

Communication WARRIOR

Chapter 5

**You + 1 =
Interpersonal Relationships**

“If only I could have you just the way I want you.”

—*If Only*, Dave Matthews Band

Like Dave Matthews sings, “If only I could have you just the way I want you...” Yes. If we could have everyone around us doing and saying just what we wanted, life would be so much easier. Unfortunately, each of us wants different things at different times from the people closest to us in our lives. And, like it or not, we each have our own journey to take in this life, and that means, we won’t please everyone around us all the time. And that’s ok. Perfection is not the goal. While some of us may be lucky enough to find everything we want all wrapped up in one person, for most of us, relationships are much more complicated than that and involve a lot more people and a lot more skill.

But, we’re jumping ahead of ourselves. Let’s start by getting one thing straight: Not all interpersonal relationships are deep, intimate, and meaningful. If you recognize and wave at your mail carrier when you see her on your street, then you have just engaged in interpersonal communication. It may not be deep or intimate, but it exists as a type of relationship. Interpersonal relationships come in all shapes and sizes.

As a Communication Warrior, your goal is to improve the state of your interpersonal relationships at every level. This is an important piece of your Smart Armor. This doesn’t mean you need to worry about being close with everyone you meet. Interpersonal Communication includes every kind of interaction with just one or two people. Having a relationship doesn’t just involve those you care deeply for. A relationship means that you and another are interacting at some level, even if it’s just a head nod or a smile. Any interaction involves our intellect and emotion, so, theoretically, they all have purpose at some level.

When we feel connected to the world, we tend to feel better about ourselves, and when we are dealing with any aspect of communication, we know that *change* is going to be involved. As with any relationship, interpersonal relationships may grow and change with time and circumstances, but we’ll get to that later. Right now, let’s start with some basics.

Interpersonal Communication takes place face-to-face, through texts, emails, and Skype. But it’s not always clear and easy to figure out. Have you ever texted someone a question, then answered your own question, and continued to have a one-sided conversation because the person you are texting hasn’t responded quickly?

The Power of Small Talk

It might seem evident that one of the most important goals for a Communication Warrior is to develop confidence. Yet, in many actual communication situations, the *unknown* is central to the context—like a big white elephant that no one talks about but knows is there. How does one maintain confidence when they know little or nothing about either the people or the subject matter? The ultimate answer is to develop an interest in *small talk*.

Now, I know what you might be thinking because I hear a lot of people talking smack about small talk. Many people tend to dismiss it as unimportant, time wasting, or boring. Small talk, however, is an extremely important component to all relationships whether the relationships are merely polite social acquaintances or intimate relationships with significant others.

In fact, *all* relationships begin with small talk! It's what always happens when people find themselves in the same place at the same time, regardless of the reason. Small talk is a fact of life and an *important* one. Before looking at how we can develop or improve our small talk skills, let's first look at *why* small talk matters.

Small Talk

1. It's friendly and demonstrates social skills.
2. It can put others at ease.
3. It can make you appear friendly and confident.
4. It can help you and others find common ground.
5. It can lead to networking opportunities.
6. It can help smooth out uncomfortable moments.
7. It can lead to more in-depth relationships.
8. It can maintain a sense of connectedness with the world.
9. It can provide us with useful information.

Small talk is polite and friendly. Being polite and friendly can only help you achieve your goals. A Communication Warriors shows confidence by demonstrating an interest in others. With small talk, you allow for the opportunity to get to know people more or to at least show a baseline of interest in others. In the 21st century, people often go for long periods of time without connecting to others. This can create a sense of isolation that can lead to unhappiness, loneliness, and depression.

Interestingly, even short, simple conversations with others can help us to feel connected and alive. Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of social media are great examples of this. In fact, a recent Harvard study shows that

social media gives the same pleasure as do food, money, and sex. No wonder people are spending more and more time on their smart phones and computers! Although these mini social encounters are virtual, a few sentences and scraps of information about others each day may be enough to keep many people from feeling lonely or isolated, at least temporarily. Addiction to relationships that are exclusively online or virtual has also been found to cause depression and other types of anxiety and stress. So balance is, as always, the goal here. While social media alone may not be enough to keep away loneliness, or may even contribute to that emotion in some way, the exchange of small talk, in person and perhaps online, can offer some sense of connection. This is the potential power of human contact, virtual or not.¹

Tips for Improved Small Talk

1. Create a sense of comfort for yourself and others.
2. Find common ground.
3. Wind up conversations on a positive note.

Creating Comfort

Whether you find yourself in a crowded elevator or waiting in a long line to buy concert tickets for your favorite performer, opportunities for small talk occur almost daily. While you don't always need to instigate small talk, or even keep it going, you will at least want to have an idea of how to control it in a positive way from a Communication Warrior standpoint.

The first thing you want to do is put on your Smart Armor. It's not as easy as you might think to read the individual language of a person. Non-verbal cues, tone of voice, word selection, and cultural tone may influence you in ways that are based on your own stereotypical perceptions. Until we get to know someone well, we may never truly understand where people are coming from and what they are really thinking. Fortunately, we don't need to know that much about most people in our lives. We just need to function as effectively and efficiently as possible in order to smoothly move through our days.

Guard yourself from acting on those perceptions immediately. From a nonverbal standpoint, you should appear relaxed and open. Do not display too much eye contact, (never stare!), but if you catch eyes, give a brief smile, look away to give the person "space," and keep a good social distance if possible. You want to appear approachable but not wide open or vulnerable.

1 Sunnafrank, M. "Predicted Outcome Value During Initial Interaction: A Reformulation of Uncertainty Reduction Theory." *Human Communication Research*. (1986).

You know it's bad when you're texting another person, but you're the only one who's asking and answering the questions. Know when to stop and wait for an answer. Otherwise, you might be embarrassing yourself!

Communication Warriors

"Serve others if you can, but if you can't, at least don't harm them." —Dalai Lama

If you feel comfortable enough to engage in small talk, go for it. Start by greeting the person appropriately. Usually a calm but friendly greeting is best. Try to avoid those energetic and robust slaps on the back!

