

WHAT MANNER OF COMMUNICATIONS ARE THESE?

The quality of human relationships depends largely upon the way we communicate with each other. It depends not only on what we say, but how we say it; not only on what we do, but our motives for doing it. Our tone of voice and even our smallest actions are elements of communication; many of us are hardly aware of these.

When partners in a marriage are held together by a bond of love, mutual respect, and a desire to please and comfort, communication naturally falls into patterns that express these feelings and give both husband and wife confidence in each other and a sense of security and mutual dependence.

When a relationship is distorted by an unbalanced dependence, or by suspicion, hostility, excessive demands, and expectations, these flaws reveal them-

selves in the way the two people communicate with each other.

If a man marries a woman because he was attracted by her warm maternal quality, as many alcoholics do, he is likely to be the dependent one. And she, attracted to him because of her unconscious desire to mother someone, will be the practical member of the family. She may later bemoan the fact that he has failed in his role as head of the house, not aware that it was she who took the reins and did all the managing. And while she is managing him, the children, the household, and the finances, she's awash with self-pity because of the big load she has to carry.

If he is drinking, her constant protective watchfulness makes it easy for him to sidestep getting help. He has no incentive to get sober. She convinces herself that she's doing her very best for him; she hasn't learned, as she would in Al-Anon, that shielding him from the consequences of his drinking only prolongs its course.

When he's drunk, her reaction is to reproach him for his behavior, and that's the very worst time to attempt to communicate with him. In fact it can't be done without triggering a family war.

Until she learns what is wrong with *her* attitude and how to change *herself* so he will be forced to face his responsibilities, the situation isn't likely to improve.

If a man married a woman because she's shy, timid and submissive, he unconsciously chose a wife who would satisfy his need to dominate. If she turns out to be an alcoholic, he will have the complete dependent he wants, no matter how desperately he *thinks* he wants her sober. He, too, will cover up her drinking, protect her from public disgrace, and assume all the responsibilities which should be hers.

Such distorted relationships are often found in alcoholic marriages, and they inevitably lead to the drying up of the communication which is vital to a good marriage.

We can make verbal communication effective if we never lose sight of the fact that the alcoholic is sick; he has a disease for which it is unfair to blame him or punish him. But he must be told—at the right time and without anger or reproach—what he has done and is doing.

This suggestion, from an AA member, has proved successful in many cases.

“The alcoholic may experience blackouts. He

appears to be functioning, but he usually doesn't remember what he did or said. He suspects that something did happen and his anxiety and nameless guilt are almost unbearable. If you're sorry for him, you might think it's unfair to torture him by telling him *what* his drinking led to. But it's kinder and more constructive to relieve his mind and tell him frankly what he needs to know. He has a right to know what his drinking is doing to him. If you go to him without anger or reproach and tell him quietly what happened, you'll be helping him to see himself as he is.

“My wife did just this for me and it was the single most helpful thing that ever happened to bring me to sobriety.

“I had no idea how far I had fallen from my own ideals until she came to me one morning and told me what I had done the night before. And as soon as she had spoken her piece, she excused herself and quietly left me to figure out for myself what I was going to do about it.

“But the alcoholic must be allowed to draw his own conclusions. If you tell him *how* he looked, *how* he acted, what you think of him for it, it won't work. He'll just fall back on the old excuse, ‘She's picking

on me again,' and he'll have a grievance against you that will sustain him over this bad time.”

Until the spouse has been exposed to the Al-Anon program, she automatically assumes that the alcoholic could, if he only wanted to, get sober and behave better, so she berates him when he comes home drunk. And when the drunk phase is past, she hesitates to bring up even urgent problems for fear of giving him reason for another binge.

This brings to mind a meeting that inspired the members to explore their own motives and to understand how they were performing in their communication with their partners. The topic was:

Do You Say What You Mean?

Do You Mean What You Say?

Many of the difficulties of achieving good communication lie not only with the alcoholic, but with the spouse as well. The stresses and uncertainties she lives with each day—the dread, the fear, the anger—have so distorted her reasoning powers that most of her reactions are emotional and often destructive.

