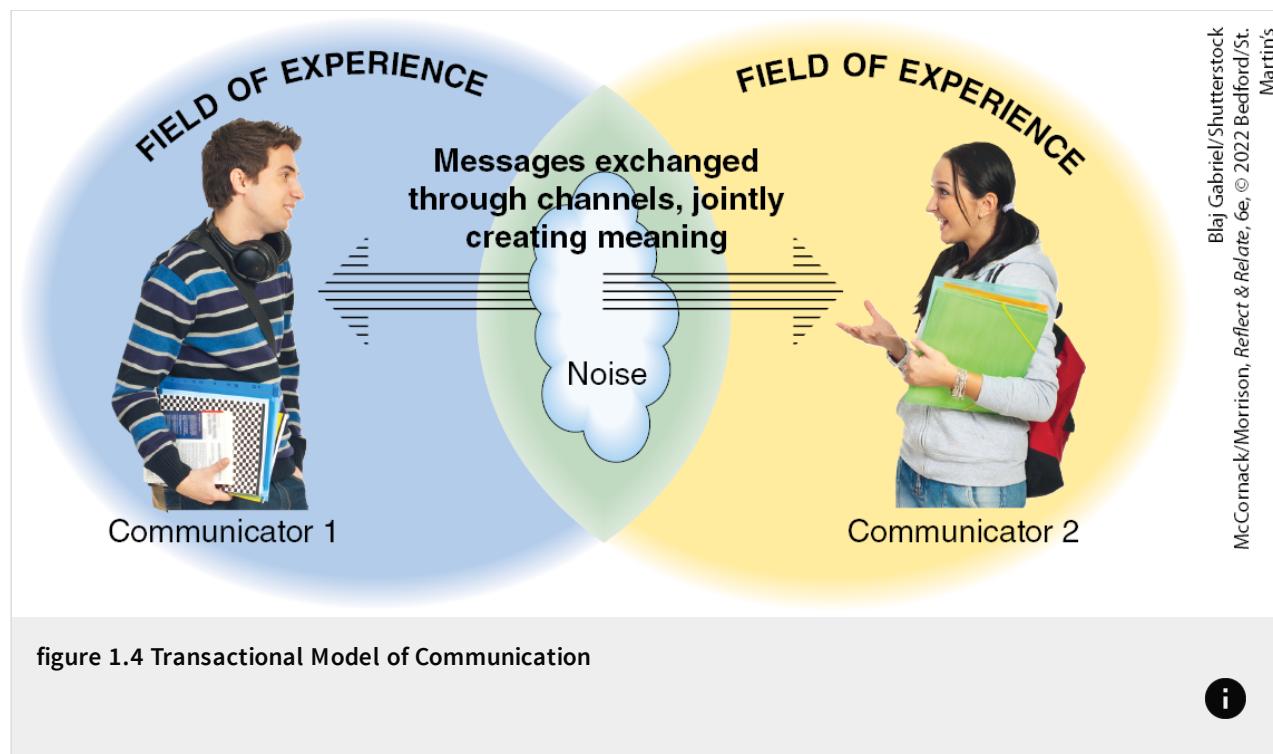
Watch this clip online to answer the questions below.



Can you think of situations in which you jointly created meaning with another person? How did this happen? In what ways are these situations different from ones that follow the interactive communication model?

Transactional Communication Model

The [transactional communication model](#) (see [Figure 1.4](#)) suggests that communication is fundamentally multidirectional. That is, each participant equally influences the communication behavior of the other participants ([Miller & Steinberg, 1975](#)). From the transactional perspective, there are no “senders” or “receivers.” Instead, all the parties constantly exchange verbal and nonverbal messages and feedback, and *collaboratively create meanings* ([Streek, 1980](#)). This may be something as simple as a shared look between friends, or it may be an animated conversation among close family members in which the people involved seem to know what the others are going to say before it’s said.



