

CHAPTER 6

Interpersonal Communication



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When you have read and thought about this chapter, you will be able to

1. define interpersonal communication.
2. define interpersonal relationships.
3. explain the importance of interpersonal relationships.
4. describe how self-disclosure affects relationships.
5. describe friendships and how they have changed.
6. explain the importance of cross-cultural relationships.
7. explain a motive for initiating, maintaining, and terminating relationships.
8. name three essential interpersonal communication behaviors.
9. describe how bargaining and behavioral flexibility can be used to improve interpersonal communication skills.

Interpersonal relationships can be immensely rewarding, but they take effort to build and maintain. This chapter highlights some of the foundational elements of interpersonal relationships and interpersonal communication. You will learn why people start, maintain, and end relationships. You will also study essential skills such as self-disclosing, using affectionate and supportive communication, influencing others, and developing a unique relationship.

The Nature of Communication in Interpersonal Relationships

Today our definitions of interpersonal relationships are more complex and variable, in part due to social networking and online dating apps. Even the COVID-19 pandemic altered our capacity for relationships in new ways. For example, we became more adept at virtual interactions to maintain relationship with family and friends, such as by co-viewing television shows or having a weekly game-night on Zoom. Additionally, many people balanced virtual work meetings at home and made decisions about sharing their living spaces by having their camera on or off. People may count dozens, or even hundreds, of others as their “friends.” One advantage of these new relationships is the ease with which they can be begun or ended. The disadvantage is that they may be short lived, lack depth and connection, or be unfulfilling. Scholars are fascinated by these new developments in relationships. They see them as raising some important issues about the definitions of interpersonal relationships and interpersonal communication. For what reasons do people form their online relationships? How do people interact when a friendship is exclusively online rather than in face-to-face settings? How do online support groups help people develop relationships to help each other manage grief and loss? These questions are part of the fabric of our society today.

In this section you will discover what interpersonal communication is, what constitutes interpersonal relationships, the importance of interpersonal relationships, what “dark side” challenges we face in interpersonal relationships, and how we develop relationships using self-disclosure.

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DEFINING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Interpersonal communication is defined by the context, or the situation. In other words, interpersonal communication is the process of using messages to generate meaning between at least two people in a situation that allows mutual opportunities for both speaking and listening. Defined in this manner, interpersonal communication includes our interactions with strangers, with salespeople, and with waitstaff, as well as with our close friends, our lovers, and our family members. This definition is very broad.

We can also think of interpersonal communication as communication that occurs within interpersonal relationships.⁵ This idea suggests that interpersonal communication can be limited to those situations in which we have knowledge of the personal characteristics, qualities, or behaviors of the other person. Researchers Gerald R. Miller and Mark Steinberg assert that, when we make guesses about the outcomes of conversations based on sociological or cultural information, we are communicating in a noninterpersonal way. When we make predictions based on more discriminating information about the other specific person, we are communicating interpersonally. When we communicate with others on the basis of general social interaction rules, such as engaging in turn taking, making pleasantries, and discussing nonpersonal matters, we are engaging in impersonal, or nonpersonal, communication. For

instance, when you engage in small talk with the barista at your favorite coffee shop, this can be viewed as a form of impersonal communication. When we communicate with others based on some knowledge of their uniqueness as individuals and a shared relational history, we are communicating interpersonally.

None of our interpersonal relationships are quite like any of our other interpersonal relationships. A friendship you might have had in high school is not the same as your new friendships in college. Your relationship with one of your parents or parental figures is uniquely different from your relationship with the other. Likewise, if you have multiple siblings, your relationship with each of them will be different. Even if you have several intimate relationships with people, you will find that none of them is quite like the others. Nonetheless, we have accumulated a great deal of knowledge about how to communicate more successfully in our interpersonal relationships. This chapter will explore that knowledge by first defining what interpersonal relationships are and why we form them. Then you will learn about the skills needed to develop and maintain relationships.

DEFINING INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

On the simplest level, relationships are associations or connections. Interpersonal relationships, however, are far more complex. **Interpersonal relationships** may be defined as associations between at least two people who are interdependent, who use some consistent patterns of interaction, and who have interacted for an extended period of time. Consider the various elements of this definition in more detail:

- *Interpersonal relationships include two or more people.* Often, interpersonal relationships consist of just two people—for example, a dating couple, a single parent and a child, a married couple, two close friends, or two coworkers. Interpersonal relationships can also include more than two people—for example, a family unit, a group of friends, or a social group.
- *Interpersonal relationships involve people who are interdependent.* *Interdependence* refers to people's being mutually dependent on each other and having an impact on each other. When individuals are independent of each other, we typically do not define the resulting association as an interpersonal relationship. Friendship easily illustrates this concept. Your best friend, for example, may be dependent on you for acceptance and guidance, whereas you might require support and admiration. If you did not care about your best friend's well-being or needs, then you would not offer guidance and, therefore, you would not truly have an interpersonal relationship.
- *Individuals in interpersonal relationships use some consistent patterns of interaction.* These patterns may include behaviors generally understood across a variety of situations, as well as behaviors unique to the relationship. For example, your partner may always greet you with a kiss. This kiss is generally understood as a sign of warmth and affection. At the same time, you may have unique nicknames for your partner that are not understood outside the relationship.

- *Individuals in interpersonal relationships generally have interacted for some time.* When you nod and smile at someone as you leave the classroom, or when you place an order at a fast-food restaurant, you do not have an interpersonal relationship. Although you use interpersonal communication to accomplish these activities, one-time interactions do not constitute interpersonal relationships. That said, these interactions could be the beginnings of an interpersonal relationship, should the other elements we've discussed occur. We should note, however, that interpersonal relationships might last for varying lengths of time—some are relatively short but others continue for a lifetime.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

According to psychologist William Schutz, we have three basic interpersonal needs that are satisfied through interaction with others:

- the need for inclusion, or becoming involved with others;
- the need for affection, or holding fond or tender feelings toward another person; and
- the need for control, or having the ability to influence others, our environment, and ourselves.⁶

Although we may be able to fulfill some of our physical, safety, and security needs through interactions with relative strangers, we can fulfill the needs for inclusion, affection, and control only through our interpersonal relationships.