The chairman asked the members, “Why don’t we say what we mean? Why aren’t we honest enough to confront the troublesome partner with some straight

truths? They're surely obvious enough, but if we fail to let the alcoholic know how we feel about things, how will he know? What's going to motivate him to find sobriety if we let him believe that his behavior is acceptable?"

Each person spoke in turn; these were the answers.

"I don't say what I think because I want to avoid fights and trouble. I guess I haven't learned to distinguish between saying disagreeable, critical things and making plain statements about a situation that will throw light on them without hurting his feelings."

The next speaker said,

"I'm afraid to tell him what I think. Usually I think of nothing but criticizing him for what he's doing, and I know that's wrong because he's sick. And when he's sober he's so nice and kind that I hate to bring up the unpleasant things that happened. And anyway aren't we supposed to work on ourselves in this program? Telling him how we feel about the things he does seems to me the same as taking his inventory."

Commenting on these two remarks, the chairman said,

"You know that no improvement can be accom-

plished unless we're consistent. If we haven't the courage to speak up when the drinker is in a sober phase, he'll just go on believing that there's no limit to what we'll tolerate. But we have to know what we think before we can say it convincingly. We can't just bury it and hide our heads under a blanket of hope. Our husbands have a right to know what we expect from them. It's up to them to decide whether or not they want to live up to our expectations. Not letting them know how we feel is dishonest. It's just another way of pretending we accept the situation when we don't. It's a cop-out. If we want the alcoholic to face reality, we must face it first, and not be afraid to share our feelings. I don't think that's the same as nagging as long as we don't repeat ourselves, and I don't think it's the same as taking his inventory. What do you think?"

The next member spoke up, "It's bad enough to sidestep saying what we mean, but it's even worse to say what we don't mean. My long-standing habit of 'blowing my top' when my husband was drinking lasted long after he was sober in AA. I reacted to anything that annoyed me with the first angry words that came to my mind. I'd forget that he was just getting back some of his long-lost self-esteem, and

would say something bitter that would undermine it. I guess I wanted to hurt him because of all he'd put me through in the past. But I'm getting over that. I began to realize that the hurtful things I was saying really hit home—he actually believed them and I didn't mean them at all! I'm doing better as time goes on, but I have to keep reminding myself, 'Don't say it unless you mean it,' and that has kept me from saying a lot of things I'd later wish I hadn't."

What emerged out of that meeting was finally summed up by the chairman.

"We can say what we mean only if we have the courage to be honest, with ourselves and with others. We must know why we are saying it. If it's to impress, to belittle, to convey our self-pity and resentment, it ought not be said. That would only widen the rift and we want to close that gap! And we can mean what we say only if we stop the rash statements before they hit the air.

"Now let's all go home and try to do a better job of saying what we really mean, and not saying what we don't mean."

What Do Your Actions Communicate?

Telling the alcoholic what we expect and how we feel may have gotten us nowhere. He may just ignore us as if we hadn't said anything. More talking would just be nagging. So sometimes, we think some kind of action is necessary.

This, too, is a form of communication. It says, "I respect your right to live the way you want to. But I also have that right. I will not let your drinking be the most important thing in my life."

This typical discussion at an Al-Anon meeting suggests approaches to such a difficulty.

"When my husband stops at a bar on his way home from work every night, there's no telling when he will turn up. If I have dinner at a regular hour with the children, he may come just as we're finishing. Then he's highly indignant because we didn't wait. I've tried fixing his plate and keeping it warm, but by ten or eleven it's dried up and he's just as likely to hurl plate and all at me. I know I can't reach him with reasoning, so what do I do?"

One member answered,

"Tell him, on an occasion when he's sober, that you want the children to have their meals at a regular

hour, and that you want yours too, so you'll have dinner at six whether he's home or not."

Another member said,

"Why say anything? Actions speak louder than words. If six o'clock leaves him ample time to get home from work, set your dinner hour for six and eat then, whether he's there or not."

