

Authentic Communication

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Every interpersonal relationship requires effective communication to thrive and avoid misunderstandings. Nevertheless, interpersonal communications are usually surrounded by different communication barriers and challenges. Although all relationships face different communication challenges, in my opinion, family relationships are the most challenging to maintain authentic communication with. This is because family relationships are usually characterized by long-term relational histories, profound emotional attachments, and intergenerational expectations. These characteristics make it difficult to maintain honest and open relationships compared to partnerships, friendships, or professional relationships.

First, family relationships experience **communication climate** challenges. Communication climate is the emotional tonality which can demonstrate warmth, support, coldness, or defensiveness (Adler et al., 2021). For instance, in a family where opening up about a weakness results in sarcasm or criticism, a climate of defensiveness is likely to develop. Some common phrases occur when adolescents within a family share their feelings about being stressed and end up being dismissed with responses such as, “You don’t understand what stress is yet”. Under such scenarios, the adolescents may fail to express their authentic frustrations later in fear of being brushed off or thinking of their problems as burdens to others. With time, the communication climate can cause relational strain due to miscommunication from hindered emotional expression.

Second is the **self-disclosure** aspect in communication. Self-disclosure entails expressing one’s experiences, opinions, and emotions to others, which in most cases enhances relational connection (Adler et al., 2021). In most families, self-disclosure can turn out to be an emotional

risk to the individual involved. For instance, in most conservative families, a family member may avoid discussing their sexual orientation, which may differ from their norm, due to the fear of being excluded or rejected. In situations where a person feels uncomfortable about being their real self and showing their original identity, it becomes challenging to achieve and maintain authentic communication. For some individuals, it becomes easier to open up to their friends and partners rather than opening up to their families to avoid tarnishing the ‘ideal’ family image.

Third is the concept of **relational roles** which deeply influences and in other cases can complicate family communication. The assigned roles, such as “the black sheep,” “the caregiver,” or “the achiever” can sometimes become deep-rooted and influence expectations of different family members, thus hindering authentic interactions (Adler et al., 2021). For example, a family member who is labeled as “the peacemaker” may often avoid expressing their own needs or expectations and avoid confrontations so as to live by their expected roles of preventing conflicts. Individuals who are labeled as “caregivers” may, in most cases, overlook their wellbeing to look out for others. Similarly, “the achiever” may always struggle to hide their struggles by keeping up with the bar at the expense of their physical, emotional, or mental wellness. Under circumstances where relational roles overlook the reality of the individuals within a family, authentic communication does not exist.

Fourth is the lack of **empathetic listening**. Empathetic listening is a form of active listening that calls for the sincere interest in understanding another person’s perspectives on a given matter or their emotions without interrupting them or being judgmental. However, in most family conversations revolving around sensitive matters, listening reflectively is never prioritized. Such conversations usually encounter reactive responses which hinder the

understanding of the point of focus. For instance, a young adult man who expresses their challenges with mental health concerns may be dismissed and interrupted with comments like “toughen up” or “you’re a man, men in our family aren’t weak” which overlooks their distress. A lack of empathetic listening limits the extent of emotional bond and communication ideal families should exhibit.

Fifth is **conflict management styles**, which can greatly impact the feeling of safety with authenticity within families. While aggressive communicators in a family decide to set ultimatums, yell, or criticize, avoidant families may ignore problems, which eventually builds resentment amongst them (Beebe et al., 2021). In contemporary families, it is rare to find families that collaboratively resolve conflicts in a way that respects every individual’s opinions. For instance, when parents have a disagreement with their adult children based on their lifestyle choices and principles, being avoidant or aggressive may worsen the situation and affect their relationship for longer periods of time. On the other hand, employing constructive conflict resolution, such as flexibility to change and trust in one another can be an effective approach to solve such disagreements.

Comparing family relationships with romantic relationships and friendships, we realize that although romantic relationships may require emotional input, there are always clear boundaries and voluntary involvement, which may be lacking in family relationships. Also, while professional relationships are often structured and may seem stressful, they lack the generational intensity in family relationships. Family relationships are usually tied with unspoken rules and principles, responsibility, and intergenerational ties which makes authentic communication challenging, but necessary.

In conclusion, the complex nature of family relationships makes them the most challenging relationships to experience authentic interpersonal communication. This is due to their characteristic emotional climates, dynamics of disclosure, relational obligations, listening habits, and conflict resolution approaches. Establishing healthy family relationships needs deliberate efforts in changing the dynamics, cultivating a culture of trust, and enhancing openness.

References

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