The Dalai Lama of Tibet, a person considered to be one of the most genuine and positive people on Earth, says, "My dedication is to serve the 7 billion sentient beings on this planet and the other creatures with whom we share it. If you can, help serve others, but if you can't at least don't harm them; then in the end you will feel no regret." It's a great piece of advice for most communication situations. If you don't like interacting with someone, and you don't need to for any important reason, then don't.

Finding Common Ground

If, after exchanging greetings, it seems appropriate to continue, and you feel the other person is receptive, then make a statement out loud to them. Keep it neutral and simple. The weather is a fine way to start the conversation. You don't need a "line" or some amazing thing to say. This, in fact, can really turn off the other person by making them feel too obligated to notice you or talk to you further.

The idea is to think of talking to people not as a *performance*, but rather as an authentic way to communicate because you are genuinely interested in creating a comfortable space to co-exist temporarily. You will want to pay attention to *how* a person responds to you in order to continue, stop, or try to honestly connect with them. What do they *do*? How do they speak? What do they say? How do they respond to *you*?

Depending on the person's own ability to effectively communicate behaviors and ideas back to you, the conversation can also be revealing about the character of a person. Remember, it is only after small talk that any other aspect of a relationship can be possible. Lifelong friendships form from small talk.

Couples who have celebrated 50 year anniversaries have long-term, successful relationships in a large part because of small talk. They still ask how each other feels, what they're dreaming about or wishing for, and how great the garden and workshop look. Job partnerships and professional relationships stay viable due to small talk, as well. Creating a hospitable work environment is always a good thing, and one way to do that is to show a friendly yet mild interest in each other's personal lives outside of work.

Keep it lite and airy, but strive to find common ground. If you're in line at a restaurant, for example, say something like, "I love coming here even though it's a long wait." Stay neutral yet positive. Try to avoid negative opening comments like, "I really hate waiting to eat dinner, don't you?" You might appear negative to someone who doesn't know you, which is usually not in your best interest. First impressions are real, and managing your personal public relations is the goal for a Communication Warrior.

If you want to show interest, whether for professional or personal reasons, don your Smart Armor first. Make sure you have it set high or low, depending on your quick assessment of the situation. Also, make sure you are set for the correct context—is this professional? Social? What is your objective? What do you have to gain or lose with the outcome of this interaction?

Next, show that you are *attentive*. Put away your phone or other electronic device. *Look at people when they talk and when you respond.* If you've ever tried to talk to someone while they are texting or otherwise engaged with their smart phone, then you know how important this is for your credibility! If, however, your goal is to avoid talking to someone, then using your smart phone as a shield is the perfect weapon.

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Whether on a professional or personal level, when it comes to small talk and information sharing, only give as much energy to the situation as you are receiving. Better to leave them wanting more than wishing you'd just go away!

Always give information about yourself that you ask of the other person. This is important as it helps maintain an openness about yourself, yet it establishes that you expect the same level of information exchange in order for the conversation to continue. As long as there is a balanced give and take with information quality and quantity, then the conversation will probably continue in a fairly comfortable way.

Once either person starts *donating* more information than they are receiving, that is a clear signal that one person is not as interested in the conversation as the other. Information exchanges should usually be fairly even—a balanced give and take. As soon as someone is disclosing more information or more intimate information than the other, the balance has been breached, and the exchange will usually become awkward and uncomfortable. Warriors need to pay attention to that. *Stop yourself before it's too late.* It's a little bit like that, “She's just not that into you” thing. Even if the conversation isn't on a personal level, the signs are still very much the same.

Winding Up the Convo

One important thing about small talk is that it should be short, sweet, and small! A few minutes of lite, low-impact small talk usually suffices to create the brief social connection desired. If a conversation starts to take a more complex turn, and it appears both parties are looking for a continuation of the conversation, then you may want to go ahead and end the small talk on a positive, forward-looking note. Perhaps you exchange business cards, email contact information, or phone numbers. This allows communication between the parties to remain flexible and open-ended in case either party wants to follow up at another time.

If a small talk session runs out of gas because one or both parties stop making attempts to continue the conversation or there are markers of boredom, disinterest, or inattentiveness, simply make a pleasant closing remark like, “good talking to you” or, “I've gotta make a call—good talking to you,” or “Well, have a great time—good talking to you.” These casual statements are short but polite, and don't attempt to make a reconnection at any other point in the future. That's important when it comes to helping people feel comfortable.

If it doesn't seem like someone wants to continue small talk, then politely taper off. If someone wants to continue, then they will most certainly say or do something to indicate this. A Communication Warrior wants to make people feel good, not bad, so don't pressure anyone to pay attention to you. Always give people a face-saving “*out*” in the form of a friendly end to the conversation. This can help alleviate any sense of trepidation or uncertainty on either side. If something feels awkward, then it probably is. If you are paying attention, you'll know the signs of someone interested in furthering a connection. No fake phone number exchanges are necessary. *This is a good place for a Winky Face.*

Self-Disclosure

Whether it's small talk with a stranger, a serious, intimate conversation with a spouse, or an important meeting with your boss, a Communication Warrior is always careful about what he or she says, and how he or she says it.

Words, as we know, are vital tools to help us understand and connect with each other. However, they can also be confusing, misleading, or hurtful. Our own use of words as encoders can lead to misunderstanding and noise, and our interpretation of words as decoders can lead us to potential misunderstandings. Words can be efficient tools or weapons of communication, but just as important are our nonverbal behavior and expression.

Nonverbal communication can be equally confusing. She stands there with her arms crossed and her head down—is she tired, angry, or depressed? You can't know until you have more information.

What's more difficult than either verbal or nonverbal communication? A combination of the two. What are we to think when someone screams the words, "I LOVE YOU!!" while clenching his teeth and throwing his fist into the wall?

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You know it's bad when you're texting another person, but you're the only one who's asking and answering the questions. Know when to stop and wait for an answer. Otherwise, you might be embarrassing yourself!

We show and tell the world who we are, what we think, how we feel, and what we know all the time and in a multitude of different ways. When the things we tell others about ourselves are not obvious, are not known, or are a secret, we engage in **self-disclosure**. In other words, when we show our true feelings, talk about a difficult time in our past, or tell someone in confidence that we color our hair (if it isn't obvious), we are engaging in self-disclosure.