The interdependent nature of interpersonal relationships suggests that people mutually satisfy their needs in this type of association. Interdependence suggests that one person is dependent on another to have some need fulfilled and that the other person (or persons) is dependent on the first to have the same or other needs fulfilled. For example, a child who is dependent on a parent may satisfy that parent's needs for inclusion and belonging. The parent, in turn, may supply the child's need for affection by spending time with, hugging, or listening to the child.

Complementary relationships—those in which each person supplies something the other person or persons lack—provide good examples of the manner in which we have our needs fulfilled in interpersonal relationships. An example is a friendship between an introverted individual and an extroverted one. The introvert may teach the extroverted friend to be more self-reflective or to listen to others more carefully, whereas the extrovert might encourage the introverted friend to be more outspoken or assertive.

Our needs may also be fulfilled in **symmetrical relationships**—those in which the participants mirror each other or are highly similar. A relationship between two intelligent individuals may reflect their need for intellectual stimulation. Additionally, two coworkers who individually know that they meet goals more easily when they are held accountable may decide to form a running group to hold each other accountable to meeting their exercise goals.

Conflict is inevitable and normal in interpersonal relationships; in fact, conflict can be

Conflict is inevitable and normal in interpersonal relationships; in fact, conflict can be constructive and creative. Conflict can be healthy when it is used to resolve differences and to “clear the air.” However, it can also be dysfunctional. You might have grown up in a family in which sequences of conflict were ever present, and the only way you know how to have a conversation is by yelling to get your point across. Or you might have had parents who never discussed differences, and the only way you know to manage conflict is to walk away or not talk about what bothers you.

Conflict is dysfunctional when you avoid talking about problems or become withdrawn. Conflict is also dysfunctional when you take any criticism or suggestion as a personal attack. Do you fight fairly, or do you attack the other person rather than raising the issue that is at stake? If you feel out of control when you are engaged in an argument with a family member, you may experience conflict as dysfunctional. Finally, conflict can be dysfunctional when you store up many complaints about a person and then attack that person with all of them.

If you have experienced conflict as dysfunctional, you can begin to experience it more positively when you follow some straightforward guidelines. First, you need to remain calm. You should also express your feelings in words rather than in actions such as breaking objects, driving recklessly, or consuming too much alcohol. Try to be specific about what is bothering you. Rather than bringing up multiple grievances of the past, try to deal with only one issue at a time. Consider your language and avoid words such as *never* and *always* when describing the problem. Do not exaggerate or invent additional problems that are not central to the discussion. Finally, you may find that it is important to establish some ground rules that both you and your partner adopt.



- Interpersonal relationships fulfill basic needs.

Fuse/Getty Images

sizing things up

Interpersonal Motives

We enter into interpersonal relationships for a variety of reasons. Below you will read several statements that describe possible reasons for joining interpersonal relationships. Indicate how likely you are to enter into an interpersonal relationship for each reason using the following scale:

- 1 = Never
- 2 = Unlikely
- 3 = Likely
- 4 = Frequently

I enter into interpersonal relationships . . .

1. so that I can have influence over others.
2. so that I can share emotions with others.
3. to feel part of a group.
4. to be involved in things with other people.
5. to gain affection from others.
6. to bring control to my life.
7. so that I can have more influence over my surroundings.
8. because I need to know that people like me.
9. because I want to be included in different activities.

A guide for interpreting your responses appears at the end of this chapter.

THE DARK SIDE OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Conflict is only one aspect of interpersonal relationships that seems to represent a “dark side” to these most personal affiliations. Although your interpersonal relationships are generally pleasurable and positive, you might also have experienced painful and negative interactions. Communication scholars Brian Spitzberg and William Cupach have provided the most comprehensive treatment of the dark side of relationships.⁷ What are some of the qualities of negative relationships? Obsession that includes intense feelings and jealousy can create negative outcomes. Similarly, misunderstanding, gossip, conflict, and codependency can lead to harmful results. Relational abuse, which includes sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, as well as economic distress, is truly harmful to individuals and destroys relationships. In addition, some of the qualities we associate with healthy relationships—self-disclosure, affectionate communication, mutual influence, and the development of a unique relationship—can all

become extreme and therefore unhealthy. Effective communication, as you have been learning, is challenging, and interpersonal communication may be the most challenging context of all. This chapter focuses primarily on positive interpersonal relationships and how to improve them.

SELF-DISCLOSURE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

One change that occurs as relationships become deeper and closer is an increasing intentional revealing of personal information. **Self-disclosure** is the process of making intentional revelations about yourself that others would be unlikely to know and that generally constitute private, sensitive, or confidential information. Researchers W. Babnett Pearce and Stewart M. Sharp distinguish among self-disclosure, confession, and revelation.⁸ They define self-disclosure as voluntary, confession as forced or coerced information, and revelation as unintentional or inadvertent communication.

Psychologist Sidney M. Jourard suggests that self-disclosure makes us “transparent” to others, that disclosure helps others to see us as a distinctive human being.⁹

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Sandra Petronio’s communication privacy management (CPM) theory provides a useful framework for helping people think about the rules they create regarding when they will and will not share private information and how they manage privacy boundaries once they have shared private information.¹⁰ Have you ever told someone something in confidence and then said, “Now don’t tell anyone else about that”? According to CPM, this is an example of how people intentionally make rules surrounding who has access to their private information. Privacy rules are created to control the permeability of the boundary.¹¹

The Importance of Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure is important for three reasons. First, it allows us to develop a greater understanding of ourselves. Consider the Johari window depicted in  **Figure 6.1**. Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham created this diagram to depict four kinds of information about a person. The open area (I) includes information that is known to you and to other people, such as your approximate height and weight, and information you freely disclose, such as your hometown, major, or age. The blind area (II) consists of information known to others but unknown to you, such as your personality characteristics that others perceive but you do not recognize or acknowledge. For example, others may think you are stubborn, whereas you think you are fairly flexible. The hidden area (III) includes information that you know about yourself but others do not. Any information that is hidden and that you do not self-disclose lies here. Finally, the unknown area (IV) comprises information that is unknown to you *and* to others. For instance, perhaps neither you nor others know that you have an untapped talent for woodcarving.

