

Below are twelve compassionate communication steps to support intimacy, cooperation and trust. They are equally valuable with personal, professional and casual conversations. Practice and share in every opportunity that arises. Remember every person, and conversation, is unique. Trust your intuition and use the right strategies, at the right time, with the right people.

Intuition is inside all of us, behind all the noise of everyday consciousness, there is a calm, observant self capable of making wise decisions.

Of the twelve steps the following are to be completed before a conversation;

- 1 Relax
- 2 Stay present
- 3 Cultivate inner silence
- 4 Increase positivity
- 5 Reflect on your deepest values
- 6 Access a pleasant memory

The next six are to be completed during a conversation;

- 7 Observe non-verbal cues
- 8 Express appreciation
- 9 Speak warmly
- 10 Speak slowly
- 11 Speak briefly
- 12 Listen deeply

Initially practice each of the steps below in full. With repetition you will be able to achieve each step in the time shown in brackets.

Step 1 : Relax

(approx. 1 minute)

First notice which parts of your body are tense. Assign a number on a scale of one to ten (with ten being extremely tense) to signify your state of relaxation or stress. Write down the number on a sheet of paper.

For the next thirty seconds, breathe in slowly to the count of five, and exhale slowly to the count of five. Repeat this three times. Now yawn a few times, even if you have to fake it, and notice if your level of relaxation has increased. Assign it a number between one and ten and write it down.

Now slowly stretch your body in any way that feels comfortable and pleasurable. See if you can immerse yourself completely in the sensation of each stretch. Begin with the muscles of your face, scrunching them up and then stretching them out. Next move down to your shoulders and neck, gently move your head from side to side and from front to back. Scrunch your shoulders to your ears and let them drop, pushing them down toward the floor.

Next tighten all of the muscles in your arms and legs. Hold them tightly as you count to ten, then relax them as you shake your hands and feet. Take a few more deep breaths and rest. Once more assign a number to your state of relaxation and write it down, noticing how much you've improved.

Step 2 : Stay present

(approx. 30 seconds)

Begin by concentrating on your right hand, then ask yourself the question "How can I really know, at this very moment, that my hand exists?". The more you think about this question, whilst focusing on your hand, the more sensations you'll begin to feel.

If you don't feel any difference after a minute or two, close your hand very slowly into a fist, and hold it tight for thirty seconds. Then spend the next thirty seconds slowly opening it back up. Pay attention to every sensation in each finger and your palm.

You'll notice that in this deep state of concentration your mind has become silent, and although you may not realise it, your blood pressure will have dropped.

Step 3 : Cultivate inner silence

(approx. 30 seconds)

You'll need a bell that when rung will resonate for at least fifteen to thirty seconds (<http://www.mindfulnessdc.org/bell/>). Ring the bell and as the tone fades, you'll notice that you have to give more attention to your listening. Then, when the sound disappears, continue to listen deeply to the silence, which, as you will discover, is filled with a variety of subtle sounds. You might become aware of the sound of your breathing, which is an excellent sound to focus on.

Ring the bell again and listen. Listen even more closely than you did before. Continue several more times as you train yourself to recognise the special state of awareness it puts you in. This is the state of attentiveness that you can use when listening to another person speak.

Step 4 : Increase positivity

(approx. 1 minute)

Take a mental inventory of your mood. Are you feeling happy or depressed, tired or alert, anxious or calm? The three previous steps should help remove or reduce any unhelpful feelings and thoughts. If they do still remain repeat the exercises above, or consider postponing the conversation.

Even if you feel calm and relaxed, ask yourself "Do I feel optimistic about the conversation and the person?". If the answer is "No" eg if you harbour any significant degree of doubt, anxiety, frustration or even an inkling of anger, then again postpone the conversation if possible.

If you can't postpone, at least spend a few moments focusing on a more positive idea. Remember any negative state can generate mutual defensiveness and distrust. Use your imagination to visualise and rehearse a conversation that is filled with positivity, kindness and optimism. If you consciously visualise a future success, it will enhance your motivation to achieve it.

Step 5 : Reflect on your deepest values

(approx. 30 seconds)

It's important to know your own as well as those of the person you are about to engage with. The three types of values to consider are innermost values, relationship values and communication values. Together these three will create the best possible scenario when it comes to dealing with problems and achieving desired goals.

Step 6 : Access a pleasant memory

(approx. 30 seconds)

It's best to enter a conversation with an inviting expression that conveys kindness, compassion and interest. In this expression the muscles around your eyes relax and your smile is gentle. This cannot be faked! It can however be elicited by tapping into a pleasant memory, particularly one which involves people you deeply love and respect, and fills you with pleasure and joy.

Step 7 : Observe non-verbal cues

Whilst maintaining the softness in your eyes, you can observe another person's non-verbal cues without being invasive. They will also enjoy making eye contact with you which builds social connections. Observing facial cues is a skill in itself, please see www.paulekman.com for further details.

Step 8 : Express appreciation

The first words spoken set the tone for the entire conversation, and a single compliment may be all that's needed to enhance cooperation and trust. Bring as many expressions of appreciation into the conversation as possible. Everyone is a powerful form of affirmation and can reduce the negative mood of the recipient. Also make sure to end with a compliment that conveys a deep sense of appreciation for the other person and for the dialogue you've just had.

It must be genuine though. Ask yourself the question "What do I really value about this person?". Write everything down and then choose which one you respect the most. Keep it in mind as you talk, and listen for an opportunity to share it. If it doesn't occur, consider sending the person a note after the conversation.

Step 9 : Speak warmly

Speaking warmly conveys compassion and sensitivity. This can be done by reducing your speaking rate and the pitch of your voice.

Step 10 : Speak slowly

Slow speech rates increase a listener's ability to comprehend what is being said. It also deepens respect and has a calming effect on someone who is feeling anxious.

Step 11 : Speak briefly

Whenever possible limit your speaking to 30 seconds or less. If it is something essential forewarn the listener. Then break down what is to be said into one or two sentence segments. Say one segment then pause and take a small breath to relax. Wait for the listener to acknowledge their understanding before moving to the next segment.

Step 12 : Listen deeply

To listen deeply and fully train your mind to stay focused on the person who is speaking: their word, tone, gestures, facial cues ... everything. When the other person pauses, respond specifically to what they've just said.