People engage in self-disclosure for many reasons. Usually, it's to increase the level of intimacy between people. To move a relationship to the *next level*, for example, we need to increase **intimacy**. Intimacy is created when people increase the *depth and breadth* of the topics discussed and managed between them. If you talk deeply about a lot of stuff, intimacy strengthens. You can move a relationship from the Small Talk acquaintance phase into a friendship partially through the act of mutual or shared self-disclosure.

If you and your classmate, for example, start a casual acquaintance by talking about class work, then go out one night for pizza after class, start talking about other things, meet again to study and end up going out with a group of people, and through all of this begin talking about personal things and past experiences, the relationship begins to change. You start to go beyond acquaintances and head into the territory of friends. This is due to the increased intimacy between you based on increased mutual self-disclosure.

But intimacy is not always what we want from most of our relationships; so, moderating our self-disclosure is important. One of the best reasons for creating and using Smart Armor is to attempt to manage the first impressions people have of us. When we are new to a situation, we seldom want everyone to know everything about us. It's not usually in our best interest.

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When it comes to using self-disclosure to advance a relationship, go slow and proceed with caution. In order for a relationship to remain in good balance, the give and take of information needs to be relatively equal.

When one jumps too far ahead, it leaves the other behind. That usually feels uncomfortable.

We can prevent the loss of control over our communication behavior by training ourselves to rely on our Smart Armor for some basic standards of communication so we don't expose the more vulnerable areas of ourselves right away. This allows us to pay more attention to what's going on rather than trying to hide out or be the center of attention. In any new or serious situation, staying calm and paying attention to others is how we more quickly learn what's really going on around us, thereby possibly making decisions that are good for us in the long run.

How much self-disclosure is too much?

The answer is actually fairly simple. As long as the give and take between all participants is relatively equal, then self-disclosure is balanced. In other words, if you choose to disclose personal information about yourself, it's important to go slowly, and only proceed if and when sensitive information is equally shared by the other.

Self-disclosure should be a give and take process in order for the relationship to feel equally satisfying to all involved. If one participant discloses

more than the other, the relationship will quickly fall out of balance. This creates a feeling of “one is doing more than the other” or that one person is progressing too fast in the relationship. Perhaps the person can be perceived as needy or desperate. Neither one of these conditions is considered the goal of a Communication Warrior. If it feels uncomfortable, then stop self-disclosure for a while to see what happens. You’ll be better able to gage the other person’s feelings as he or she responds to your lack of self-disclosure.

Relationships

Who are the five most important people to you? How would your life be affected if they were harmed? How would their lives be affected if you were harmed? Relationships matter whether they are with your top five favorites or with the woman behind the cash register at your favorite restaurant who is just an acquaintance. You are in a lot of different kinds of relationships right now. That means you play a variety of roles every day. You might be any or all of these right now: a parent, friend, student, employee, peer, sibling, girlfriend, boyfriend, best friend, enemy, aunt, uncle, acquaintance, teacher, employer, boss, mentor, or co-worker. The list is infinite. How many relationship roles do you play? Regardless of the number, you know that you alter your communication patterns in each relationship role. This is normal, but sometimes you might get confused about your role in certain relationships and wish things were a little clearer.

We meet a lot of people as we move through our lives, and though we might nod or say, “Hi” because we recognize them by sight, we probably don’t even know most of the names of people we see everyday. That’s normal. We know a lot more people than we think we do. But we aren’t necessarily close to all of them. In fact, we probably aren’t close to most of them. Relationships come and go, shift and change. Some stay the way they started—distant and fairly unimportant. But every once in a while, people come into our lives who stay with us for a lifetime. And yet all relationships, whether casual or deep, have stages they pass through as we grow and change over time.

Disclaimers about Relationship Stages

- When it comes to humans, there is no true norm. People do all kinds of things. As with everything regarding human behavior, use this information as a guideline, but be flexible when it comes to what’s really happening in your own life.

- People can move backwards and forwards through the stages. Starting at stage one doesn't mean you will definitely end up at stage ten.
- People can stay at any stage indefinitely and can move backwards or forwards through stages. There are no rules.
- Some people cruise through the stages rapidly and some move slowly.
- People in relationships are not necessarily going to be in the same stages at the same time. This is why couples often say they "cycle" through their relationship. One may be more interested in intensifying a relationship at one particular period of time, or one may be ready to bond while the other is happy with no commitment and few obligations. One may be discontented with the relationship, while the other is content. Then, when the other is finally content again, the other turns angry, and so on.
- Knowing where you and your partner are as far as relationship stages go can help couples manage both their sets of feelings

No two relationships are the same, but some share similar characteristics. All relationships travel through stages that may have similar qualities. Researchers Knapp and Vangelisti created a useful model to help us more clearly observe some of the logistics of relationships.² Familiarity with these stages can help us analyze the strength or vulnerability of a relationship at any given time.

Not all relationships pass through all the stages, nor do they need to. And some relationships never move beyond a certain stage, while others can skip stages, moving forward or drifting slowly backward. We all know relationships can be complicated, but here are some basics that might help you in your quest for a healthy relationship.

10 Stages of Relationships

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|------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Initiating | 6. Differentiating |
| 2. Experimenting | 7. Circumscribing |
| 3. Intensifying | 8. Stagnating |
| 4. Integrating | 9. Avoiding |
| 5. Bonding | 10. Terminating |

Relationships, like every human life, are a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Perhaps, as in the case of parents and children, the beginning starts at birth and doesn't end until the participants have moved on from this life.

2 Knapp, M. L., and A. L. Vangelisti. *Interpersonal Communication In Human Relationships*. 5th. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2005. Print.

The end of a relationship doesn't have to come during a lifetime. Some relationships seem to last forever. However, for the sake of being thorough, let's look at the stages, from start to finish, in three sections:

1. Coming Together
2. Relationship Maintenance
3. Coming Apart

Communication Warriors

In the 21st century, change is the name of the game. A good relationship will need to handle the unknowns that are sure to come your way. Build flexibility into your relationships from the start, and keep them well-oiled, maintained, and well-tuned.