Known
to self

Not known
to self

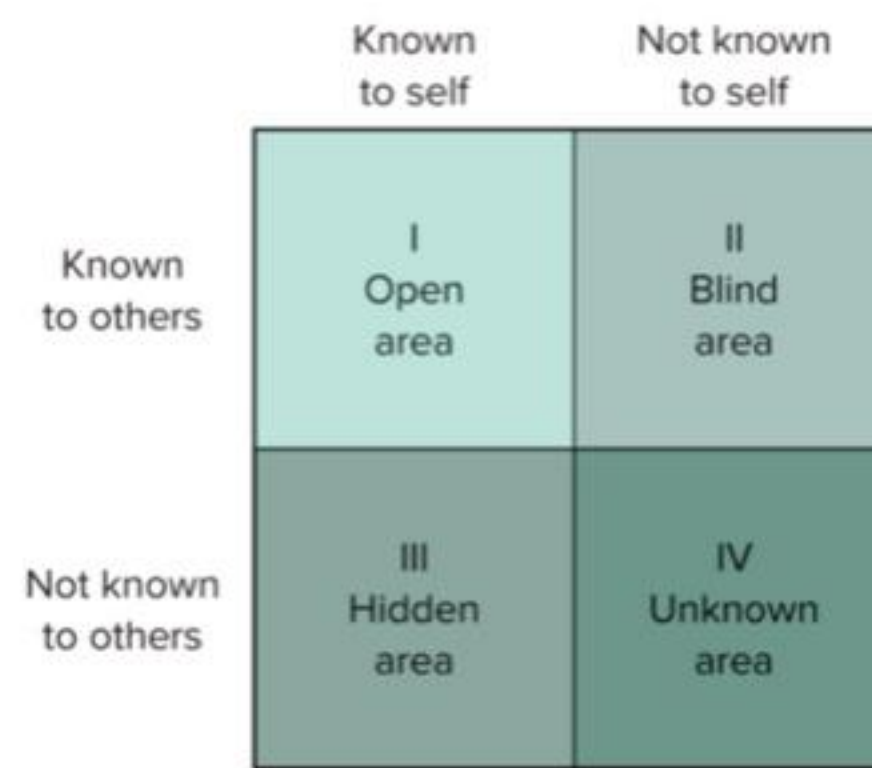


Figure 6.1 Johari window.

Source: Luft, J. (1984). *Group processes: An introduction to group dynamics*. Mayfield Publishing Company. Copyright 1984, 1970, and 1969 by Joseph Luft. McGraw Hill.



The quadrants of the Johari window can expand or contract in size. The quadrants can also have different shapes with different family members, friends, or acquaintances. For example, you might have a very large open area when you are considering the relationship between you and your closest friend. By contrast, the hidden area may be very large when you consider the relationship between you and your employer. As the size of one of the quadrants changes, so do the sizes of all the others.

Second, self-disclosure allows us to develop a more positive attitude about ourselves and others, as well as more meaningful relationships. Most of us have experienced a problem or faced a difficult situation, and we know that sharing our fears or telling others about our anguish provides comfort. For example, imagine that you vandalized property in high school and were caught. You might feel very guilty for having done the wrong thing, for having to pay a large fine, and for damaging someone else's property. If you can find the courage to talk about your feelings to a friend, you might find that you are not alone, that almost everyone gets into trouble at one time or another. Similarly, if you have recently experienced the loss of a family member, you may find that talking about your feelings and sharing your grief will lead to positive growth for you. Hastings found that self-disclosure is a powerful form of communication in grieving and in healing a fractured identity.¹² In addition, self-disclosing on social media provides a possible place for grieving, support, and coping after the loss of a loved one.¹³

Third, self-disclosure is one way relationships grow in depth and meaning. Partners in romantic relationships, for example, can use self-disclosure to intensify a relationship.¹⁴ When you self-disclose more to others, they will most likely disclose more to you. Without the opportunity for self-disclosure and active listening, relationships can be based on superficiality, which can lead to relational termination.

At the same time, self-disclosure can be used inappropriately. Have you ever sat on an airplane next to a stranger who revealed highly personal information to you? Have you ever dated

someone who insisted on sharing private information too early in the relationship? In the next section we will consider some of the findings about self-disclosure that may provide guidelines for your self-disclosing behavior.

The Factors Affecting Appropriate Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure typically unfolds over the lifespan of a relationship. There are many factors that influence the ways in which self-disclosure typically happens as a relationship develops. The following are six principles that guide appropriate self-disclosure.

Disclosure generally increases as relational intimacy increases. We do not provide our life story to people we have just met. Instead, in the developing relationship, we gradually reveal an increasing amount of information. We might begin with positive information that is not highly intimate and then begin to share more personal information as we learn to trust the other person. In this way our disclosure tends to be incremental, to increase over time.

Disclosure tends to be reciprocal. When people offer us information about themselves, we tend to return the behavior in kind. In fact, when people reciprocate self-disclosure, we tend to view them positively; when they do not, we tend to view them as incompetent. Reciprocal disclosure generally does not occur in families. Although parents have an expectation of self-disclosure from their children and adolescents, they do not perceive a need to reciprocate. A variety of factors affect adolescents' disclosures to their parents. Adolescents do not generally feel the need to disclose to their parents, and they are even more reluctant to disclose if their behavior is not sanctioned by their parents.¹⁵ Grandparents may become the target of self-disclosures, since they are sometimes seen as more empathic and positive.¹⁶

Negative disclosure is directly related to the intimacy of the relationship; however, positive disclosure does not necessarily increase as the relationship becomes more intimate. What does this mean? As we become closer to another person, we are more likely to reveal negative information about ourselves. Positive information, by contrast, flows through conversations from the earliest developmental stages throughout the lifetime of the relationship. Hence, negative information increases over time, but positive disclosure does not necessarily increase.

Disclosure may be avoided for a variety of reasons. Self-disclosure does not flow freely on all topics. You may avoid self-disclosure for reasons of self-protection, relationship protection, partner unresponsiveness, and social appropriateness.¹⁷ At the same time, topics that are taboo or difficult to talk about under some conditions may be appropriate later, when conditions change.¹⁸ For example, parents typically engage in more communication about sex and sexual health as their children age into late adolescence and early adulthood.¹⁹

Disclosure varies across cultures. Self-disclosure is not uniformly valued or disvalued around the world. For example, one research study found that American college students disclosed significantly more than Japanese college students regardless of whether the relationship was a same-or cross-sex friendship or an intimate relationship.²⁰ In online settings, Americans tend to use verbal disclosure more than East Asians, and Koreans tend to share more photos to

to use verbal disclosure more than East Asians, and Koreans tend to share more photos to disclose aspects of themselves than Americans.²¹ Cultural norms can influence the ways in which we self-disclose in our relationships.

