

## **Communication skills are changeable and can be developed**

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Recently, I bumped into a couple I went to college with over 10 years ago. As with all post-college encounters, I couldn't help but compare the people in front of me to the college kids I remembered. Back in college, at the start of their relationship, Mary and Benjamin often fought over small misunderstandings. However, during our conversation, Mary and Benjamin told me about how they eventually learned to voice their concerns and ask each other about their feelings when their partner seemed upset, allowing them to clear up any misunderstandings that occurred. Meeting them again now, I wondered, how did Mary and Benjamin's communication skills improve so much—was it true that they had gotten better at communicating their feelings after being together for so long?

### **Does communication ability change?**

To find out what the experts say about whether communication ability can change or not, I went to the Relationship and Communication Research Laboratory (RCRL) at Stanford University. Researchers at the RCRL are interested in the origins of communication skills and how they develop over time. For more than 15 years, the RCRL has been following over 400 couples. The researchers have been collecting elaborate data on them, including in-depth interviews with the couples, their family members, and close friends.

In a recent article published in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, Dr. Daniel Lawrence, the Director of RCRL, reported the findings of their research. Dr. Lawrence concluded that “communication skills seem to be malleable and can be

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and cultivated.” Dr. Lawrence shows that of the 400 couples followed over 15 years, many people's overall communication skills changed significantly from what they were at the beginning of the study. Why? As Dr. Lawrence explains, “at almost any time in a person's life, their communication skills can be shaped. We go through life and meet different people and have different experiences, and our communication talents can be changed by them.” He reported many large long-term studies which show that people can “mature and develop their ability levels.”

Similar conclusions were drawn by Dr. Heather Ochoa, an eminent researcher. In her speech at the American Psychological Association's annual convention, held in San Francisco in August of 2019, Dr. Ochoa argued that “no one's communication skill is hard like a rock that cannot be changed. Only for some, greater effort and determination are needed to effect changes.” She reported numerous large longitudinal studies which show that people “can mature and can change their communication abilities.” She also reported findings showing that people's communication capabilities can be changed even in their late seventies.

Dr. Ochoa's conclusions about communication are based on six longitudinal studies published between

2004 and 2017, including two of her own. All six studies had considerably different samples and rationales, but “were nearly unanimous in their conclusions on the malleability of communication skills,” she said.

These studies, together with many others, have made clear the fact that people’s communication abilities can be developed and can be changed throughout their lives.

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### **How does communication ability change?**

To better understand how communication skills change, I spoke to eminent psychologists and neuroscientists all across the country. Surprisingly, I found good consensus that all through one’s life, one’s communication skill can improve significantly. Whether or not you are skilled at communicating at first, you can improve your communication ability.

How have these fields come to such agreement about the ability of communication skills to be changed? Actually, this conclusion was reached long ago. The classic Cambridge-Somerville Young Couples Study convinced the field of psychology that communication ability does indeed change over time. In 1935, Richard Clark Cabot established one of the most ambitious and exciting intervention programs ever conceived. It was designed to serve the needs of young couples who were on the verge of breaking up, and who reported hesitancy and difficulty in talking about their negative emotions with their

partner. At the start of the study, the 250 young couple participants had been in a romantic relationship for 6 months to 3 years. They continued in the program for two years.

The main research question of the intervention program was whether these couples’ communication skills changed, and how. Among other things, during the program, couples attended bi-weekly psychotherapy sessions and attended individual psychotherapy sessions once a month. In short, the program was a multifaceted, long duration intervention.

The results of the intervention were rewarding. Compared to the young couples who were at risk of breaking up but were not in the program, those who had the intervention showed dramatic differences years later. Compared to the young couples who experienced the intervention, the young couples who were not in the program were significantly more likely to report continuing relationship dissatisfaction and were significantly more likely to break up.

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“Of course, a person’s communication skills do not change automatically,” says Dr. Ochoa. “Usually, there are some events in a person’s life or relationships that motivate them to change.”

Similar conclusions were echoed by other researchers in the field. For example, Dr. Nick Campbell, a professor at UCLA, has done extensive research on

how people's communication ability changes in long-term romantic relationships. "We all know people who display such rigid and enduring avoidance of communication, to the point that change seems impossible. But, in fact, this is not true. On the contrary, my research findings show that with enough motivation and some external help, such as counseling, these people can develop well beyond their current patterns of behavior," Dr. Campbell states.

How does intervention or psychotherapy create change? According to Dr. Mike Skijus, an eminent psychologist, psychotherapy creates change "by guiding patients to utilize their potential. My experience has taught me to never give up on my clients. No matter what their problems are, the potential that exists in people makes it possible for them to change. It is our role as therapists to guide them to discover their own potential." Perhaps psychotherapy is effective because our abilities are changeable to begin with.

The conclusion is clear: research findings from a wide range of studies, including large-scale longitudinal studies, rigorous experiments, and intervention programs, converge to one major conclusion: *Communication ability seems to be malleable and can be cultivated.*

## **Lessons Learned**

So what about my old classmates, Mary and Benjamin? I guess it's no surprise that their communication skills had improved so much over time, based on their experiences during and after college.