

Communication is tougher than you think!

Honesty is to communication what multiplication is to calculus. If you can't be honest, you can't communicate. Honesty is the minimum, not the maximum; there is more to communication than just honesty.
-Jenna Medaris

"Communication is rule #1 of a polyamorous relationship."

It's something you'll hear in the poly community so often it's become a mantra. And rightly so; communication is arguably the single best indicator of the health of any romantic relationship, monogamous or polyamorous. A relationship that lacks good communication is built on a foundation that's fundamentally flawed, and a relationship whose members lack good communication skills is a relationship that has problems from the very beginning.

Few people really talks about *how* to build good communication, though, and that's unfortunate, because good communication is trickier than it sounds. (I've already written an essay about the ways communication can go wrong in my journal; this is more of a practical guide.)

Rephrase of Communication
There's more to communication than opening your mouth and saying what's on your mind. Effective communication starts with *understanding* what's on your mind, particularly if you're trying to solve a problem. It's not just enough to say "I feel uncomfortable about this" or "I'm feeling upset about that" or "I don't want you to do this;" real communication requires understanding what's at the root of those feelings and desires.

Analyze first
Now, hold on, smart guy! If I'm feeling something, I should be able to say so, without all this analysis crap!

Of course. But once you've said what's on your mind, what comes next?

There are people who believe it ends there. "I've said what I have to say; now it's up to my partner to behave accordingly." This isn't communication; in fact, this closes the door on communication, because it gives your partner no way to continue, short of doing whatever it is you want him to do.

Communication is about increasing understanding. If you simply say "This is how I feel" and leave it at that, the conversation is done, and you're not really increasing understanding, because your partner still has no idea *why*. In fact—

Hang on. I've said what I'm feeling and what I want my partner to do; who cares why?

You should, for one. Let's start with the most obvious first: if your partner does not understand why you feel the way you do, your partner may just end up violating the spirit of the rules without breaking the letter, because he does not understand what the rules are supposed to do. *MIS UNDERSTANDING*

But let's step back a little from that. It goes beyond simply experiencing an emotion you don't like and then letting your partner know about it so that he can stop doing whatever it is that's leading to your emotion. If you do not understand why you feel what you feel, you may not be able to get a handle on what might change those feelings. It might seem obvious at first glance; "I get jealous when my partner takes someone else to my favorite restaurant, so if my partner stops taking people there, I won't be jealous anymore." But feelings are really sneaky, complicated things, and the actions that trigger a feeling may not actually be as directly tied to the feeling as you think. What might just happen is you might just find that you still feel jealous even if your partner promises never to take anyone to that restaurant again, and all that's happened is those feelings are now triggered by something else.

Analysis becomes growth
If you don't understand your feelings, then it's pretty damn tough to say with certainty what you or anyone else can do to address them. In fact, as I was about to say, often the roots of feelings and emotional reactions aren't obvious at all, and if you don't understand the problem, it's really difficult to come up with a solution with any real chance of success.

You're telling me that I don't even know what I'm feeling?

The unexamined life is not worth living - Socrates
No, I'm saying that if you don't make an active effort to understand your feelings, you won't know *why* you're feeling what you're feeling. And if you don't know why you're feeling what you're feeling, it gets pretty hard to have a dialogue with your partner about it, and it gets even harder to come up with a plan of action based on it.

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Not all feelings are true. You may feel something so strongly that you know for a fact that what you're feeling is absolutely right and perfectly justified, know it more surely than you know your own name—and still be wrong. Only by looking at your feelings can you understand the heart of where they come from, and only by understanding them can you really be sure they are appropriate and justified. *Feels right or nec. wrong.*

Remember what we're talking about here—dialog. You talk to your partner, your partner talks to you, you each come away with a deeper understanding of one another, and that deeper understanding is what helps you solve problems, right?

And solving problems is a lot easier if your partner understands what's going on in your head, which is a lot easier if you understand what's going on in your head. In fact, it very well might be that if you and your partner both have a clear idea about why you're feeling what you're feeling, you might find a better solution than the most obvious one! Saying "I'm feeling jealous so I want you to stop doing X" is a decree, not an honest attempt at communication; it closes the door to further discussion. *Saying "I'm feeling jealous, and I think this is why, and this is what I've observed to trigger those feelings" opens the door not only to further discussion, but to finding some kind of solution that might not have occurred to you.*

Communication is already difficult enough even if you understand perfectly whatever it is you're trying to talk about; if you don't understand what you're talking about, forget it.

What do you mean, communication is difficult enough? If I'm talking to my partner, and—

If you're talking to your partner *honestly*.