Relational satisfaction and disclosure are curvilinearly related. Satisfaction is lowest with no disclosure and with excessive disclosure; it is highest when self-disclosure is provided at moderate levels. Consider your own personal relationships. Does this conclusion appear to be accurate?

building behaviors

Guidelines for Self-Disclosure

Try the following strategies for appropriate self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships:

1. Gradually increase disclosure as your relationship develops.
2. Reveal information to others as they reveal information to you.
3. Do not disclose negative information until your relationship is established.
4. Do not disclose information that will cause you personal harm.
5. Be sensitive to cultural differences in your self-disclosure.
6. Be aware of nondominant cultural differences in self-disclosure.
7. Be willing to self-disclose in interpersonal relationships.

Consider how, if at all, these guidelines change or remain the same when self-disclosing in online or other digitally mediated contexts.

Friendship

Friendship contributes to our well-being. People who have harmonious sibling relationships and same-gender friends report the highest levels of well-being.²² Whereas we celebrate romantic relationships, we do not similarly honor friendships. Bill Rawlins, a communication scholar who studies friendship, notes that we ought to have a “friendship day” because our friendships are at least as important as our romantic relationships.²³

THE VALUE OF FRIENDSHIPS

What does friendship mean? Friendships can be based on shared activities or on the level of

information we exchange with others. Young adolescents report that their friendships are based on shared activities, whereas for emerging adults they are based on self-disclosure.²⁴ The communication of private information appears to gain in importance as people mature. Most people identify both family and nonfamily members as friends.

Friendships also change over time. As people age, family members become more salient as friends.²⁵ For many older men, their only friend is their spouse,²⁶ although the same is not true for older women. In fact, research suggests that maintaining small, emotionally meaningful relationships helps with well-being as we age.²⁷ Do friendships actually improve over time? Although we cannot be sure, we do know that people *perceive* that they do.²⁸ Perhaps people come to better understand the importance of friendship as they mature.

The quality of friendships is affected by psychological predispositions, such as attachment styles. People who are securely attached to others have lower levels of conflict with their friends and are able to rise above problems in their friendships. People who are avoidant, or not attached, experience higher levels of conflict and lower levels of companionship.²⁹

Rawlins provides a six-stage model of how friendships develop.³⁰ The first stage, role-limited interaction, includes an encounter in which individuals are polite and careful with their disclosures. Second, friendly relations occur when the two people determine that they have mutual interests or other common ground. Third, moving toward friendship allows them to introduce a personal topic or to set up times to get together. Fourth, in nascent friendship they think of themselves as friends and begin to establish their own private ways of interacting. Fifth, the friends feel established in each other's lives, in what is termed a stabilized friendship. Finally, friendships may move to a waning stage, when the relationship diminishes. Not all friendships reach this sixth stage.

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Friendships are not necessarily defined the same way in all cultures. People in collectivist cultures tend to have more intimate but fewer friendships. As people have more contact with other cultures, however, these patterns are showing signs of change. For example, Indonesian people, traditionally from a collectivist culture, now display extensive social contacts.³⁴

Over the last several decades, relational development has been enhanced through technology. Researchers highlight both the benefits and challenges of forming, maintaining, and ending relationships using mediated communication. In this way, the influence of technology on our friendships is undeniable.

FRIENDSHIPS AND NEW TECHNOLOGY

Social networking sites, such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Twitch, Snapchat, Discord, Bumble BFF, and LinkedIn, make new kinds of friendships possible by allowing people to communicate with each other online.

TikTok launched in 2016 and became the most downloaded app in the world in 2022, with more than 1 billion active users. According to Emily Dreyfuss, a researcher at Harvard's

Shorenstein Center for Media, Politics and Public Policy, TikTok creates and reinforces culture.³⁵

Facebook claims that more than 1.97 billion people log in daily.³⁶ Although we might believe Facebook is distinctly American, 90% of daily users are from outside the United States, and the largest population of users is from India with over 320 million users. Finally, the average Facebook user has 338 Facebook friends.³⁷

Twitter (now X) was created in March 2006 and boasted 192 million active users in 2022.³⁸ “Tweets,” or posts, are limited to 280 characters, and the amount of retweets and likes a post has increases its influence. The use of Twitter (X) multiplies when prominent events occur. For example, a tweet from actor Chadwick Boseman’s account announcing his death and commemorating his life is one of the most popular on the platform to date, with more than 7.7 million likes and more than 2 million retweets.³⁹ In another instance, former president Barack Obama’s 2017 tweet in response to violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, reached 1.7 million retweets, the highest of that year.⁴⁰

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More recently, the app Sit with Us was created by high school student and antibullying activist Natalie Hampton to create a safe space for other high school students to make friends and find classmates with similar interests to sit with at lunch. Students create a profile and sign a pledge that says they’ll participate in “open lunches,” which are an invitation for other kids to join their lunch table. In this way, the app is creating connections, facilitating friendships, and potentially reducing loneliness and bullying.⁴¹

Why do people choose to have online friends? Although extraversion and openness to new experiences have some predictive power in identifying people who are likely to use social networking, no clear personality factors distinguish social networkers from others.⁴² Perhaps people are motivated to form online friendships because they have a sense of safety and security—they do not need to meet the other person in a face-to-face setting. Others might perceive that online friendships are more exciting than day-to-day relationships. Finally, some people might be attracted to social networking sites because they can create a more idealized self—someone who is more attractive and has a different personality than they actually have.



- Social networking apps provide opportunities for new kinds of interpersonal relationships.

StratfordProductions/Shutterstock

CROSS-CULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

Because our culture is increasingly diverse, the likelihood that you will be part of a cross-cultural friendship, or even a romantic relationship, is far greater now than ever before. In many respects, cross-cultural relationships work like any other type of relationship: we enter into them for many of the same reasons, the processes of self-disclosure work the same, and we even initiate and maintain them using many of the same skills.