A third member spoke up,

"I disagree. It's true that 'Actions speak louder than words.' But if you don't say anything to him when he's sober, he won't know what to expect. You'll just have a scene the next time he's late, and it's impossible to reason with him when he's been drinking. You might explain to him that you haven't made this decision because you don't want him to eat with the family. That would be punishing him. It's just that you think the children would do better on a regular schedule. That's keeping the family from revolving around his drinking."

A husband spoke up,

"After working hard all day, I would come home and find my wife too drunk to prepare dinner for my children and me. During a period when my wife wasn't drinking, I sat down and talked with her as calmly and reasonably as I could. I told her that she

was the only one who could do anything about her drinking, but that I could take certain steps to see that her drinking would not affect me and our children as far as meals were concerned. I arranged with a neighbor to come in and cook the dinner. This went on for three weeks, then my wife asked for another chance. Although she still gets drunk nearly every night, now she at least waits until after she has cooked dinner. I think this is a case of ‘changing the things we can.’”

These suggestions have certain qualities in common: they are honest and candid, they are courageous and firm, they have no element of blame or criticism and they are courteous.

A very large order, but communication which has these qualities will accomplish several ends: It will confirm our individuality and dignity; the person who hears them cannot mistake their meaning; they carry no residue of regret for unfairness.

Coping with Anger

What alcoholism is doing to us gives rise to resentment. Resentment creates anger, and our anger must be dealt with, for our own health and growth.

Living with an alcoholic can be a frustrating business, producing conflict after conflict. Even after the spouse has begun to absorb and use the principles of Al-Anon and has learned not to make a bad situation worse by arguing, the alcoholic's behavior will often make her seethe with anger.

Both before and after sobriety is established, the alcoholic may say and do things that trouble her. The resentment may take the form of inner, unexpressed anger, or in those of us who are more volatile and high-strung, recurrent senseless rages. If this self-destructive behavior is allowed to continue, no real growth, spiritual or emotional, can be expected.

As we gain a deeper understanding of ourselves in the Al-Anon program, we learn more wholesome ways to relieve our feelings of hostility by analyzing and uncovering their causes. Otherwise they can have two undesirable consequences:

1) We suppress the anger, turning it back into ourselves to fester, which can make us sick, mentally and physically.

2) We “take out” our feelings on others, particularly our children, whose healthy development can be seriously hampered by an unreasonable and hostile parent.

One member illustrated this at an Al-Anon meeting:

“When I first came into Al-Anon, a battered and defeated victim of many a brawl with my husband when he was drinking, I heard one phrase and latched onto it.

“‘Keep your mouth shut, no matter what he says!’

“I thought that was all the magic I needed, so I immediately began to exercise massive self-control when he was drinking. I thought I was the picture of serenity. But it seemed to make him all the more furious; he wanted me to help create a full-fledged fight as usual.

“The worst, though, was what it did to me. It made me so frustrated, so nervous, that I began to take it out on my children. The least thing they did that bothered me, like a bit of spilled milk or childish wrangling, would cause me to fly into an uncontrollable rage until I had exhausted myself and sat trembling with fear at what my terrible temper was doing to my little ones. I realized that I was punishing them for what had been done to me. I knew I would have to find other outlets for these feelings.

“Soon afterward it was my good fortune, or maybe that’s the way things happen in Al-Anon, to hear a

speaker from another group tell a story very much like mine. She told us what she did about her anger instead of repressing it or venting it on innocent victims. Here's her story just as she wrote it out for me afterward to help me solve my problem.

“When my husband was drinking, we used to do an awful lot of fighting. I realize now that I was often the one who started it when he came home drunk. The result was always the same. I'd end up boiling mad and helpless to do anything about it.