Okay, fine. If I'm talking to my partner honestly, and—

Funny you should mention honesty. That's another one of those little things that's trickier than it sounds. Honesty, like understanding, begins at home, with yourself. In order to be honest with another person, you must first be honest with yourself, and part of that means recognizing and acknowledging the reality of who you are and the reality of your situation.

This is true across the board, but it's most especially true in very difficult situations such as mono/poly relationships. For example, if one person has it somewhere in the back of her mind that she's monogamous, she wants a monogamous relationship, and if she can just make things complicated enough on her partner, her partner will give up this poly stuff, but she hasn't really quite admitted to herself that that's what she's doing, then any effort at communication is already undermined. She may believe she's talking openly and honestly with her partner, but because she hasn't really admitted to herself what's going on, she's not really being honest with him.

And before you say I'm picking on the monogamous person unfairly, if a polyamorous person is seeking multiple relationships because he has a deeply seated but quite subtle fear of commitment or vulnerability, and so he's driven to avoid uncomfortable intimacy by starting new relationships over and over, then he's not going to be able to communicate honestly with any of his partners about what he wants or what his relationship goals are, because he hasn't admitted that to himself yet.

And while we're at it, a quick word on honesty and lies:

are defined
A lie is any conscious, deliberate attempt to deceive or mislead. Many people will find all kinds of ways to justify lying, especially indirect lying: "Oh, I haven't told him about thus-and-such because he hasn't asked," or "Oh, I haven't told her anything that is not factually untrue, so I haven't lied."

A good liar tells lies that are mostly true; a masterful liar can lie without ever uttering a single falsehood.

Consider these examples. If I tell someone "I will be at your house at two o'clock," and at one forty-five I'm struck by a bus, I have not lied; I did not show up at two o'clock, but it was not my intent to mislead that person. If, on the other hand, I am having an affair and cheating on my partner while at my office, and my partner asks me "Did you cheat on me today?" and I respond "I was at my office all day," I have lied; I have given an answer calculated to mislead my partner into drawing the wrong conclusion.

Okay, then...I've looked inside myself, I understand what I'm feeling and I understand the reality of my situation, and I'm not going to lie, directly or indirectly. Now I'm home free, right?

Not only are you not home and dry, you're not even home and vigorously toweling off yet. It gets more complicated.

Huh? I understand myself; I understand what I need to say, I just have to say it!

And your partner needs to understand it, which is more than just a matter of speaking the same language. Remember, your partner has no way to crawl behind your eyes and see the world the way you do; *your emotional reality is just an abstraction to your partner, and everything he knows about it comes only from what you tell him.*

Indeed, two people can have radically different emotional realities, and bridging that gap is not easy.

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So. Let's assume you're honest, you know yourself, and you're sincere about this whole communication thing. There's still plenty of things to go wrong; here's a few things you should keep in mind:

- Don't assume that your partner would feel the same way you do if he were in your shoes. "Well, just think about how I feel!" isn't terribly helpful; your partner may *be* thinking about how you feel, but if he doesn't feel the same way himself and wouldn't react the same way in your position, what he's thinking is likely to be off base. *Tell* him how you feel—and tell him why.
- Don't take somebody else's word for what your partner is doing or thinking, and don't rely on someone else to tell your partner what you're doing or thinking. Talking through a proxy never works. Seriously. Everyone has a slightly different worldview and a slightly different interpretation of events; what you're hearing when you're talking through a proxy is your partner's ideas filtered and interpreted through someone with a different take on reality, and there's really no way around that.
- Don't slam the door. Door-slamming behavior can be literal or figurative; it's anything that closes off dialog, as in walking out of the room and slamming the door, or simply cutting off your partner. It doesn't come just from issuing decrees; it comes any time you don't want to hear what your partner has to say or don't give your partner the opportunity to respond to what you have to say. And along the same lines:
- Don't make a habit of issuing ultimatums. An ultimatum leaves no room for negotiation; like a decree, it cuts off further dialog. Ultimatums, if they are necessary at all, are an absolute last resort, best reserved for a situation that, if it does not change, will definitely end the relationship. An ultimatum is appropriate only in the most extreme and dire of circumstances: "get help with your drinking problem or I will not be able to stay."
- Don't get caught up in your own assumptions or your own interpretations. This one is particularly devious, because we all tend to assume that what we think and what we see is the "right" way to think and the "right" way to see a situation. But your interpretation of something may differ dramatically from your partner's; it's helpful to get into the habit of mentally asking yourself "What if I'm wrong?" whenever you think you've got something all figured out.

A. Send

So even if you understand yourself, you understand what you have to say, and you understand why you feel the way you feel, you still have to be careful.

Wow. Okay, so now I've got it licked...

Not quite. There's still the "blue fish tuba" effect.

The who what? That makes no sense!

Precisely.

Each of those words individually has a simple meaning, but put together in that order, they make no sense. Often, that's what it seems like to someone who does not share your conceptual worldview.

