

Respectful Interactions

Today's culture is filled with headlines of people behaving badly. One episode of the evening news is all we need to see the deterioration of civility in our world. Celebrities, politicians, athletes and more, are held up as role models; yet their behaviors demonstrate something altogether contrary. Why is civility in the world so hard to come by?



What is Civility?

Merriam Webster defines civility as "polite, reasonable, and responsible behavior." Polite, reasonable and responsible behavior is the result of believing that everyone is deserving of dignity and respect. Some have described it as The Golden Rule, others call it simply "good manners."

Respectful, civil communications and behavior are important in all relationships. Civility enhances a sense of

peace, predictability and value. It is the bedrock of solid and safe relationships. Unfortunately, our communication is negatively influenced by what we read, hear and see on social media, the news, in our workplaces and in our communities. It also suffers when we feel overly comfortable or familiar with others in our social circles. So we tend to be less attentive to common courtesy at home with our families, and in the workplace with colleagues and peers.

The good news is that each of us can make a difference in improving communications around us. Bitter, spiteful and nasty communication has a negative influence in social circles. So too are we positively influenced by the kind, affirming and respectful communication of just one person.

Try This

Here is a little exercise to see how much influence you have on the way other people interact. The next time you find yourself in the midst of a highly charged conversation, or someone is argumentative or insisting on the correctness of their opinion, take a deep breath, try to stand or sit back and relax. Smile, put your hands to your side, nod, listen. Really listen. Ask questions. Use an even, calm tone. Speak slowly. If they

interrupt, let them. How long does it take for them to begin calming down? At what point does the other person begin to listen and engage in a dialog? Do they reduce their volume? Does the pace of their speech slow down?

Cultivating Respectful Interactions

Habits of respect and courtesy must be cultivated and nurtured. They don't happen automatically. It is easy to slip into sloppy interactions. A little attention to polite communication can make a world of difference. Here are some thoughts for maintaining respectful interactions, whether at home, at work, or in our communities:

Read social media posts with a critical eye. Limit the amount of highly charged, sarcastic, bombastic and generally offensive content you consume. It will seep into your own communication style before you know it!

Electronic communication can be a wonderful thing, but it also *inspires a level of boldness* that doesn't exist when



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"I get a choice every time I have to open my mouth: that it can be with civility and dignity and grace - or not." ~ Dana Perino



communicating face to face. Think, “Is what I am posting something I would say to this person’s face?”

If you want to talk with someone about a potentially uncomfortable topic, take the time to *meet them face-to-face or at least over the phone*. Electronic communication shields our ability to observe the other person’s non-verbal cues. Without the immediate feedback, we don’t have the ability to clarify, soften, rephrase or correct misunderstanding.

Recognize that when you are tired, hungry, frustrated, hurting or hurried, you are more likely to overlook the importance of respectful communication. No matter how frustrated or angry we are, terse, impatient and sarcastic language can do real damage to relationships, and trust may not be restored easily.

Don’t confuse *“direct” with “brutal”*. This may seem obvious, but it can be difficult to deliver a difficult message without coming across as harsh or hostile. If there is something difficult that must be said, start by letting the other



person know that what you need to say is difficult. Then *deliver your message with “I statements”*. “I am having trouble understanding why you are telling other people that I don’t carry my weight around here. It is really hurting my feelings. I’d like for you to stop it.”

There are two sides to communication – yours and theirs. Respectful communication requires that *you are as willing to listen as to speak*. Make sure that you model active listening the way you want the other person to listen to you.

Active listening means that you provide feedback to the other person that you are understanding what they are saying. “It sounds like you’re pretty upset with me.” Give the other person time to explain themselves thoroughly without interrupting, and then summarize what you have heard, without becoming defensive or angry. This is one area that requires a great deal of practice. Active listening is very difficult when it feels like we are being criticized or attacked.

Avoid expletives. Expletives have become increasingly commonplace, again likely because of the caustic communication we hear in various public arenas. Your



words will have greater impact, especially when you want to communicate intense feeling, if you are not prone to peppering your communication with profanity and swearing.

Be liberal with heart-felt apology. *Say “I’m sorry”* when you’ve hurt or disappointed someone, said something inappropriate, interrupted someone, or lost your patience. One of the best ways to express respect for others is to own your behavior and how it impacts those it has affected.

Ask yourself, *“Do my interactions with others reflect well who I am on the inside?”* Periodically check in with others about how you are doing with communication.

We can’t change how other people behave and speak, but we can still influence them. It may be a small thing, but powerful, in the quest for respectful interactions and restored civility.

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- Learn ways to live well with an illness and slow its progression
- Support a loved one dealing with their health concern



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