

Adult Mental Health Services
Stabilisation Workbook 4

Effective communication: Learning to be as effective as possible when communicating



Introduction

The skills we are going to teach in this workbook are all about effective communication.

Effective communication helps us to:

- Be skilful in getting what we want and need from others
- Negotiate with others so they are more likely to do the things we would like them to do
- Get others to take our opinions seriously
- Say no to unwanted requests effectively.

Communicating our needs and what we want from others can be difficult. This can be especially true if we have had difficult past experiences and / or relationships, which can influence our ability to communicate effectively with others going forward.

For example, someone who has been bullied in childhood may have learnt to adopt a submissive role in relationships and avoid verbalising their needs for fear of being treated negatively or punished by others. Alternatively, someone who has been bullied in childhood could instead adopt a dominant aggressive role, as they have learnt that anger and aggression can frighten others into listening.

Neither role is helpful in supporting us to get what we want or need from others, maintain healthy relationships and / or feel positive about ourselves.

Effective communication is about being able to assert our own wishes, goals and opinions in a manner that leads other people to respond favourably.

This means we can be equal partners in our relationships and maximise the chances that our goal in a specific situation will be met, while at the same time not damaging the relationship and our self-respect.



DEAR MAN

DEAR MAN (developed from a therapy called DBT) is a way to remember a set of skills that help us be as **effective** as possible when we want something, need to say no, maintain a position or point of view, or achieve a goal. The DEAR MAN acronym stands for:

Describe

Express

Assert

Reinforce

(Stay) **M**indful

Appear confident

Negotiate

Describe

Describe the current situation. Stick to the facts. Tell the person exactly what you are reacting to. No judgemental statements. Be objective.

Sticking to the facts can be useful for a number of reasons:

- Ensures the other person is focused on the actual issue you want to raise
- Supports you and the person you are talking to begin the interaction from a place of agreement
- If the other person is not in agreement with the basic facts, it gives you warning that what you want to say may not be well-received.

For example:

“You told me you would be home by 6 but you didn’t get here until 11.”

“This is the third time this week you have asked me for a cigarette and you have not offered me any of yours.”

“In the last week, you have borrowed my shampoo and conditioner 3 times and not returned it.”

“Every time we meet you always criticise the clothes I wear.”

“There are lots of dishes to wash.”

Express

Express clearly how you feel or what you believe about the situation. Don't expect the other person to read your mind or assume that they know how you feel.

By sharing your personal reactions to situations, you are making it easier for the other person to work out what you want from the situation and what is important to you. This can make you feel vulnerable at times, but also has the advantage of helping the other person to understand your feelings.

Use phrases such as "I want" instead of "You should", and "I don't want" instead of "You shouldn't."

For example:

"When you come home so late, I start worrying about you."

"I feel frustrated as I think you are taking advantage of me."

"When you criticise me it hurts and I feel sad."

"I feel annoyed because it seems to me there is an expectation I do all the washing up in the house."

Assert

Assert yourself by asking for what you want or saying no clearly. Do not assume that others know what you want if you don't tell them. Remember that others cannot read your mind. Don't tell them what they should do. Be clear, concise and assertive.

For example:

"I would really like it if you would call me when you are going to be late."

"I would like you to return the number of cigarettes I give you on a weekly basis."

"I would like you to return my shampoo and conditioner the same day after you use it."

"I want you to stop criticising the clothes I wear."

"I want you to start doing your share of washing up."

Reinforce

Reinforce (reward) the person ahead of time by explaining the positive effects of getting what you want or need. If necessary, also clarify the negative consequences of not getting what you want or need. This can involve taking time to consider the other person's perspective and motivation. Alternatively you can offer to do something for the other person, if they do this thing for you. As a minimum, express appreciation after anyone does something at your request. Linking your request to consequences that other people want will make them more likely to agree.

For example:

"I would be so relieved, and a lot easier to live with, if you do that."

"I would be happy to continue to give you cigarettes when you have run out, as long as you return them when you have money."

"I will be happy for us to still meet weekly if you can do this."

"I think the atmosphere in the house will improve if you can do this."

(stay) Mindful

Keep your focus on the goal you want to achieve. Maintain your position. Don't be distracted. Don't get off the topic. There are 2 useful techniques you can use for this:

1. **'Broken record'**: Keep asking, saying no, or expressing your opinion over and over and over. Just keep replaying the same thing again and again. Keep a soft voice tone. Be persistent in maintaining your position.
2. **Ignore attacks**: If another person attacks, threatens, or tries to change the subject, ignore the threats, comments, or attempts to divert you. Do not respond to attacks. Ignore distractions. Just keep making your point. When you respond to attacks, you often lose track of your objective and when that happens the other person can take control of the conversation.

Appear confident

Appear effective and competent. Use a confident voice tone and physical manner, make good eye contact. This conveys to the other person that you deserve respect for what you want. No stammering, whispering, staring at the floor, retreating. No saying, "I'm not sure."

It is perfectly reasonable to be nervous or scared during a difficult conversation. The skill is 'appear' confident not 'be' confident.

Negotiate

Be willing to give, to get. Offer and ask for other solutions to the problem. Say no, but offer to do something else or to solve the problem another way. Focus on what will work.

For example:

"How about if you text me when you think you might be late?"

Turn the tables – turn the problem over to the other person. Ask for other solutions.

For example:

"What do you think we should do? I can't just stop worrying about you (or I'm not willing to)."

"I'm not able to say yes and you seem to really want me to."

"What can we do here?"

"How can we solve the problem?"



Using DEAR MAN

DEAR MAN is a set of skills. Depending on the situation you may not need to use all of them. For less challenging requests such as going to the cinema, you may not need to use 'describe' or 'express'. However, if you previously agreed to go bowling, you may need to employ all of the DEAR MAN skills to let the person know you have changed your mind.

Exercise

Think of a situation where the DEAR MAN skills can be used. Practice each of the skills and write down what you would say. Then practice role playing the situation.

Practice ideas

- Go to a library and ask for assistance in finding a book.
- Invite a friend for a coffee.
- Ask a friend to do you a favour.
- Disagree with someone's opinion.
- Ask a parent, partner or friend to accept more responsibility.
- Ask a person to stop doing something that bothers you.
- Ask to watch a programme on TV.

Describe the current situation. Stick to the facts. Tell the person exactly what you are reacting to. No judgemental statements. Be objective.

Express clearly how you feel or what you believe about the situation. Don't expect the other person to read your mind or assume that they know how you feel.

Assert yourself by asking for what you want or saying no clearly. Do not assume that others know what you want if you don't tell them. Remember that others cannot read your mind.

Reinforce (reward) the person ahead of time (so to speak) by explaining the positive effects of getting what you want or need. If necessary, also clarify the negative consequences of not getting what you want or need.

(stay) Mindful – keep your focus on the goal you want to achieve. Maintain your position. Don't be distracted. Don't get off the topic.



Appear effective and competent. Use a confident voice tone and physical manner, make good eye contact. This conveys to the other person that you deserve respect for what you want.

Negotiate – be willing to give, to get. Offer and ask for other solutions to the problem. Say no, but offer to do something else or to solve the problem another way.