Communication on the one hand is quite robust, but on the other hand is very fragile; it's robust in the sense that language is quite resilient, but it's fragile in the sense that when you are talking to someone whose philosophical worldview is vastly different from yours, then when you try to explain a difficult concept, your words end up sounding like "blue fish tuba." It's the concept that's difficult; if the concept itself is foreign to your listener, then the words stop making sense.

For example, take a person whose idea of relationships is "commitment means exclusivity." If you tell such a person "It is possible to be committed to more than one person at a time," your words sound like "blue fish tuba," because the *concept* of commitment inherently implies exclusivity to that person—saying "commitment to two people" is about like saying "the tuba was so huge it was tiny."

Explaining a foreign concept to someone is particularly frustrating; often, you need to invest a great deal of work in isolating and identifying the places where your conceptual frameworks don't overlap, and then carefully building a bridge between those different conceptual frameworks.

In the example of a person to whom "commitment" means "exclusivity," this means trying to find a way to express the concept that it is possible to be committed to more than one thing at the same time; until you can communicate this concept, everything you say about commitment will sound like "blue fish tuba."

Wow. This does get tricky. But once I'm over that hurdle, I'm home free...right? Right?

B. Reverse

(while being sent for)

Um...no. It still gets complicated...because there's the second half of communication, which I haven't even mentioned yet, and that is *listening*.

Listening is active, not passive. If you're planning out the next thing you're going to say, you're not listening. If you're looking out the window, you're not listening. If you're so wrapped up in trying to make your point that you've forgotten your partner is also trying to make a point, you're not listening.

And listening is confounded by the fact that people rarely remember the exact words told to them; they remember only the concepts. Which means if you misunderstand the concept, you're totally screwed.

One of the most common problems with communication from the listener's point of view is the problem of interpretation; if you think you've understood your partner, you may find that you assume your interpretation is the only correct one, and if you're wrong, you may find yourself resistant to what your partner was actually *trying* to say.

① Analyze
② Send
③ Receive
④ Interpret

But I am listening to my partner—it's just that my partner isn't listening to me!

And from your partner's perspective, it's the exact same situation, only with the pronouns reversed.

It's easy to feel like you're not being heard when you're not hearing your partner; you end up in a competition to speak your piece and forget about the fact that communication is about mutual understanding. If you don't understand your partner, you can't communicate with your partner; and here's where things can get all kinds of cattywumpus if you aren't paying attention: *you need to understand where your partner is coming from even if you personally happen to believe your partner is irrational, mistaken, or flat-out wrong.*

You can't ignore what your partner is saying just because you believe your partner is being irrational or bullheaded; for starters, the emotional reality for your partner is different than it is for you, and furthermore, it just might be possible that your partner is trying to express something that doesn't fit within your conceptual framework, and you are the one suffering from the "blue fish tuba" effect.

If you want to understand your partner, there are a few things you need to keep in mind:

- Don't assume that you already know what your partner is going to say. *Listen* to what your partner is saying instead.
- Don't assume that you can disregard what your partner is saying, thinking, or feeling simply because you don't happen to believe that those thoughts or feelings are justified, or because they aren't what you would think or feel in your partner's shoes.
- Don't jump the gun; don't assume that you know where your partner is going with an idea and cut him off before he gets there. He just might surprise you.
- It's inevitable that you will project your own feelings and your own attitudes on what someone else says to you; we do tend to interpret the world in light of our own experiences and our own attitudes. Be aware of that. Try, as far as is possible, to listen to what your partner says from outside your own preconceptions. This means, among other things, not making assumptions about the reason your partner is saying something and not reading more into your partner's words than is warranted; if your partner says, "Would you like to go out to dinner tonight?" don't read into that question a statement ("I don't like cooking for you anymore").
- One of the greatest enemies to communication is an exaggerated sense of insult or injury. If you feel wronged by your partner, it's quite likely you're not going to be particularly inclined to hear what he has to say, and it's also likely you will interpret everything he *does* say in the worst possible light. Do not assume that every perceived slight is intentional; do not assume that someone has acted out of spite or malice if there is another possible explanation; do not assume that your own grievance is always justified; do not assume that your feelings are the only ones that are relevant.

I don't have an exaggerated sense of insult—my partner hurt me!

When you feel your partner has hurt you, it can feel just, right, and reasonable to want to lash out at your partner. After all, your partner deserves it, right? He hurt you, right?

Whenever you feel this way, though, it becomes very, very important to keep two things in mind:

1. Just because I feel bad doesn't mean somebody else did something wrong.
2. Just because I feel good doesn't mean I'm doing the right thing.