These three models represent an evolution of thought regarding the nature of communication, from a relatively simplistic depiction of communication as a linear process to one that views communication as a more faceted and mutually crafted process. Each of these models represents useful ways to depict different forms of communication, rather than “good” or “bad” evaluations of communication. See [Table 1.1](#) for more on each model.

table 1.1 Communication Models

Model	Examples	Advantage	Disadvantage
Linear	Twitter and Facebook posts, texting, email, scripted public speeches	Simple and straightforward	Doesn't adequately describe most conversations that occur face-to-face, over the phone, or on a video call
Interactive	Classroom instruction, group presentations, team/coworker meetings	Captures a broad variety of communication forms	Neglects the active role that receivers often play in constructing meaning
Transactional	Any encounter (most commonly face-to-face) in which you and others jointly create communication meaning	Intuitively captures what most people think of as interpersonal communication	Doesn't apply to many forms of online communication, such as Twitter and Facebook posts, email, and texting

Now that we have defined communication and discussed various models of it, let's look at what is meant by *interpersonal* communication.

skills practice

Communication Models

1. Think of someone with whom you engage in both linear and transactional communication.
2. Identify how your preference for feedback influences when you opt for linear versus transactional communication.
3. Reflect on how your knowledge of the other person's fields of experience influences your understanding of their feedback.
4. List several feedback cues you can provide in your next linear and transactional interactions.
5. Use these cues the next time you text and speak face-to-face, and consider how the feedback cues influenced the creation of meaning.

What Is Interpersonal Communication?

Interpersonal communication impacts our relationships

Our students frequently comment that they can't believe how relevant interpersonal communication scholarship is to their everyday lives. After all, we cover (and this book will discuss) self-esteem, jealousy, anger, conflict, betrayal, love, friendship, and healthy close relationships, to name just a few topics. Students often find themselves using this material to analyze everyone they know—sometimes vexing roommates, lovers, friends, and family members who are subjected to their scrutiny!

Of course, interest in interpersonal communication has existed since the dawn of recorded history. In fact, one of the earliest texts ever written—the maxims of the Egyptian sage Ptah Hotep (2200 B.C.E.)—was essentially a guidebook for enhancing interpersonal skills ([Horne, 1917](#)). Ptah Hotep encouraged people to be truthful, kind, and tolerant in their communication. He urged active listening, especially for situations in which people lack experience, because “to not do so is to embrace ignorance.” He also emphasized mindfulness in word choice, noting that “good words are more difficult to find than emeralds.”

DEFINING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Why has learning about interpersonal communication always been considered so valuable? One answer is that knowledge of interpersonal skills is essential for maintaining healthy interpersonal *relationships*. For most people, having satisfying relationships with romantic partners, friends, family members, and coworkers is critical in determining overall life happiness ([Gustavson et al., 2016](#)). Furthermore, the quality of our relationships directly predicts physical and mental health outcomes, including overall life span ([Myers, 2002](#)). For example, research examining the link between loneliness and longevity suggests that feeling socially

isolated and disconnected from others has twice the negative impact upon mortality (likelihood of death) as does obesity, and four times the negative impact of air pollution ([Hawley & Cacioppo, 2010](#); [Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010](#)).

The connection between relationships and interpersonal communication is clearly illustrated by our definition: **interpersonal communication** is a dynamic form of communication between two (or more) people in which the messages exchanged significantly influence their thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and relationships. This definition has four important implications. First, interpersonal communication differs from some other forms of communication—such as tweets, office memos, email, and formal lectures or speeches—because it's *dynamic* rather than static. That is, communication is constantly in motion and changing over time, unlike carefully planned messages such as advertisements, news articles, or formal public speeches. For example, imagine that you are in a video call with a sibling who lives overseas. The first few moments may be awkward or tense as you strive to reconnect and search for words, demonstrated by long pauses between short sentences. Then one of you cracks a joke, and the whole exchange suddenly feels warmer. Just a few minutes later, as you realize you have to end the encounter, the conversation slows, and the mood shifts yet again to sadness and regret, as each of you tries to delay the impending end of the conversation.

self-reflection

How do you define *interpersonal communication*? Can interpersonal communication happen between more than two people? Can it happen through tweets, texts, or emails? Or is it the content of what is discussed that makes communication interpersonal? What forms of communication are *not* interpersonal?