Coming Together

Coming together involves the three stages of initiation, experimenting, and intensifying. From the first second we encounter someone, we are in the first stage of a relationship.

In the **initiation stage**, we see or meet someone. You notice someone, and he or she notices you. It may be visual, or you might hear their voice, see them online, or in some other way realize that you both exist in the world. Often that's the extent of the relationship! You and someone might have a mutual Facebook friend. You both see each other's comments, but do not know each other beyond that and have no need or desire to go any further in the relationship.

However, if you begin to put comments on each other's home page, text message or chat with each other, even if it's only through Facebook, you have entered the second stage of coming together, and that is the **experimenting stage**. One of the primary features of this stage of a relationship is the use of small talk! It is through small talk that we get to know more about each other and test the amount of things we have in common. We are attempting to get to know each other.

In fact, most of the relationships in your life are still in the experimenting stage. These are your acquaintances. The average person has hundreds of acquaintances, several friends, and few best friends. While you may feel friendly towards your acquaintances, if you never talk much beyond small talk, then you are still in stage two and will more than likely stay there.

That's fine. This is how we connect to people in our community. We chit chat with the cashier at our favorite grocery store, talk to the neighbor about their lawn, and say hi to our professor when we see her at the mall, but we don't know too much about the private lives of these people, and they don't know much about ours.

Communication Warriors

"People who meet in airports are seventy-two percent more likely to fall for each other than people who meet anywhere else." —Jennifer E. Smith, The Statistical Probability of Love at First Sight

If, however, through mutual self-disclosure and a desire to get to know each other you continue deepening your relationship, you'll move into the *intensifying stage*. In this third and final stage of coming together, things start getting more intimate. Regardless of the nature of the relationship, whether professional, friendly, or romantic, this is a fairly energetic and intense time in the development of a relationship. During the intensifying stage, both parties begin to have a type of need or desire for the relationship. They are making strong connections and feel that there is serious potential for a long-term commitment.

During this intense time, both parties generally feel that creativity exists between them, and they have a certain drive to find the time and resources necessary to deepen and strengthen the relationship. They may start new projects together, spend extra time together, and be somewhat exclusive. Depending on the nature of the relationship, they may even begin using their own style of language, whether developing pet names for each other in romantic relationships or using buzzwords and concepts for more professional situations.

This stage is sometimes referred to as, "the honeymoon period," as the couple, new friends, business partners, or pair tend to stay somewhat private and exclusive. While they have yet to announce themselves as a couple or as official business partners, it's obvious to anyone who's paying attention that a new bond is being created. Logistical difficulties in the relationship and personality clashes have not yet shown up, and both parties may be somewhat oblivious to problems that will soon become apparent.

Relationship Maintenance

The length of each stage is unpredictable, but in the case of a long-term, interpersonal relationship, whether personal or professional, stage four is inevitable. Once a couple works through their first major conflict, or once a professional team faces disappointment, the relationship will more than likely enter the *integrating stage*. This is a rather public phase of the relationship as the couple or pair “come out of the closet” in a semi-official way. Either they announce this to friends, family, or co-workers, or others may begin calling them a couple, or ask where Bob is whenever they see Sandra. The two become known as a pair and are seen as one entity.

Communication Warriors

“There is no age requirement for love.”

—Unknown Origin

People in this phase may also begin to share things like food and expenses (couples), reputations (professionals), or activities and time (friends). This is also a time when they might begin using the words, “we” and “us” instead of “I” and “me.” It is almost as if the pair begins forming a new identity and, with that, a new set of obligations. They may now begin to try to meet not only their own needs and those already present in their lives, but also the needs of the new friend, significant other, or business partner. This is where people’s lives can start to get complicated.

What happens when our friends and family members get pushed aside for the new person? Now we have to change our behaviors and meet several sets of unexpected needs while dealing with the new and unexpected problems that might arise. Managing these new conflicts will take time, and time is one thing that is in high demand for most people in the 21st century. Managing old relationships that are impacted by new ones is not something we tend to think about when we are in the grip of a certain amount of euphoria over a new job situation, friendship, or boyfriend.

If the relationship continues through the integrating stage, however, and both parties have successfully and satisfactorily handled the conflicts that arose during this time, then the couple may find themselves heading into stage five, the *bonding stage*.

Bonding is difficult to do and even harder to undo. True bonding indicates that a level of trust has been established between the two people. Both parties have agreed to certain conditions that could hurt the other if broken.

This may be formal, as in the case of an engagement or pre-nuptial agreement, it might be in declaring a commitment for each other that includes certain restrictions and expectations of behavior, and in the case of working relationships, it might be that both jobs are dependent on each other's performance; contracts might be drawn up or legal partnerships might be created.

Whatever the nature of the relationship, the bonding stage is big. The expectations for trust, honesty, and transparency are high in this stage of a relationship. This is where couples, business partners, and friends will benefit from going slowly and paying close attention to how daily life feels with this person. It is important to make sure that the person is who you think he or she is, and to make sure that what you *think* is happening in the relationship is accurate. Trust, in short, is on the line now.

In the 21st century deception is often the name of the game for some people who spend their lives pretending to be what they are not. The increased dependence on digital communication has made it extraordinarily easy to deceive the unsuspecting. For this reason, many relationships falter during the bonding stage when previously unknown truths are discovered and behaviors are questioned. A relationship in the bonding stage may suddenly implode and crash land somewhere back around stage two, except the small talk is more heated and fraught with tension than before.

It is also during this fairly pressurized stage that those with deeper issues of trust and commitment may unexpectedly try to put the brakes on the relationship in order to slip back down to the intensifying or integrating stages. This doesn't usually work out too well for most relationships, but any faltering in the bonding stage should be noted. An inability to trust or be trustworthy is probably the most common reason for relationship dissatisfaction or failure. After all, trust is the foundation of a healthy relationship. Without that, the ground is going to remain shaky and the truth unclear.

Yet, working through tensions, troubles, and conflict is part of any relationship. Once trust has been built and established, a confident couple or partnership begins the process of relaxing their grip on each other a bit. As intense as the relationship was up to the bonding stage, it now eases its hold on both parties (not always at the same time, though!), and one or both begin entering the *differentiating stage*.