One difference is that we may feel more tentative in initiating a dialogue with a person from another culture. Perhaps we are afraid of language barriers or of accidentally saying something wrong. In other situations, such as when two people are assigned to a residence hall room as roommates, the relationship may be forced upon them. In either case, one approach to establishing a relationship is to view it as a cooperative learning opportunity in which both participants work together to achieve a mutually shared understanding while learning about each other's culture.⁴⁶ In approaching the relationship in this way, try to do the following:

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- *Have meaningful personal interaction.* If you feel uncomfortable in the initial stages of interaction, you may be tempted to stick to very safe topics of conversation. Try to talk about some more personal and meaningful topics as well. For instance, what are the similarities and differences between your families? What religions do you practice? What are your hometowns like? What work experiences have you had? By talking about more personal topics like these, you will begin to learn about each other and start the self-disclosure cycle.
- *Maintain equal status.* Research shows that, when one person assumes a role of "leader" or "teacher," the relationship will have more trouble developing. Both members of the relationship should recognize that each has something unique to offer in terms of knowledge, creativity, openness, listening, and so on. Remembering to keep the new relationship focused on interpersonal closeness rather than task concerns can help prevent a perception of inequality in the early stages of the relationship.
- *Find ways to build interdependence.* Any relationship will be stronger if both individuals bring something to it. If each can find ways to help the other, interdependence will form, and the bond of the relationship will grow stronger.
- *Respect individual differences.* People from different cultures are like anyone else. Some are shy, whereas others are outgoing. Some are very cerebral, and others are very practical. Some like romantic comedies, whereas others like action shows. Such differences and even disagreements over them do not mean you cannot make a cross-cultural relationship work; it may simply mean that you don't like certain personality characteristics. Just as with friends from your own culture, you occasionally have to overlook minor disagreements in light of the many areas of agreement.

Motivations for Initiating, Maintaining, and Terminating Relationships

Most relationships go through definable stages of development, maintenance, and deterioration.

MOTIVATIONS FOR INITIATING RELATIONSHIPS

How do you determine which people you will select to be your friends or intimate partners? Why do you cultivate relationships with them? How does communication figure into the equation?

First, **proximity**—the location, distance, or range between persons and things—is obvious but important. Although online relationships are commonplace, you are unlikely to have very close relationships with people from places you have never been. You are most likely to find others where you spend most of your time. For this reason a roommate or coworker can easily become a friend. People who attend the same religious services, belong to the same social clubs, or live in the same neighborhood are most likely to become friends. People who share a major, a dormitory, a cafeteria, or a car pool are also likely candidates. To underline the power of proximity, consider that changes in location (high school to college and college to job) often change relationship patterns.

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Second, from all the people we see, we select the ones we find high in **attractiveness**, which includes physical attractiveness, how desirable a person is to work with, and how much “social value” the person has for others.⁵⁸ Attractiveness is not universal, however; it varies from culture to culture and person to person. Because of perceptual differences, you will not be looking for the same person as everyone else.

Responsiveness describes the reason we tend to select our friends and loved ones from people who demonstrate positive interest in us. Few people are more attractive than those who actively listen to us, think our jokes are funny, find our vulnerabilities endearing, and see our faults as amusing. In short, we practically never select our friends from among those who dislike us.

Similarity, the idea that our friends and loved ones are usually people who like or dislike the same things we do is another feature of attractiveness. Whatever we consider most important is the similarity we seek, so some friends or people in loving relationships are bound by their interests, others by their ideology, and still others by their mutual likes and dislikes. Thousands of people find their friends in the same circle where they work: administrative staff with administrative staff, managers with managers, and bosses with bosses. Similarity is a powerful source of attraction.

Complementarity is the idea that we sometimes bond with people whose strengths are our weaknesses. Whereas you may be slightly shy, your friend may be assertive. In situations that call for assertiveness, your friend may play that role for you. A math-loving engineer may find

friendship with a people-loving communication major who takes care of the engineer's social life while the engineer helps their friend with math courses. Complementarity seems to occur in fiscal matters, too. Those who spend more than they should tend to marry those who spend less than is ideal. However, these marriages tend to result in a great deal of conflict over fiscal matters, and the couples report diminished marital happiness.⁵⁹



- We select friends from among people who are responsive to us.

Don Hammond/Design Pics

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MOTIVATIONS FOR MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS

After you have gotten to know someone, why do you continue to maintain the relationship? You may begin to relate to dozens of people, but you do not continue friendships or romantic relationships with everyone with whom you start a relationship. Have you found it easier or harder to build and maintain relationships since the COVID-19 pandemic? Let us consider some of the motivators that encourage continuing a relationship.

Although we initially develop a relationship on the basis of such factors as attractiveness and personal charisma, we maintain relationships for different reasons. Maintained relationships invite certain levels of predictability, or certainty.⁶⁰ Indeed, we attempt to create strategies that will provide us with additional personal information about our relational partners.⁶¹ We also are less concerned with partners' expressive traits (such as being extroverted and spontaneous) and more concerned with their ability to focus on us through empathic, caring, and concerned involvement.⁶² Indeed, as relationships are maintained, partners not only become more empathic, but they also begin to mirror each other's behavior.

communicating creatively

Using Art to Cope with and Share Difficult Experiences

Often there is excitement when developing new interpersonal relationships and gratitude that comes with maintaining them. It's relatively easy to be there for the fun times, but what about the tough times? It can be difficult to know what to do or how to help someone who is going through something difficult.

do or say when someone we care about experiences something difficult, especially if you have not had a similar experience. These experiences can range from short-term setbacks, such as a poor grade, to life-altering events, such as the death of a loved one.

Art is one way to help people express grief and trauma and can create ways for people to have conversations about difficult issues. In particular, when people have experienced trauma, researchers have found that art and storytelling can be ways of understanding, coping, healing, and community building. For example, the Scraps of the Heart Project (SOTHP) engages in this important work surrounding the specific experience of baby loss. Founded by Dr. Erin K. Willer, a communication studies associate professor at the University of Denver, the SOTHP is a collective of parents, students, artists, health care providers, and researchers working together to empower families and educate others about baby loss through stories and creative arts. The SOTHP has been able to offer workshops, including scrapbooking, assemblage art, and jewelry making, to grieving parents and their families. Dr. Willer also employs service learning in her classes through which students have worked with the SOTHP to create a children's book, *Help Me Remember: A Storybook for Children and Families Coping with the Death of a Baby*, and a line of grieving cards to support families experiencing baby loss. In 2017, parent and student art works were featured in an exhibit at the University of Denver's Museum of Anthropology. In this way, the SOTHP is giving voice to those experiencing baby loss and creating space for dialogue about this traumatic experience through art.



The Scraps of the Heart Project, Creative HeARTs Workshop. Participants decorated pumpkins during a fall workshop to honor their babies lost to miscarriage, stillbirth, and neonatal death.