“To get rid of my nasty feelings (anger gave me a lot of energy!) I would go out in the backyard and dig. I'd pretend I was digging a grave for my husband; I can't tell you how often I buried him in the backyard! Eventually I had a nice big patch of ground dug up to plant things in. Once the flowers and vegetables began to grow and I didn't dig any more, I got a lot of relief out of pulling weeds and pretending they were his hair. All summer long I used to bring my resentments to Al-Anon meetings—in the form of bright bouquets!

“You might feel like chopping somebody's head off; chopping a bunch of vegetables for making relish gives you just as much satisfaction—and a good bonus besides.

“When you feel like “rubbing someone out” you can use that energy to scrub the floor or polish the furniture. And for a really satisfying outlet, one member of my group recommended making bread. You just take that ball of dough and pound and pummel it, pick it up and thump it down on the board and knead it, stretch it as though you were pulling somebody apart—and the result is a batch of delicious, sweet-smelling homemade bread—a nice dividend to get from working off our rages.’

“Any vigorous exercise is a good outlet for anger. Sports like bowling or golf and tennis are great for releasing hostility. In addition to that, concentrating on winning the game keeps our minds free from tormenting thoughts.

“A friend of mine told me she used to have a very sharp tongue, and had developed a socially unacceptable vocabulary which she too often let loose on her children. Someone suggested to her that she give vent to her verbal explosions in the shower, and she tried it. She found she could say anything she wanted to, which gave her a two-way benefit; she’d come out clean in body and mind!

“Another friend says she unloads her anger by writing down all the things she wants to say. If we can do

that, we can be as violent as we please—nobody else is going to see it anyway.

“The important thing is that anger is a natural reaction to a frustrating situation. We may not be able to control how we feel but we can control what we do about it. Bottling up anger destroys our peace of mind and often takes physical form in headaches, backaches and other discomforts. Anger should be recognized and released as quickly as possible, and without guilt.

“Of course we must remember never to condemn the alcoholic for being sick, but that doesn’t make the things he does any easier to bear. We can pave the way for calm, reasonable communication with him only if we first find healthy outlets for our own negative feelings.”

What Do Your Attitudes Communicate?

So much has been said about communicating in words that we may lose sight of another important element in communication, our attitudes, apart from the words we speak.

If the attitude expresses loving awareness or even a reasonable tolerance of the person we’re talking

to, what we say may fall on receptive ears. If it's an angry accusation or criticism, the situation can't help getting worse. A simple example might be an irritated spouse with a comment to deliver may hurl it at her husband as she would throw a stone at a dog. Her attitude instantly inflames him and a full-fledged row is started.

If she does, in fact, feel for him the contempt she is expressing by her manner of communicating, it may well be a symptom of her own sickness and her need of healing guidance such as Al-Anon provides.

The words we speak may be ever so gentle, but if the "body language" is belligerent it belies the words we are saying. If we assess our behavior honestly, we will see the value of ruling out whatever self-justification may come to mind.

We may suppress things that need to be brought out into the open, because we doubt our own ability to handle them calmly and reasonably; we're afraid the subject is controversial and will set off a quarrel. We learn in time that it is not subjects which are controversial, but the manner in which we communicate about them and the elements of personal blame we add to them in anger.

One night at an Al-Anon meeting a member offered

a problem-question and the members, one after another, were to comment and suggest how the difficulty might have been dealt with.

“When my husband comes home drunk, and in what is surely a blackout, he flies into a rage over almost anything. I don’t deny that I’m often the one who gets him started. I’m working on that and I think I’ve made some progress in avoiding talking at the wrong time and in the wrong way. But last night I had a slip. I made a remark that lit his fuse and in the next five minutes he’d just about wrecked the kitchen and smashed a big hole in the wall.

“This morning at breakfast I didn’t say a word and neither did he. He was in the grip of a massive hang-over and obviously sick. I felt so sorry for him; my first impulse was to comfort him by trying to make light of the whole thing. I knew I shouldn’t do that but I didn’t want to hurt him, either. What should I have done, and what do I do now?”