Even while in the most connected partnership, most individuals require a certain reclaiming of identity from time to time in a relationship. The amount and duration are completely individual. It's perfectly normal. Maybe one member of the pair begins seeing their friends one night a week without their partner. In a professional situation, perhaps one of the team members starts a secondary project with someone else. In any case, it is quite typical

to begin opening up your social or personal options a bit in order to regain part of what may feel like lost identity.

How far this stage goes depends on many factors. If one of the pair is insecure or nervous about the other wanting some independence, then conflict will ensue. It is important that the couple not only realize that it is normal to want some personal space, but also to be sensitive to the threat a desire of independence might be to the other person if they have not entered the same stage at the same time.

Communication Warriors

Relationships flourish based on mutual intimacy in communication, increasing the depth and breadth of topics to develop trust and further commitment.

Sometimes the differentiating stage uncovers problems that the couple has difficulty managing. If, for example, one of the individuals in the pair resents the other for wanting time away to become more independent than was believed to be agreed upon, deeper conflicts can arise. If these conflicts are not managed and the couple fails to find contentment and trust, then they may enter the *circumscribing stage*.

It is in the circumscribing stage that the health of the relationship begins to seriously come into question. Up to this point, a relationship has been in a state of growth, even in the differentiating stage. Independence and partnership are both important features of a typical, healthy 21st-century relationship. In today's society, most couples have a variety of daily experiences that involve not only their partner, but also friends, family, and professionals as well.

In the circumscribing stage, the couple is in a standoff. Due to an inability to come to agreement and understanding about the nature of the conflict, which led to the differentiating stage, the couple's communication behavior has begun to change significantly and not for the better.

In this stage it's typical for certain *hot topics* to be avoided because they cause fights and stress. Avoiding certain topics, however, leads to constant conflict because there has been no resolution to the problem. Not talking about certain things actually makes the conflict worse, like a festering wound that you ignore in the hope that it goes away.

Restricting the manner of communication in any way is usually detrimental to a relationship. The reason any relationship flourishes is due to

a sense of intimacy in communication. That is, increasing the depth and breadth of topics and having enough trust to create the freedom necessary to discuss whatever you want with your partner, without fear of rejection or anger. When that is taken away for any reason, the relationship can begin to become malnourished, and if something isn't done to reestablish trust and interest in each other, then the relationship may be on its way to coming apart.

Coming Apart

Finding yourself in a faltering relationship can be terrifying at first. In some cases, the relationship may quickly end at the first sign of trouble and these next few stages heading towards the end of a relationship can happen quickly and chaotically. In some cases, however, the ending is a slow, surgical process. For many, heading into these last three stages is enough to realize that the relationship is worth keeping, and attempts are made to try to repair damage and move forward. Relationships can be unpredictable. Maybe the honeymoon really is over, but that doesn't mean all hope is lost.

Communication Warriors

*"I believe in fighting for a relationship.
But I don't believe in fighting for it alone."
—Author Unknown*

It's important to remember that at any stage in a relationship, it is possible to find your way back to happiness. A pair who want happiness can have an endless number of honeymoons throughout their relationship, but recognizing the situation at hand, especially when trouble is brewing, and trying to understand the complexity of what's going on between both parties, is not only difficult but time consuming. It will take an effort to find common ground again, and that's exactly what needs to happen if a couple is in the **stagnating stage**. When this happens, relationships in trouble begin to cross into the coming apart stage.

When a couple or pair first falters, often after the first major disagreement, it's easy for them to feel as if they'll never find happiness again. After the anger subsides, if the explanations fail to bring about the necessary changes and understandings between the pair, then depending on how long it goes on, circumscribing might leave the pair in an awkward state of poor

communication and dissatisfaction for too long. That's when things between the pair will begin to go stale.

The stagnating stage is often a time of indecision and low energy for the couple. The highly emotional state of the last two stages can leave individuals feeling worn out and hopeless. Active communication attempts can get sluggish, if it does not come to an actual standstill. The pair has trouble conjuring the energy to bring up *hot topics*, but this is exactly what is needed to move the pair back into active discussions about the problems between them. Even going out together can become too much trouble. It often feels like being together is no longer worth the effort.

With each passing day, the desire to try to fix things can become weaker in one or both parties. This puts both people in an unhappy and unrewarding state. The question may come up, "Why am I in this relationship if I'm not getting what I want?" Over time, this question can become a sort of emotional plague for one or both parties. When this happens, the relationship is, officially, dysfunctional and disabled.

A dysfunctional and disabled relationship is unsatisfying to all parties involved. For some people, this becomes the new *normal*. The new standard of being for couples or partners who find themselves in this position and who, for whatever reason, choose not to change themselves or the situation; find themselves, the relationship, and their partner boring, uncommunicative, uninterested, and unsatisfied.

If this doesn't change, then the pair head straight into the *avoiding stage*. At this point, life has stopped revolving around the partner, and one or both parties begin to find other people, activities, and projects to focus on outside the relationship. For some it may be travel, work, club membership enthusiasm, or hanging out with friends. Whatever the actual involvement is, people who are in the avoiding stage have similar behaviors: they get involved in things that take them away from home and/or the partner as much as possible.

Conversations and nonverbal communication between the two become business-like and perfunctory. It's almost like small talk again, but any real interest or concern has mostly evaporated. During this time, it is common for couples to spend a lot of energy trying to avoid each other. Perhaps they change their work hours or begin filling time with other obligations and activities. If a couple finds themselves in this place together, then they don't really care that much what their partner is involved in as long as they keep it to themselves. They aren't really interested in hearing about your new friends or your new projects. This stage is probably not going to feel too good even

with the most cooperative partner. However, it feels worse if one of the partners is trying to connect and the other is trying to avoid.

There is still time to get the relationship back on track as long as both parties are interested in doing so, but if only one person wants to revive the relationship, the odds of renegotiating each person's needs and desires satisfactorily are very low. Chances are, at this point, that the relationship will terminate. This can be a very fast, friendly, fairly painless situation or a long, drawn-out, destructive event. No two relationships ever end the same way, but they do end. Let's take a look at the ***terminating stage*** of a relationship.