Erin K. Willer

Gender and Cultural Differences

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People of different ethnicities may express different needs in their interpersonal relationships. For example, one study reported that people from Western countries tend to value fairness in their relationships and communicate in ways to maintain a sense of equity. In the same study, researchers found that Japanese people reported using fewer maintenance strategies than Chinese people.⁶⁴

Satisfying Relationships

Couples can achieve satisfying and long-term relationships. Maintaining positive, satisfying relationships is not easy, but the people who are the most satisfied with their relationships are probably those who have worked hardest at maintaining them. Married partners are most satisfied when they feel highly committed to and interdependent with each other.⁶⁵

Researchers found that people in long-term and satisfying relationships are more likely to use joint rather than individual identity pronouns (“we” and “us” rather than “I” or “me”).⁶⁶

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MOTIVATIONS FOR TERMINATING RELATIONSHIPS

Although our goal may be to maintain satisfying relationships, this outcome is not always possible. Relationships do not last. About 44% of all marriages end in divorce,⁶⁸ and in second and third marriages the failure rate is even higher.⁶⁹ Why do interpersonal relationships end? What factors encourage people to seek the conclusion, rather than the continuation, of a relationship? We consider a few of those factors here.

Hurtful messages and events are things partners say and do that create emotional pain or upset. Hurtful verbal messages fall into 10 categories of behavior: accusation, evaluation, directive, advise, express desire, inform, question, threat, joke, and lie.⁷⁰ Among the most common are accusations (implying or stating fault or offense), evaluation (describing value, worth, or quality), and inform (disclosing feelings that involve the partner). Hurtful events fall into 14 categories: infidelity, jealousy, conflict, deception, temporary termination, other relational uncertainty, lack of emotional support, hurtful behaviors, betraying trust, not standing up for the other partner, distance/moving away, lack of equity, secret keeping, and “other.”⁷¹ The most common are infidelity, jealousy, conflict, and deception.

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not always end in disruption of the relationship, but they can if they become a pattern or are so intense that one partner cannot forget them. When people feel hurt by an event that damages a relationship or when the hurtful message highlights a character flaw in the receiver, the receiver of the message tends to withdraw from the person who committed the hurtful act.⁷² Vangelisti and Crumley determined that people respond in one of three ways: active verbal responses (for example, attacking the other, defending oneself, or asking for an explanation), acquiescent responses (for example, apologizing or crying), and invulnerable responses (for example, laughing or ignoring the message).⁷³ People who felt extremely hurt were more likely to use acquiescing responses. Those who felt less hurt used invulnerability more than did those who felt extremely hurt.

Deceptive communication—the practice of deliberately making somebody believe things that are untrue—can also lead to relational dissatisfaction and termination. All relational partners probably engage in some level of deception from time to time. The “little white lie,” the nonrevelation of the “whole truth,” and the omission of some details are commonplace. However, deliberate and regular deception can lead to the destruction of trust and the end of the relationship.

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People may tell familiar lies (stories that are manufactured and that they tell again and again) or unfamiliar lies (untruths that are constructed on the spot). They vary the length of their pauses, their eye gaze, and the amount of smiling and laughing in which they engage, depending on whether they are telling familiar or unfamiliar lies. Most observers, however, cannot detect these alterations.⁷⁴ In short, we do not seem to be able to accurately identify deceptive behaviors.

Aggressiveness occurs when people stand up for their rights at the expense of others and care about their own needs but no one else's. Aggressiveness might help you get your way a few times, but ultimately others will avoid you and let their resentment show. In general, when partners express verbal aggression toward each other, it threatens couples' sense of safety and stability in the relationship.⁷⁵ Aggressiveness is not the same as argumentativeness.

Argumentativeness, defined as the quality or state of being argumentative, is synonymous with being contentious or combative. People who are argumentative are not verbally aggressive.⁷⁶ Indeed, argumentative people may value argument as a normal social communicative activity. Argumentation varies across the life span.⁷⁷

Defensiveness occurs when a person feels attacked. Jack Gibb suggests that trust is essential to healthy relationships.⁷⁸ However, trust must be established between individuals and not be based on their roles, positions, or status. In other words, people should come to relationships without all the trappings of the roles they play. Reducing defensiveness is essential to building trust.

Gibb distinguished between behaviors that encourage defensiveness and those that reduce defensiveness. He identified evaluation, control, neutrality, superiority, certainty, and strategy as promoting defensive behaviors in others:

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Gibb then categorized the following behaviors as reducing defensiveness: description, problem orientation, empathy, equality, provisionalism, and spontaneity. These behaviors show the following characteristics:

- People who use *description* report their observations rather than offering evaluative comments.
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Gibb suggests that people replace those behaviors that create defensiveness with those that reduce it. [Table 6.2](#) depicts the paired concepts. For example, rather than telling coworkers they are late for a meeting and you do not appreciate waiting, you might note the time they arrived and inquire empathically about their circumstances. Rather than being indifferent toward others and nonverbally suggesting you are superior, inquire about them and express your multiple similarities.

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building behaviors

Reducing Defensiveness

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do or say when someone we care about experiences something difficult, especially if you have not had a similar experience. These experiences can range from short-term setbacks, such as a poor grade, to life-altering events, such as the death of a loved one.

Art is one way to help people express grief and trauma and can create ways for people to have conversations about difficult issues. In particular, when people have experienced trauma, researchers have found that art and storytelling can be ways of understanding, coping, healing, and community building. For example, the Scraps of the Heart Project (SOTHP) engages in this important work surrounding the specific experience of baby loss. Founded by Dr. Erin K. Willer, a communication studies associate professor at the University of Denver, the SOTHP is a collective of parents, students, artists, health care providers, and researchers working together to empower families and educate others about baby loss through stories and creative arts. The SOTHP has been able to offer workshops, including scrapbooking, assemblage art, and jewelry making, to grieving parents and their families. Dr. Willer also employs service learning in her classes through which students have worked with the SOTHP to create a children's book, *Help Me Remember: A Storybook for Children and Families Coping with the Death of a Baby*, and a line of grieving cards to support families experiencing baby loss. In 2017, parent and student art works were featured in an exhibit at the University of Denver's Museum of Anthropology. In this way, the SOTHP is giving voice to those experiencing baby loss and creating space for dialogue about this traumatic experience through art.



The Scraps of the Heart Project, Creative HeARTs Workshop. Participants decorated pumpkins during a fall workshop to honor their babies lost to miscarriage, stillbirth, and neonatal death.