Answers from the group:

No. 1: “If he brings it up, just answer what he asks in a perfectly matter-of-fact way, as though it were understood that he’d done this when he was not himself. If your attitude indicates no blaming, this will be

much more effective than going into detail and you'd be less likely to put him on the defensive.”

No. 2: “If he doesn't say anything, wait a couple of days and then say, very calmly, ‘I think I'll call the plasterer today and get that hole fixed. O.K.? Or do you think we can do it ourselves?’”

No. 3: “I don't agree. I'd leave the hole to remind him of what he did until it bothers him so much he'll have to fix it.”

This brought a storm of protest; three hands went up.

“Don't forget the alcoholic is sick!” “We're not supposed to punish; the alcoholic does enough of that for himself!” “That would only make everything worse.”

The chairman restored order and went on to the next member who suggested that she say, “‘When you get into those uncontrollable rages, I'm always afraid you might hurt one of the children.’ He ought to be told what serious consequences his drinking could have.”

A man spoke up, “No threats of impending danger ever kept an alcoholic from drinking!”

A long-timer in Al-Anon who had been quietly listening to the discussion, asked to speak. She said,

“It seems to me, the important thing is that we

mustn't take the consequences of the alcoholic's drinking. To me, this adds up to simply—he made the hole in the wall, so he should fix it if he's handy, or pay to have it fixed if he can't or won't fix it himself.

“A similar thing happened to me, only my husband fell on a kitchen chair and broke it. The next day, I said, ‘Last night you fell on this and broke it. Will you please have it fixed?’ No criticism, no big deal—just plain facts—you did it, you fix it. Because I was calm and didn't berate him, he didn't need to defend himself. He felt bad about what he had done, and was only too happy to have a chance to make up for it.”

And finally there came a suggestion that, in any case of violence, the police should be called.

Most of these are reasonable suggestions, but she herself would have to make her decision, based on her relationship with her husband. The common denominator, basic to Al-Anon thinking, is that *there should be no blaming of the alcoholic*, in word or attitude.

Five Guides to Communication

A member once remarked that she had worked out a little set of rules for herself about communicating

with her husband, long actively alcoholic, finally solidly sober. She was invited to speak about her self-instructing rules, and this was what she said.

“Discuss, Don’t Attack. When my husband was still drinking, this rule saved lots of fights which could only make things worse. But when he was sober, and real personality problems came into focus, I certainly needed this rule. The sober alcoholic is overly sensitive to criticism; and when newly sober, his self-esteem is still fragile. He’s so braced for rejection that he imagines it even when it isn’t intended. Anything I might say that seems critical of him as a person would make him react emotionally and defensively. If I have a grievance, I just tell him how I feel about it. If it’s a minor irritation and it still bothers me I sometimes say: ‘I know this is petty, but it gets to me somehow, so I thought you’d want me to tell you about it.’

“Keep the Voice Low and Pleasant. I had lots of experience the other way until I realized that, when feelings run high, voices get high—and then there’s trouble. If something I said got a loud-voiced reaction from him, I just left the room. That made him more angry, of course, and for a while he’d follow me and yell: ‘Don’t you dare walk out on me when I’m talking to you!’ But I finally convinced him, in a low

voice, thank goodness, that our shouting days were over, and you'd be surprised at the difference in our home atmosphere!

“Stick to the Subject. When I started to tell him something, it seems I was always using the opportunity to list ten other things I'd been meaning to bring up. At last I sat myself down and said: ‘One thing at a time is sufficient. If I confuse the issue, we'll end up fighting about his cousin Joe and my aunt Charlotte.’

“Listen to His Complaints. When it's my turn to be on the receiving end of a complaint, I keep myself receptive to what he's saying, reminding myself that I want to be cool-headed, open-minded, and reasonable. Maybe he's telling me something I need to know that will make me a better person.

“Don't Make Demands. I just state the case without telling him how I think it should be resolved. If he wants to do something about it, he's free to work out a solution of his own. If he doesn't, telling him what to do would be arguing about a solution instead of discussing the problem. By leaving the choice up to him, the door is open for a mutual coming to terms with the problem. Believe me, it was hard work to overcome my thinking that ‘my way is the only right way.’”