Second, much interpersonal communication is *transactional*, with both parties contributing to the meaning. For example, you and a romantic partner share an intimate dinner, jointly reminiscing about past times together and exchanging expressions and glances of affection fluidly back and forth. But some interpersonal communication isn't transactional. You know that your sister is feeling depressed

over a breakup, so you send a consoling text message in the middle of the workday. You don't expect a response, and don't receive one because of your sister's busy schedule. There's no feedback and no interplay between you and your sister. Instead, there is a sender (you), a message (your expression of support), and a receiver (your sister), making it a linear encounter, albeit an interpersonal one.

Third, interpersonal communication is primarily **dyadic**—it involves pairs of people, or *dyads*. You chat with your daughter while driving to school, or you exchange a series of Facebook messages with a long-distance friend. Of course, some interpersonal communication may involve more than just two people. For instance, our family celebration following Kyle's college acceptance—described at the beginning of this chapter—was definitely interpersonal; just as a conversation between you and your three closest friends would be. The (often) dyadic nature of interpersonal communication allows us to distinguish it from **intrapersonal communication**—communication involving only one person, in the form of talking out loud to yourself or having a mental “conversation” inside your own head.

Finally, and perhaps *most* importantly, interpersonal communication creates *impact*: it changes participants' thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and relationships. The impact on relationships is one of the most profound and unique effects created through interpersonal communication, and it stands in sharp contrast to **impersonal communication**—exchanges that have a negligible perceived impact on our thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and relationships. For example, you're watching TV with your partner, and one of you casually comments on an advertisement that is annoying. Within most close relationships, at least some communication has this impersonal quality. But we can shift to interpersonal at a moment's notice. Soon after the ad commentary, you snuggle up to your partner and murmur, “I love you.” You're rewarded by warm eye contact, a tender smile, and a gentle hug—all signs that your message has had a significant impact on your partner.

When we interpersonally communicate, we forge meaningful bonds that can help bridge the distance between ourselves and others. Philosopher [Martin Buber \(1965\)](#) argued that we can make this distance seem “thinner” through our communication.

Specifically, when we embrace the fundamental similarities that we share with others, strive to see things from others' points of view, treat one another as unique individuals, and communicate in ways that emphasize honesty and kindness, we feel closer to others. We don't have to agree with everything others say or do, but we need to approach each other with an open mind and a welcoming heart, affording everyone the same attention and respect we desire for ourselves. When we do so, using our interpersonal communication skills to reduce distance and orient to the "whole being" of others, we come to perceive them and our relationship as **I-Thou**.

In contrast, when people focus on differences, refuse to accept or even acknowledge others' experiences, and communicate in ways that emphasize perceived superiority, the distance between people "thickens" (in Buber's terms) to the point where it becomes impenetrable. As a consequence, people increasingly perceive their relationships as **I-It**: they regard other people as "objects" that they observe, that are there for "use and exploitation" ([Buber, 1965](#), p. 24). The more that people view others as objects, the greater is the likelihood that they will communicate in disrespectful, manipulative, or exploitative ways. And when people treat others this way, their own relationships deteriorate.

Highlighting the mental, emotional, behavioral, and relational impact of interpersonal communication reinforces the central theme of this text: *our communication choices powerfully influence the personal, interpersonal, and relationship outcomes that follow*. You cannot control what others do, but through interpersonal communication, you can change your own feelings and thoughts about both yourself and others; express yourself in a way that contributes to healing or hate; promote heartbreak or happiness; offer hugs or hostility; create, maintain, or dissolve relationships; and move from I-It to I-Thou. This power means it is critically important that you practice your interpersonal communication skills, which allow you to communicate competently and increase the likelihood that you will experience positive outcomes.

PRINCIPLES OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Now that you know the definition of interpersonal communication, we can expand our understanding of how it functions in our daily lives by exploring several principles suggested by scholars, based on decades of research and theory development. These four principles are affirmed repeatedly throughout our text, and each one suggests practical insights into how you can improve your interpersonal communication skills and, by extension, your relationships.

Interpersonal Communication Conveys Both Content and Relationship Information

During every interpersonal encounter, people simultaneously exchange two types of information ([Watzlawick et al., 1967](#)). *Content information* is the actual meaning of the words we utter. *Relationship information* indicates how each person views the relationship: whether you consider yourself superior, equal, or inferior to the other person and whether you see the relationship as casual, intimate, or estranged.

