

Living Well and Improving Communication

By Heather M. Futch

Multi-County FCS Agent Baker and Bradford Counties

Committed couples care about the quality of their relationship and realize that communication is important in improving their relationship. Parents who have healthy relationships with their children also communicate that to their children. Communication is the key to a strong, healthy relationship and allows partners and families to feel love and caring. Effective communication requires practice of the skills of listening and expressing thoughts and feelings. Communication is much more than talking; it is what you say, how you say it, why you say it and even what you don't say.

A key part to communication is listening. How exactly is it that you listen to someone rather than just hear them speaking? You encourage them to talk about what is important to them. It's easy to be careless or sloppy about really listening. You may think you know what the other person means and you may pretend to listen while you do something else. To break the habit of not listening carefully, you must forget about what you are going to say. Avoid judging and making comparisons and simply sit silently. Really listen to what the other person has to say when someone is speaking to you. Improving communication by simply listening can prove to be a relationship saver.

The other key part to communication is speaking. The speaker who uses negative words, phrases, and body language often sets up misinterpretations and discourages good communication. The speaker who uses positive (or neutral) words, phrases, and body language encourages open and attentive listeners because of their ease of communication. You may think that your partner or family member knows your needs, feelings, and opinions without your saying them aloud. All too often, that's not the way it is. The habit of expecting someone to read your mind can result in hurt, disappointment, and misunderstandings. Do you want to avoid this common communication mistake? It's simple: *State your thoughts as clearly, honestly, and positively as you can.*

An effective way to talk to others is through "I" messages. These describe your feelings and tell how you are affected by someone else's behavior. "I" messages can express emotions in a way that is not threatening and focuses on the speaker's feelings. "I" messages are different from a "you" message, which blame and judge the other person. "You" messages often trigger defensiveness or hostility in the partner and tend to increase conflict. *Think about how you feel when you hear "You always..."* "I" messages contain three main parts: a statement about the speaker's feelings, a statement about what the other person did or said, and the reason for the speaker's feelings.

Effective communication isn't easy. Teaching yourself and learning new communication skills takes patience and practice. Taking the time to talk is important. A few minutes spent just talking about your day can even be a relief from stress. Be sure to save difficult or problem-solving discussions for times when you and those around you are not tired or already stressed. You will find many ways to open the door for communication if you are sensitive to others. Taking the time to listen keeps the lines of communication open. So this month when you are spending time with those dear to you, remember to improve your relationships by improving your communication.