A Key Word in Communication

This is the story of an Al-Anon member who made an interesting discovery concerning one little word and what it did for her.

“After my husband became sober in AA, I spent the usual spell on the pink cloud we hear so much about. Although I’d had four years in Al-Anon, my attitude might be summed up this way: ‘I’ve won this battle!’

“I had read all the literature. I rarely missed a meeting. Then why did it take so long, I wonder, for me to see the light? I have finally realized that I never even accepted Step One! I never released my tight grasp on the idea that my sole purpose was to win the battle with my husband and get him sober.

“Nobody could advise the newcomer better than I could. ‘Let go!’ I would tell her. ‘It isn’t your problem. He’s sick. You have to get over your own flaws of character and learn to let go.’

“I assumed, as so many wives do, that being married to a man put me in charge of him. I felt that he belonged to me and I would somehow make him conform to my way of thinking and living.

“I know now that he might have found help much

sooner if I had only followed the advice I handed out so freely to others.

“So there I was, with a sober husband, triumphant on my pink cloud.

“Little by little, I discovered that I had not conquered him. I didn’t change my ways. I tried to tell him how many AA meetings to go to; I directed him in a thousand little ways in our daily lives. I resented his resistance, which grew stronger as he devoted himself to the AA program. And the more he resisted, the harder I fought.

“Our marriage, as such, had long since foundered on the rock of his alcoholism. I was naturally hoping that we’d get back to a normal way of living now that he was sober. But we didn’t. And I couldn’t understand why, because I had no real grasp of Al-Anon.

“I blamed his coldness on his interest in women in his group; I grew more and more jealous and suspicious. I monitored his telephone calls, went through his pockets, followed him. Finally I became more frantic and emotionally disturbed than I was when he was drinking. Our rows became pitched battles, and after every one I felt greater despair over the situation.

“They talk about hitting bottom. I hit mine. I real-

ized that getting him sober in AA was only the beginning; that something had to be done about me, and I had to do it. In my utter desperation, I turned to Al-Anon like a drowning person going down for the third time. Something opened my mind to insights I had never accepted before:

“First, that my husband was an individual, a distinctly separate person, a child of God—and not my property.

“Second, that my domineering was destroying our relationship, if it had not already been destroyed beyond saving.

“Third, that I would approach my problem very simply and leave the result in God’s hands, where it had always belonged.

“I did it with a single word: courtesy.

“People with usually good dispositions have no difficulty being courteous to strangers and friends. It is when our strong emotions are involved that we swing to the limits of the pendulum—extremes of demonstrating affection or disapproval. We are so deeply involved that we treat those closest to us as though they were part of us; when they do things that do not please us, we fight them instead of fighting our own shortcomings.

“Keeping in mind the one word ‘courtesy’ helped to remind me that my husband is other things besides a husband. He is a man, a person, an individual; he is a man who does a job, earns a living. He is a helping hand to troubled people in AA. He is a person whose life experience is totally different from mine; he has a mind, a soul, a set of emotions—unique in every way. He is a person to be respected, to be considerate of, to treat always with courtesy.

“From my observation of many marriages, even quite happy ones, there is very little real courtesy, that deference which we owe to every human being, and particularly to those we love. There may be intimacy, togetherness, but what you rarely find is this particular, un-smothering attitude of courtesy.

“It seems like such a little thing, but it worked for me in changing my whole viewpoint about my husband and our marriage. The thought came to me at the time of my greatest need, when a friend lent me a book, *The Prophet*, by Kahlil Gibran, in which he speaks of marriage in this way:

‘Let there be spaces in your togetherness. Love one another, but make not a bond of love. Give one another of your bread, but eat not from the same loaf.’

“I have learned that courtesy generates courtesy. It

makes you more pleased with yourself. It makes others, particularly those near to you, reconsider their own attitudes.

“It has worked for me. It may work for you if you have the goodwill and patience to try it.”