Yes, that's right. Even the *end* of a relationship is a process, and there is no right or wrong way to end the relationship. The terminating stage will vary depending on the personalities, predicaments, and details of the situation and people involved. When it comes to people, it can be a combination of anything. People are often unpredictable when they are under emotional stress. Most relationship break-ups, even under emotionally controlled circumstances, lend themselves to stress.

The terminating stage is the process of redefining the rules, boundaries, and desires of people involved in a relationship. If two people find themselves in the terminating stage at the same time, things will generally be smoother. Two people who are actively furious at each other may still agree that separation is their best option. The most difficult terminating situation in a relationship occurs when one person initiates the terminating stage while the other tries desperately to avoid breaking up and wants to make up instead.

Sometimes the terminating stage goes more smoothly with less emotional heartache. Even after officially terminating a relationship through a break-up, dissolution of a partnership, divorce, or due to distance, people may *still* find their way back to each other. Even the terminating stage isn't always permanent. Once a relationship has officially terminated, it's important to realize that the relationship doesn't evaporate. As long as both parties are still alive, there is some aspect to the relationship that is still maintained. It also may be that a relationship stays in the terminating stage as long as both parties are alive.

Feelings don't go away. Memories are usually forever, and all people and events have a domino effect on us throughout our lives. The terminating stage may be a mutual agreement to stop contacting each other, stop seeing each other, stop interaction as much as possible, but even with stringent rules of engagement like these, it will still be possible to run into each other in town, online, on the phone or at parties or gatherings of mutual friends, family, or business associates.

Communication Warriors

Relationships are complicated. Learning how to build a solid friendship can set the foundation for future, long lasting relationships. Start with a sense of tolerance, then have fun. Work toward understanding, then create predictability. Predictability fosters respect and trust. Only then will you find stability in your relationships.

Regardless of why a pair has entered the terminating stage of their relationship, it is important to have a personal game plan that makes your own life viable and successful without the partner. It's time to look ahead at conflict.

Conflict and Relationships

The first thing I want to say about conflict is this: *Conflict* is normal. It is neither bad nor good. The presence of conflict indicates that something is not mutually understood by two people (or within one's own self). *Conflict is not synonymous with fighting.*

When most people think of the word conflict, however, they think of yelling and arguing along with negative emotions like anxiety, frustration, hurt, hate, and sadness. These are painful *responses* to conflict, but they are not the conflict itself. If you didn't understand that, here it is again: *Reactions* to conflict may include yelling, hitting, screaming, ignoring, and hurting other people emotionally or physically. These are reactions and responses to conflict, *but they are not the conflict themselves.* Unfortunately, these learned and practiced negative reactions to conflict make most of us afraid of conflict.

As warriors, we know that fear always makes things worse. The key to losing your fear of conflict is in learning to *manage* your emotions and responses to conflict. Eradicating conflict altogether is not even in the realm of possibility. As we see in the *Model of Communication*, the existence of *noise*, present in every communication interaction, reminds us that two brains will never perceive everything in exactly the same way. Therefore, conflict, which is a disagreement in perception, attitude, value, or belief, is inevitable. The goal is not to get rid of conflict—that's impossible—but to learn to manage it in a way that may lead to more effective, satisfactory outcomes and relationships.

Communication Warriors

When it comes to relationships, outcomes and results always depend equally on both parties. If one person is really trying to find solutions to a conflict, and the other just pretends to try, then the conflict will not be worked out. Instead, it will quietly smolder until it works its way back into the open again.

When a couple or pair find themselves faltering, which is often after the first major disagreement or breach of trust has been discovered, they usually land somewhere between the *differentiating* and *circumscribing* stages. In this dark, unhappy place, it's easy to feel as if the world suddenly has become murky and dangerous. At any stage in a relationship, however, as long as all parties are willing, it is possible to find your way back to happiness. But recognizing the situation at hand and trying to understand the complexity of what's going on between both parties can be difficult and time consuming. It will take an extended effort on the part of both individuals to find common ground again, but it can be done.

The possibility of getting a relationship back on track exists *as long as both parties are interested in doing so*. If only one person wants to revive the relationship, however, then the odds of successfully doing so are low. Renegotiating each person's needs and desires satisfactorily takes time and energy. Both parties must be willing and interested in taking the time and spending the energy necessary to accomplish this. And once agreement has been met, the relationship will continue to require maintenance and vigilance in order to remain healthy. In other words, no amount of hoping or wanting will fix a conflict if only *one* person is trying. The old saying that, "It takes two to tango" is true.

Some Truths about Conflict

1. ***Conflict exists when attitudes, values, beliefs, or perceptions are not agreed upon.*** At its simplest, conflict occurs because two brains are attempting to analyze the same stimuli and are not coming up with the same results.
2. ***Conflict indicates change is approaching.*** When partners realize they are in a conflict, it's because they do not agree on something. Whether they know it or not, regardless of whether the conflict is over something big or small, both participants will have to change something in order to reach a comfort zone again.

3. ***Conflict is neither good nor bad.*** It is the response to conflict that can be positive or negative. Once two people realize they are in a conflict, the actions they each take next will determine the eventual outcome of the relationship.
4. ***Communication will not always clear up conflict.*** If two people do not perceive the same event in the same way, no amount of talking or communicating is going to help. Some conflicts involve values and beliefs, and for the most part, no amount of force can make us change just because someone wants us to.
5. ***Conflicts can't always be avoided.*** Differences in perceptions and beliefs exist. If participants can agree to disagree and honestly feel no pain in this decision, then co-existence as a response to conflict is possible and relationships can continue to flourish in spite of the differences.
6. ***Conflicts can't always be resolved.*** If partners can't find ways to satisfactorily resolve a conflict or the issue causing the conflict is too big to be overcome or be ignored, then the only resolution may be to make a significant change in lifestyle and/or the relationship.
7. ***Physical and emotional violence never solve conflicts.*** If someone is bothering you and you punch them in the face and knock them out, they will probably stop bothering you immediately, at least for a period of time. However, you have not solved the conflict by stopping the behavior. Stopping a behavior by using physical or emotional violence towards another person (or pet), only causes the person (or pet) to stop for that moment, but the additional problems caused by hitting or yelling people increases the likelihood of more severe problems later on. If someone you know uses violence as a way to solve problems, they need to seek professional help. Using violence in interpersonal relationships is a highly destructive and unethical behavior pattern.
8. ***The solution to conflict is not always obvious.*** Conflict means that people don't agree. This means you won't always get your way. Sometimes, no one gets their way and an alternative solution must be agreed upon and upheld. The goal is to feel good in the relationship and to be with people you trust. Sometimes we have to happily disagree, trust the other person, and continue doing the best we can to move past the conflict. Being open to new information will help you work towards solutions that are practical and fair. The goal is *not* always to win an argument. The goal is to find the best solution while protecting the relationships you care about.