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Essential Interpersonal Communication Behaviors

In interpersonal interactions, you need to be aware of many aspects of communication such as your perception of yourself and others, your self-concept, the verbal and nonverbal cues you send to and receive from others, and the ways in which you listen to others. In an interpersonal relationship you also show affection and support, influence others, and develop the unique nature of the relationship. In this section we consider three interpersonal communication areas: affectionate communication; influence, which includes compliance-gaining and interpersonal dominance; and the development of the distinctive relationship.

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USING AFFECTIONATE AND SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION

Affection, the holding of fond or tender feelings toward another person, is essential in interpersonal relationships. You express your affectionate feelings for others in a variety of ways, often nonverbally as you touch, hug, kiss, or caress the person. You also use verbal statements of affection, such as “I care about you,” “I really like being with you,” or “I love you.” Affectionate communication has been linked to improved mental health and wellness,⁷⁹ and people who give and receive affection tend to have reduced stress.⁸⁰ In fact, according to communication scholar Dr. Kory Floyd, “Among the most consequential forms of relational communication for health and wellness is the tendency to express and receive affection.”⁸¹

Affectionate communication can be risk-laden, and a number of variables affect its appropriateness, such as your own and the other person’s gender, the kind of relationship you have, and the context of the interaction.⁸² Telling others that you love them may hold significantly different meanings, depending on any of these factors.

Although the expression of affection is generally positive, if the receiver of the message does not reciprocate, the sender may be embarrassed, also known as “losing face.” Researchers have shown that expressions of liking do not always result in positive relational outcomes.⁸³ Interestingly, recent research using Affection Exchange Theory (AET) indicates that people vary in terms of how affectionate they are and that some of this is determined by inherited rather than learned behaviors.⁸⁴

Supportive communication is also important in interpersonal communication. Support includes giving advice, expressing concern, and offering assistance and can vary as a result of the receiver’s age⁸⁵ and the support provider’s goals.⁸⁶ In times of distress, comforting messages, such as suggesting a diversion, offering assistance, and expressing optimism, encourage people to feel less upset. At the same time, the recipients of such messages may also feel demeaned. The distressed person is most likely to feel less upset when the comforting message is offered by a close friend rather than an acquaintance.⁸⁷ Comfort, then, is viewed as more positive in close interpersonal relationships as opposed to more distant ones.

engaging diversity

Close Intercultural Relationships and Creativity

Counselors, mentors, employers, and family members have likely told you about the importance of having intercultural experiences such as studying abroad or learning another language. Recently, Jackson Lu, an organization studies researcher at MIT, found that having a close friendship or romantic relationship with someone from a different culture boosts your creativity. In this study, researchers had participants complete a series of tasks to measure creativity, workplace innovation, and entrepreneurship. The results from this study revealed two interesting findings. First, participants who dated someone from a different culture performed better on problem-solving tasks. Second, non-U.S. participants who stayed in regular contact with U.S. friends after returning to their home country scored higher on innovation and entrepreneurship tasks. Interestingly, the length, not the number, of intercultural friendships a person had predicted the levels of creativity. From these findings the researchers argued that deeply learning about a friend's culture over time has the potential to increase gains in creativity. Lu suggested that intercultural friendships require people to acknowledge differences, and this pushes people to think differently about how to solve problems.

Think about your current relationships. Do any of them involve people from different cultures? If so, how much time have you spent deeply learning about that person's culture? If you do not have any close intercultural friendships, how might you go about learning more about the cultures of the people you already interact with—perhaps people in your classes? Doing so will not only benefit your intercultural awareness but, as Lu's research shows, it can also make you more creative.

Source: Lu, J. G., Hafenbrack, A. C., Eastwick, P. W., Wang, D. J., Maddux, W. W., & Galinsky, A. D. (2017). "Going out" of the box: Close intercultural friendships and romantic relationships spark creativity, workplace innovation, and entrepreneurship. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 102, 1091–1108.

INFLUENCING OTHERS

Influence is the power to affect other people's thinking or actions. It has been studied widely in the context of interpersonal communication. One body of research has focused on compliance-gaining and compliance-resisting. **Compliance-gaining** is a person's attempts to influence a target "to perform some desired behavior that the target otherwise might not perform."⁸⁸ It occurs frequently in interpersonal communication. We ask a friend for advice, we ask a parent for financial assistance, or we encourage a relational partner to feel more committed. Compliance-gaining is even at work in the classroom. When students feel connected to each other, they are more likely to get teachers to comply with their requests, such as extending due

Compliance-resisting occurs when targets of influence messages refuse to comply with requests. People who are more sensitive to others and who are more adaptive are more likely to engage in further attempts to influence.⁹⁰ Indeed, they may address some anticipated obstacles in their original request, and they may adapt later attempts by offering counterarguments. One research study found several strategies to resist compliance attempts that included withdrawal, exit, voice, sabotage, and engaging decision makers.⁹¹

Although we often attempt to assert influence in our interpersonal relationships, it is important to remember that you may disagree with the opinions of your friends, partners, coworkers, and family members. For example, you and your sibling may differ on your views on military spending or police officers wearing body cameras. Debate is a healthy part of dialogue and democracy, yet you should remain civil, listen, and be respectful of others' opinions.

DEVELOPING A UNIQUE RELATIONSHIP

Interpersonal relationships are defined by their uniqueness. Researchers have found that couples who created **personal idioms**—or unique forms of expression and language understood only by them—expressed high relational satisfaction.⁹²

In a similar way, through playful interaction and the creation of **rituals**—formalized patterns of actions or words followed regularly—couples create a shared culture. Rituals may become so routine that we do not realize they are part of the fabric of a relationship. However, if a relational partner does not enact them, uneasiness often follows. For example, can you recall a time when your partner failed to call you, say “I love you,” or enact another regular behavior? Although the importance of the ritual might never have been verbalized, you probably felt hurt or neglected.