We convey content information directly through spoken or written words, but we primarily use nonverbal cues to communicate relationship information. These cues can include vocal tone, and how high or low or loud or soft we speak; facial expression and eye contact; hand gestures; position in relation to the listener; and posture. For instance, imagine that you're on a video call with other students from your class, discussing a project you're all working on. One of your classmates says to you, "Do you think you could have your research done by next Monday?" with a friendly tone, smile, and rising pitch on the word *Monday*. Now imagine the exact same situation—except this time your classmate is frowning and uses a downward pitch and volume emphasis on the last word (*Monday!*). In both scenarios, the content information is identical—they use exactly the same words—but very different relationship information is conveyed. In the first scenario, your classmate conveys both equality and affection, whereas in the second, they communicate hostility and a demand.



When we interpersonally communicate, we forge meaningful bonds with others.



Relationship information strongly influences how people interpret content information ([Watzlawick et al., 1967](#)). In the preceding example, you likely will look more to how your classmate delivered their message, rather than simply considering their words to decipher the meaning. During most interpersonal encounters, however, people aren't consciously aware of the relationship information being delivered. We don't usually sit there thinking, "Gee, what's this person trying to convey to me about how they see our relationship?" Relationship information becomes most obvious when it's unexpected or when it suggests that the sender's view of the relationship is different from the receiver's. For example, if a peer at work starts ordering you around like a boss, you are likely to experience anxiety or annoyance ("You're my coworker, not my boss!"). That's why it's important to communicate relationship information in ways that are sensitive to and respectful of

others' impressions of the relationship while staying true to your own relationship feelings.

Because relationship information influences how people interpret content information, it can be considered a specific form of **meta-communication**—communication about communication ([Watzlawick et al., 1967](#)). Meta-communication includes any message, verbal or nonverbal, that centrally focuses on how the meaning of communication should be interpreted—everything from discussion of previous comments (“I actually was joking when I sent you that text message”) to exchanged glances between friends questioning the intent of a message (“What did they mean when they said that?”). During interpersonal encounters, meta-communication serves as an interpretive guide for how to perceive and understand each other’s communication.



Tyler Olson/Shutterstock

Whether an encounter is interpersonal depends on those people participating in it. Some only consider an encounter interpersonal if they gain new knowledge, make different decisions, or forge an I-Thou connection. Others consider an encounter interpersonal if information is conveyed. When do you think an encounter is interpersonal?



self-reflection

Consider an instance in which you didn't intend to communicate a message but someone saw your behavior as communicative. How did this person misinterpret your behavior? What were the consequences? What did you say and do to correct the individual's misperception?

Interpersonal Communication Can Be Intentional or Unintentional

During interpersonal encounters, people tend to perceive nearly everything we say and do as having communicative meaning—whether or not we intend to send a message. Scholars express this with the axiom “One cannot not communicate” ([Watzlawick et al., 1967](#), p. 51). Most of the time we intend, and people interpret, specific meanings. Sometimes, however, people perceive meanings from behaviors that we didn't intend to be meaningful. In such instances, interpersonal communication *has* occurred, even though it was unintentional. For example, imagine that you greet a friend of yours, “Hey, how's it going?” Your friend greets you back, “Hi, good to see you!” So far so good—both messages were intentional, and both were interpreted as intended. But then, as your friend tells you about their new romantic partner, your contact lens becomes displaced. It's the third time this has happened that day, so you sigh loudly in frustration and move your eyes to try to get it back into position. Your friend, seeing this, thinks you're sighing and rolling your eyes as a message about their partner, and gets angry, “Oh, so you disapprove? Why!?” Whether you like it or not, interpersonal communication *has* occurred, even though it was unintentional. To avoid such misunderstandings, keep this simple rule in mind: when you're communicating with others, most of what you say and do will be perceived as communication. At the same time, this does *not* mean that you're responsible for the inferences that others may make from your unintentional behavior. So, for instance, in the preceding example, it is *not* your fault that your friend thought you disapproved of their new partner. Instead, it was a simple misunderstanding. When such misunderstandings arise, it is useful to quickly clarify

the meaning, such as explaining, “This is the third time today my contact lens has slipped.” We will discuss interpersonal communication misunderstandings, and how you can resolve them, in more detail in [Chapter 8](#).

self-reflection

Think of an encounter in which you said something and then immediately regretted it. What effect did your error have on you? On the other person or people involved? On your relationship? How could you have expressed the same information differently to avoid negative outcomes?