When you feel attacked, slighted, or hurt, you can very easily slip into believing that you are justified in attacking your partner. That makes your partner feel attacked, and she will then feel justified in attacking you back. You may feel hurt, but that does not make it OK to attack your partner...and if you do, you will probably shut down all hope at productive communication, and with it all hope of solving the problem.

Just because I feel bad doesn't mean somebody else did something wrong. Just because I feel good doesn't mean I'm doing the right thing. Remember those two things, *before* you escalate an argument.

Okay, I understand active listening, and I can stay reasonable even if I think my partner is being unreasonable... but it doesn't help if my partner won't talk to me.

True.

Not talking
There are many reasons why your partner might not want to talk to you. A partner who doesn't want to talk to you creates

serious problems; the best measure of the health of a romantic relationship, as I've said before, is the quality of the communication in it.

Some of the reasons a partner might not want to talk to you are reasons you can't control. But many of them are. The single best thing you can do to help your partner open up to you is to make it clear that it is *safe* for him to open up to you.

Communication is a learned skill. Many people are afraid of talking openly and honestly with their partners because they are embarrassed by the things they feel or the things they want, or they are afraid of the way their partners will respond, or they are afraid to make themselves vulnerable to their partners, or they are afraid of being laughed at or rejected by their partners.

You can do a lot to reassure your partner that this will not happen—that you will not mock, reject, laugh at, or think poorly of your partner no matter what he says. *Even if the things he says are things you don't want to hear.*

But when you tell your partner that it is safe to talk openly and honestly with you, **make sure you mean it.** The worst thing you can possibly do is tell your partner "It's okay, you can tell me anything" and then punish your partner or react badly to your partner when he does talk to you!

Geez. Um—anything else?

Glad you asked!

Once you've got all that stuff down, you're almost there. There are a few more points to consider, though, which I'll put in another of those handy lists:

- When your relationship involves more than two people, it is essential that all the people involved be a part of your communication, especially in any situation that impacts everyone involved. Even if you divide your relationships into "primary" and "secondary" relationships, a secondary partner still has a right to be included.
- Don't call the other person names. Seriously. This should be obvious, but it bears repeating anyway. "You're a selfish prick" is not a good communication tactic; "I feel neglected because you're paying more attention to your job than to me" is better; "I'm feeling neglected, but here are some things which might help to make me valued" is better still.
- Communication works best when it's an ongoing process. It's not something you do when things get out of hand; it's something you do all the time. Don't wait for small problems to become big problems before you talk about them! Keep checking in with your partner all the time; make it a *habit*.
- Be proactive. If something arises that you need to talk about, *talk about it.* Often, it might seem tempting to just let it slide, or to wait for "just the right time" to bring it up...don't. Communication works when it is proactive; even though it can sometimes seem uncomfortable or even frightening to bring up something that bothers you or that is affecting you in your relationship, you need to do it anyway. Anyone can have good communication skills when communication is easy; it's how you communicate when it's difficult that counts.
- Interrupting your partner is rude. It also stops dialog. Remember that the things you feel are important, but they are *write down ideas* not matters of fact. Feeling neglected does not necessarily mean you are being neglected! Distinguish between matters of emotional response and matters of fact; your emotional responses are important, and your goal when you feel something is wrong should be to find a way to address that feeling, but don't assume that everything you feel is necessarily true. It's possible to feel threatened when you're not actually being threatened; it's possible to feel neglected when you're not actually being neglected—you get the picture. That goes back to the first point; understand your feelings.

⊙ If you keep having discussions about the same thing over and over again, then you're clearly not addressing the problem. When you solve a problem, let it go; don't keep dragging it up.

- Communication is a learned skill. Like all learned skills, it becomes easier and more natural with practice. When you're dealing with the problem of communicating a concept or philosophical idea that's foreign to your partner, patience is the name of the game; you may have to explain the same concept sixteen different ways to make it understood.
- Ask for feedback. Invite a response to what you say.
- An argument occurs because a problem exists in a relationship. Your partner is not your adversary; you both have the same goal, which is to solve the problem. Fixing blame isn't helpful to that goal. However, having said that:
- Take responsibility for your decisions (and the consequences, even the unintended consequences) of those decisions. Acknowledge what you've done; if you've done something wrong, say so!
- If you're thinking of ways to argue with something your partner said, you're not listening. For Pete's sake, pay attention.
- Don't exaggerate, embellish, or make blanket statements that are over the top: "You never consider my feelings at all!" "Never? Not even once?" "Well, you sometimes don't..." A better approach: "I feel like my feelings aren't getting the consideration they're warranted; here's something you can do to make me believe you're respecting my feelings."

No extremes

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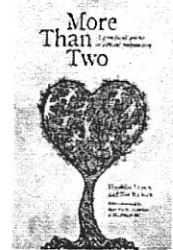
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