Researchers suggest that the following rituals are important characteristics of long-term interpersonal relationships:

- *Couple-time rituals*—for example, exercising together or having dinner together every Saturday night
- *Idiosyncratic/symbolic rituals*—for example, calling each other by a special name or celebrating the anniversary of their first date
- *Daily routines and tasks*—for example, if living together, one partner always preparing the evening meal and the other always cleaning up afterward
- *Intimacy rituals*—for example, giving each other a massage or, when apart, talking on the telephone before going to bed
- *Communication rituals*—for example, saying “I love you” before going to sleep
- *Patterns, habits, and mannerisms*—for example, meeting one partner's need to be complimented when going out for a fancy evening and meeting the other's need to be reassured before family events
- *Spiritual rituals*—for example, attending services together or doing yoga together in the evening⁹³

The Possibilities for Improvement

Can you improve your communication in interpersonal relationships? Most individuals feel it's possible. Are such changes easy? Generally, they are not. You should not expect that an introductory course in communication will solve all your relational problems. Self-help books that promise instant success will probably result only in disillusionment. Courses on assertiveness training, relaxation techniques, and marital satisfaction provide only part of the answer. Improving relationships is a lifelong process that nobody perfects but that many people can pursue for their own benefit.

BARGAINING

Often we engage in bargaining in our interpersonal relationships. **Bargaining** occurs when two or more parties attempt to reach an agreement on what each should give and receive in a transaction between them. Bargains may be explicit and formal, such as the kinds of agreements you reach with others to share tasks, to attend a particular event, or to behave in a specified way. Bargains may also be implicit and informal. For example, it might be an unwritten rule between you and your roommates that you cook dinner in exchange for them washing the dishes. You may not even be aware of some of the unstated agreements you have with others with whom you communicate.

An early study on interpersonal bargaining identified three essential features of a bargaining situation:

1. All parties perceive the possibility of reaching an agreement in which each party would be better off, or no worse off, than if no agreement were reached.
2. All parties perceive more than one such agreement that could be reached.
3. Each party perceives the others as having conflicting preferences or opposed interests.⁹⁴

What are some examples of bargaining situations? You may want to go out with friends when your spouse would prefer a quiet evening at home. One person could use the word *forever* to mean a few days or weeks, whereas another assumes the word refers to a much longer period of time. In each of these instances, the disagreement can be resolved through bargaining.

John W. Thibaut and Harold H. Kelley underlined the importance of bargaining in interpersonal communication:

Whatever the gratifications achieved in dyads, however lofty or fine the motives satisfied may be, the relationship may be viewed as a trading or bargaining one. The basic assumption running throughout our analysis is that every individual voluntarily enters and stays in any relationship only as long as it is adequately satisfactory in terms of rewards and costs.⁹⁵

MAINTAINING BEHAVIORAL FLEXIBILITY

In addition to applying your understanding of communication concepts, skills, and settings, you can enhance your interactions by using **behavioral flexibility**—the ability to alter behavior

to adapt to new situations and to relate in new ways when necessary. Behavioral flexibility allows you to relax when you are with friends or to be your formal self while interviewing for a job. The key to behavioral flexibility may be self-monitoring, always being conscious of the effect of your words on the specific audience in a particular context.

Behavioral flexibility is especially important in interpersonal communication because relationships between people are in constant flux. For example, the family structure has gone through sharp changes in recent years, the United States has an increasingly older population, and changes in the labor force also require new skills and ways of interacting with others. People travel more often and move more frequently. Millions of people live together before getting married or choose not to get married. Many couples are childless by choice and others struggle with infertility.

What kinds of changes can you expect in your own life that will affect your relationships with others? You may change your job 10 or more times and move your place of residence even more frequently. You may marry at least once and have one child or more. You will experience loss of family members through death and the dissolution of relationships. When your life appears to be most stable and calm, unexpected changes will occur.

A flexible person is confident about sharing messages with others, understands the messages others provide, self-discloses when appropriate, and at the same time demonstrates good listening skills. Flexibility lets us show concern for a child who needs assistance, be assertive on the job, yield when another person needs to exercise control, and be independent when called upon to stand alone. A flexible person is not dogmatic or narrow-minded. In short, flexibility means drawing on a large repertoire of communication behaviors as appropriate to the situation.

Changes are not always negative. In fact, many are positive. For instance, when you graduate from college, the changes that occur are generally perceived as positive. When you enter into new relationships, you generally feel better about your life. However, even positive change can be stressful because stress is the body's normal way of responding to change.⁹⁶ Author and psychologist Stephanie A. Sarkis suggests that writing down the positive outcomes that resulted from a transition can help you focus on how your circumstances have improved.

communicating with agility

Pivoting Modes of Communication

In recent years, in large part due to the pandemic, we have been asked to be flexible with the ways in which we build and maintain relationships with our family, friends, and coworkers. For example, meetings that traditionally would occur in person can now have standing virtual options, and families can host virtual game nights to maintain a sense of connection despite being far apart. Social interactions play an important role in maintaining our health and well-being. Virtual communication options have been shown to increase our number

of interactions, which can reduce loneliness, especially for people with limited mobility or people in secluded areas.⁹⁷ In what ways has the pandemic or recent events in your own life motivated you to change modalities of communication to maintain your relationships? What have been the benefits? What have been the drawbacks?

be ready... for what's next

Establishing New Relationships

Life transitions typically provide opportunities for new interpersonal relationships. At college, you have the opportunity to meet people in your classes, on campus, and (if applicable) in your residence hall and dining hall. Each time you start a new term, you will have opportunities for new relationships. Similarly, when you start a new job, you have coworkers to meet. Some life changes involve moving to a completely new community, which opens many opportunities for new relationships. How can you best be ready for establishing new relationships as you confront these life changes? The end of many COVID-19 pandemic restrictions forced us all to rethink what interacting with people in person feels like, as well as our own comfort level with that. How has the pandemic given you new ideas on forming relationships?

As you learned in this chapter, new relationships are built through communication. The following suggestions provide you with strategies for establishing and building new relationships as you go through life changes both big and small.

- *Get comfortable with small talk.* Especially for introverts, small talk can be uncomfortable. However, a few simple tactics can help you engage others in casual conversation in ways that could spark interest in further developing a friendship. Psychologist Marty Nemko explained that some of the simplest ways of starting conversations are most effective.⁹⁸ Something as simple as saying, "Hi, I'm Scott and I'm in the College of Communication," invites other people to join the conversation. Asking questions about their areas of interest, hometowns, and hobbies are not mundane; all of those lines of conversation help you in finding areas of common interest.
- *Manage your self-disclosure.* When entering a new group of potential acquaintances, you should recognize that some self-disclosure will be necessary to establish connections, bonds, and trust. In writing about workplace transitions, communication scholars Chad McBride and Karla Bergen noted that individuals should manage personal and professional boundaries by knowing when to share some personal information but to