Communication Warriors

When it comes to conflict, you will do your best when you remember to be respectful, fair, and honest. Pay attention, be cautious, and above all, protect the relationships you care most about even when you are angry, frustrated, and hurt. Working through conflicts can actually help build trust.

When it comes to conflict, here are the main points:

- You don't usually know everything, and you aren't always right.
- When you're mad, be extra careful about what you say and how you say it.
- There are almost always two or more sides to everything.
- When a conflict is over values and beliefs, sometimes all you can do is agree to disagree and see where that will take you.
- Don't keep it in, but don't always make a huge deal out of things either. Find a way to talk openly, but know when to let things go.
- You've got to give some to get some. Be willing to negotiate.
- Flexibility means being open to unknown and unforeseen possibility.
- Conflict based on hatred, bias, bigotry, and ignorance will never work out in your favor. Sometimes it is best to walk away and let the haters hate on their own time.

Dealing with Intercultural Communication

In the early 21st century, planet Earth is reaching a population of nine billion souls with the expectation of doubling more rapidly than ever before. This is not news to you, but the implications might be. As we spill over into each other's traditional spaces, break boundaries and borders, and rub shoulders ever more closely, cultural lines and identities are gradually growing softer and softer. The threat of cultural blending is real, and many cultures are trying ever harder to lock down borders and maintain clear cultural lines. In the 21st century, boundary hopping has become epidemic, and people are getting violent and desperate in some places.

As the wall of separation in Germany fell during the late 20th century, new walls of division continue to go up in the Southwestern United States. Border patrols, ethnic divisions, and violent reactions against religious

freedom are rampant from one side of the planet to the other. While South Africa has become more racially unified, the United States is showing increased signs of racial violence. Globalization seems like an intense and dangerous venture to those who get most of their information from the news. Intercultural communication is, to some, a messy political problem. I, however, beg to differ. I see intercultural communication as a common interpersonal experience. If we can manage it better one on one, the bigger problems will eventually fall to the background.

Here in Appalachia it is common for local residents to assume that they live in a place where most people share the same skin tone, religion, eating habits, accent, and background. Because of this belief, they tend to think that anyone who doesn't fit the above stereotype is an outsider. The traditional Appalachian Mountain culture doesn't make room for the many other kinds of cultures that are here and have been here for a long time. One of the cultural beliefs of this culture is that most people here are the same.

Communication Warriors

Heads up: Culture may or may not have anything to do with race or nationality. And, it's a lot more user friendly that it may appear.

Students often say that there is no intercultural interaction here. They believe this because they are following the cultural beliefs that support this statement.

Every time I hear this, my jaw drops. I look around my classroom, and I see local mountain people whose families have lived in these hills for generations, city people who love the ease of country living, parents, teenagers, wealthy people who don't worry much about money, and young adults who work two or three jobs just to afford the luxury of taking a class or two. I see young men and old women, students with autism, students who were top in their class, members of the Cherokee Nation, African-Anglo Americans, a variety of Asian faces, Latinos, Latino-Native Americans, Anglo-Native Americans, Asian-African Americans, and Polynesians.

This list is incomplete, but the information is accurate. The above named cultures represent only some of the students who sit in front of me every day right here in rural North Carolina. In front of me every single day people are interculturally communicating—regardless of their race or nationality. Clearly, the belief that this area is made up of one culture is incorrect. But

because the powerful traditional mountain culture maintains this belief, it is almost as if many of its cultural members are blind to the reality that this area is and always has had a lot of cultural, racial, and national diversity.

I, myself, am as much a Choctaw Indian (I am a member of the Choctaw Nation) as I am a Celt with roots as deep in the British Isles, Belgium, and Germany as they are in Native American soil. I also happen to be from Oklahoma. And that fact, alone, often creates interesting communication patterns between me and local Appalachian mountain folk. But my personality is less about being an American-Choctaw-Celt than it is being a middle-aged woman and a college professor living in the Southern USA. Most people do not know I am passionate about being both Native and Celt. This is probably true because I don't display any kind of identifiable symbols of clothing or style.

My point is this: if you are communicating with someone else anywhere in this world, whether they are next door to you or a continent away, you are engaged in some level of intercultural communication. Why? Because culture produces us, not race or nationality. Each one of us has cultural influences from all over the place: our church, our neighborhood, our family's socio-economic status, our education, our region, our family... We are made up of a complex number of influences, and to judge any one of us by one or two factors is unfair, unnecessary, and often problematic.

Culture

To understand the realities of intercultural communication, let's start at the beginning. Culture is created by humans. All cultures are human made, and there are a lot of them all around you right now. You, yourself, are a blend of several kinds of cultural environments. Culture doesn't involve anything that we can't control such as skin color or eye color. Culture is about the things, events, ideas, values, and beliefs that humans invent, make up, and create. It's a system that is created by a group of people so they can share meaning and feel connected. At the same time, when we feel left out of a group or don't understand why people are doing what they do, then you feel left out. Culture is created as much to keep people out as to keep people in. Culture tells us what's right and wrong. It makes us feel connected or lost. Culture can control people, too. If we break cultural rules, then we must pay consequences.

Here are a few examples of things that humans create and control:

- Language
- Dress styles

- Ideas of beauty, ugliness, and attraction
- Food
- Attitudes about everything: drinking, using drugs, sexual behavior, family, for example.
- Government
- Religion
- Birth and death rituals
- Morality and ethics
- Education norms

So, do you see where this is going? Everything that seems “normal” to you is based on how your culture defines “normal”. It’s probably more accurate to say that rather than having one culture, most of us function normally within a variety of cultures. Our cultural affiliations vary wildly, and that creates a variety of behaviors that all operate within a context. As we move through a variety of cultural norms during our day, the rules of correct and expected behavior change.