Interpersonal Communication Is Irreversible

Every time we communicate interpersonally, we weave together words that influence the current and future conversations and relationship. Take the way you answer your cell phone when your brother calls. The ringtone prompts you to look at the incoming number. Your warm and enthusiastic “Hi!” or terse “Yeah?” depends on how you feel about him. Your answer, in turn, influences his response, which then influences your next comments.

self-reflection

Recall an interaction that took a sudden turn for the worse. How did each person’s communication contribute to the change in the interaction’s quality? What did you say or do to deal with the problem?

This interconnectedness of action makes all interpersonal communication *irreversible*. By tweeting, posting a message on someone’s Facebook timeline, sending a text, leaving a voicemail message, or expressing a thought out loud during a face-to-face encounter, you set in motion the series of outcomes that follow. Simply put, once you’ve said something, you can’t take it back. Because we cannot rewind and edit our conversations, it’s important to think carefully before we communicate. Ask yourself, is what I’m about to say going to lead to outcomes I want? If the answer is no, revise your message accordingly.

Interpersonal Communication Is Dynamic

When we interact with others, our communication and all that influences it—perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and emotions—are constantly in flux. This has several practical implications. First, no two interactions with the same person will ever be identical. People with whom we once interacted effortlessly and joyfully can seem difficult to talk with during our next encounter. Those we once felt awkward around may become our closest confidants.

Second, no two moments within the *same* interaction will ever be identical. The complex combination of perceptions, thoughts, moods, and emotions that fuels our interpersonal communication is constantly changing. For instance, you meet your long-distance romantic partner at the airport, and for the first few minutes after reuniting, you both feel joyous. But half an hour later, while driving home, you suddenly find yourselves at a loss for things to talk about. As the silence stretches, the tension mounts and you both silently ponder, “Why don’t we have anything to say to each other?”

Now that we have reviewed both the definition of interpersonal communication and four defining principles, let’s turn our focus to different motives for communicating interpersonally.

MOTIVES FOR INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Barry Jenkins’s Academy Award-winning 2016 drama *Moonlight* follows Chiron, a Black boy in Miami, through different stages of his life as he comes to embrace his identity and sexuality. Chiron spends most of his childhood and teen years quiet and withdrawn, unwilling to fully open up and connect with other people. But near the end of the film, Chiron—now an adult—meets his childhood friend Kevin, who greets him warmly and tells him all about his life since they last saw each other. Finally, Chiron shares his thoughts and feelings with Kevin, allowing himself to be emotionally vulnerable for the first time. Their encounter represents a breakthrough in Chiron’s personal growth, and opens the door for the two to forge a romantic relationship.



In the movie *Moonlight*, Chiron experiences a profound moment of interpersonal connection when he meets Kevin, his estranged friend. Have you ever experienced a similar moment of connection with a friend or loved one you hadn't seen in a while?

Each of us brings our own unique experiences to every communication encounter, but one thing we *all* have in common—as Chiron’s story in *Moonlight* reveals—is that we, as human beings, are fundamentally communicative creatures. As we discuss in the next part of this chapter, we *need* to communicate with others to be happy and healthy. Consequently, interpersonal communication isn’t trivial or incidental; it fulfills a profound human need for connection that we all possess. Of course, it also helps us achieve a broad range of personal needs and practical goals. Let’s look at the needs, goals, and motives that compel us to communicate interpersonally with others.

Interpersonal Communication and Human Needs

Psychologist [Abraham Maslow \(1970\)](#) suggested that we seek to fulfill a hierarchy of needs in our daily lives. When the most basic needs (at the bottom of the hierarchy) are fulfilled, we turn our attention to pursuing higher-level ones.

Interpersonal communication allows us to develop and foster the interactions and relationships that help us fulfill these needs. At the foundational level are *physical needs*, such as air, food, water, sleep, and shelter. If we can’t satisfy these needs, we prioritize them over all others. Once physical needs are met, we concern ourselves

with *safety needs*—such as job stability and protection from violence. Then we seek to address *social needs*: forming satisfying and healthy emotional bonds w