For example, in the culture of the school you attend, you might be considered a great student if you sit quietly and take notes. But in your home culture, it’s possible that the only time you are quiet and still is when you’re asleep. Every home and family has a culture—a set of expected rules and behaviors, language patterns, beliefs, and collective memories. Every campus has its own culture, too. Some campuses are imposing, grand, and formal, while others are small, personal, and casual. Once you learn the cultural rules, you will feel comfortable and more included. But until that happens, you probably feel uncomfortable and self-conscious until you learn the do’s and don’ts of a particular environment. You’re the same person everywhere you go, but you are treated differently based on where you find yourself, right? Sometimes we feel comfortable and sometimes we don’t. Sometimes we feel confident, and sometimes we don’t have a clue about what’s going on.

Culture, then, is responsible for a good part of our personal identity. A person will never feel more out of place and awkward than when they are in a place where they are not recognized as an individual, do not know the language, are misunderstood or ignored, don’t like the food, and have no idea where to go, what to do, or how to do it. Welcome to culture shock.

Culture Shock

Culture shock can occur at any time to anyone in any place. You don't have to be traveling to exotic lands in order to experience this. Anytime you feel like you don't belong, or feel like an outsider for an extended period of time, you are experiencing at least a taste of culture shock. The strength and duration is variable but always debilitating in some way. Most of us eagerly anticipate going to new places, starting a new job, meeting new people, and experiencing new things. Things tend to go pretty smoothly until you encounter a problem based on the newness of the place, event, or experience. When starting new jobs or moving to new towns, our enthusiasm will often give us extra energy for a period of time. For some people, this is a few days or weeks, for others, a few months. But, regardless of how much time you spend feeling someone excited about the new venture, it won't be long until the inevitable happens. When you seriously begin to miss your regular routine, normal food, comfortable language patterns, and familiar faces and routines, it's typical to begin feeling resentment towards the new culture.

Communication Warriors

"I don't know anything about American history or presidents. I don't know what tailgating is! I've never been to an Olive Garden!" —Emma Watson, on the culture shock she experienced going to an American university

At this point, it can be a downhill slide towards despair and sadness if you don't pay attention. If you don't feel comfortable and feel like an outsider, you can quickly go from feeling a little melancholy and frustrated to having all-out anger and resentment toward the new people and place. Small cultural things that you took for granted back home can become huge. Small things can cause us to begin to "hate" the new culture and idealize our own culture. In time, we forget the problems at home, and see "home" as a kind of perfect place.

Of course, once you get back to your town, country, home, or region, your feelings of familiarity give you a restored sense of comfort, identity, and self-confidence almost instantly—at least for a while. The strangest part about experiencing culture shock is that after a time, we begin to remember the things about home that we dislike. Later, we might even begin to remember things we actually liked about the new culture we couldn't wait to leave.

These feelings are all natural, and being aware of behavior patterns can help you prevent despair and frustration. The main thing to remember is that nothing is all good or all bad. Neither are people, experiences, or places. The higher the expectation of anything, the more likely you'll experience a heavy load of culture shock. This is true for relationships, too. The Honey-moon Phase is the time in any new experience where the truth is as yet, unknown. It's a time in a new relationship, job, or location when fantasy and lack of information meet to create a blissful state of ignorance. Whatever you do, enjoy this phase, but remember that the fall from perfection can be hard and unjust. No one deserves to be put on a pedestal that doesn't allow them to be themselves. Even when you are in the throes of adoration, your heartthrob is like you, imperfect. You'll realize this soon enough. It's a matter of time. So, the more realistic we try to be in any given situation, the less likely we are to be devastated by the onset of Culture Shock.

Race

Because the issue of race is a hot topic in the USA, I feel compelled to address it as part of the overall intercultural communication experience. But be forewarned, my take on this topic may differ from what you are used to. As a professor, I constantly remind students that culture may or may not have anything to do with race or nationality. This is baffling to most, at first. The majority of people I encounter think that intercultural communication literally means inter-racial communication or international communication. In fact, it doesn't necessarily mean either one of those things.

Communication Warrior

*"Race is there. You're tired of hearing about it?
Imagine how ... exhausting it is living it."
—Jon Stewart, The Daily Show*

To some people, the "R" word is nearly perceived as a kind of profanity. Many people are terrified of the subject and feel too uncomfortable to discuss it. This phobia is common, but, unfortunate. In the USA, healthy, unbiased, exploratory discussions of race are rare. This fear is a result of a clash of cultural beliefs, norms, and traditions that are as old as Christopher Columbus. Because I believe in the value of confronting and facing reality as realistically as possible, I'm going to approach this topic head on. So, if this topic is uncomfortable for you, warrior up. I think you can handle it.

First of all, let's understand this, race is a physiological fact, not something selected by an individual. Race has no personality or agenda. It simply exists in the same way as hair color, eye color. It is not race that defines a person's personality or characteristics. It is the culture in which a person grows up in and/or identifies with that creates our individualism.

In places where people are categorized based on physical characteristics, however, then those qualities often become the visual cue for what is assumed to be a set of stereotypical behaviors. Issues of behavior, lifestyle, spiritual practice, and values are created not because of skin tone or national border, but because of the way the group of people living together created a culture. In the USA, for example, racial segregation between anglo, brown, red, yellow, and black skin tones has been normalized for centuries. Because AVB's have developed around the factor of race, many people confuse culture with race. I hope you are beginning to see why this is incorrect and does an injustice to everyone involved.

The bottom line is this, when it comes to being a Communication Warrior, buying into these stereotypes, even about yourself, will never give you the real picture. And that can be problematic when trying to understand your audience, friend, co-worker, or fellow citizen. We are all more than one culture. We are each more than our race or nationality. Humans are complex, and to reduce a person to a stereotype based on physical characteristics is, well, in a word, lame. I think you get it. So, 'nuf said.