

## Web-Based Radio Show

### The Healing Relationship II: Non Verbal and Pre Verbal Communication

*Discussing communication that helps produce psychological and intellectual growth or emotional and cognitive growth and the non verbal or often pre verbal aspects of relationships and communication among those in a relationship*


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August 22, 2007

Good morning. Thank you for joining us on our web-based radio show. We will continue the series we started last time, on how relationships can help heal or help produce growth. We have called this “Healing Relationships” or “Growth-Producing Relationships” and how they help individuals grow whether it’s a child in a family, or a loving spouse, or a not so loving spouse, or a friend, or whether it’s an educator and a student, or a caregiver and any youngster, or any two adults – it could be in the workplace. So this is about relationships and the ones that produce growth and the ones that don’t produce growth.

As you recall, last time we talked about the importance of helping establish a sense of security through regulation and engagement and a sense of deep trust in a relationship. These have qualities that enable individuals to grow psychologically and intellectually. We also began talking about reading each other’s emotional signals through facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice, and how this establishes communication.


Today we are going to talk further about establishing that communication that helps produce psychological and intellectual growth or emotional and cognitive growth and go into detail about what really might be elusive to many of us – that is the non verbal or often pre verbal aspects of relationships and communication among those in a relationship. We often assume that the most important messages are the words we use; saying “I love you” or “I hate you” or “I admire you” or “I disrespect what you are doing,” etc. But in fact, our tone of voice and enthusiastic raised eyebrow or the gleam in your eye says more to a child than any words. A look of scorn, a head shaking no, and a look of disgust also says more than any words. So whether it’s two adults or adult to a



child, when one person says, “Oh that’s terrific!” but has a scornful, critical look, it demoralizes the other person. When the person jokingly says, “Oh you can do better than that” but has a gleam in their eye and a look of respect and pride and is beaming with joy, it’s often a very positive message.

The words are less important, often, than the tone of voice, the facial expressions; basically the emotions contained in the non verbal elements of communication. I like to use the analogy of being in a dark alley in a dangerous city and a menacing looking stranger with menacing facial expressions says, “I’m really a nice person, I just need to know the time” and he is walking toward you, do you just trust the words or trust the tone of voice and the look and the context and the setting? Do you run away or do you go towards the person? I think most of us pay attention to the pre verbal or non verbal elements. That is embedded – that attention to these pre symbolic or pre verbal or non verbal elements is really embedded in the history of our culture and in evolution because before we could speak or use words, we communicated through these gestures. There the group that held individuals together trust in common goals were communicated through these raised eyebrows and pointing and tones of voice and different sounds. Distrust and danger is communicated so you can look at someone’s facial expression and know whether there is danger around the corner or whether there is safety around the corner, whether you should feel secure or worried – all that can be communicated, non verbally, and in fact is communicated between caregivers and infants and toddlers before the toddler can speak to any degree. So while the toddler is just learning their first words, they already have a non verbal or preverbal language that is very, very complex. In fact, words when they are learned at 18 months and two and two and a half, often are giving voice, giving words to feelings that are already part of negotiation for many, many months, already. So a toddler already knows about trust, and all about cooperation, and all about anger, and all about exploration, and all about curiosity, and all about excitement, and all about getting humiliated, and all about approval and disapproval, and all about danger, and all about being creative and discovering new things, way before they have words for any of these because they are a part of the rich repertoire of interactions occurring between the early months of life and, let’s say 18-20 months of life when words really start coming in at a fast clip.


Now how can we look at this in all relationships in a way that will systematically enable therapists to better operate at this level with their patients; to enable parents and caregivers to operate with their children or students; to enable spouses to be more



sensitive to one another; to enable adults, whether in the workplace or in friendship patterns to be more aware of this level of the relationship and how it can be helpful and productive and provide the ingredients of healing or in growth with the ingredients of distrust – hostility and regression or what we call negative growth.

**Let's look at it systematically in a number of categories. The first is in all communication, whether it be between an 8 month old and a caregiver or two adults, we have an exchange of emotional signals through facial expressions, arm gestures, body postures, voice tone, and the like. As I indicated before – the big smile, the raised eyebrows, the gleam in the eye indicating one emotional theme, and shaking head, the sides of the mouth turned downward, the eyes narrowed indicate another emotion. Interestingly, those who have studied facial expressions have shown some universality among certain basic emotional expressions in terms of these facial contours, and have actually done research. Issy Pilowsky and Paul Ekman, based on the work of other colleagues, have developed rating scales for these, for example. The first goal in promoting healthy relationships and healthy communication – those that produce growth and help heal – is to extend what we call the non verbal or pre verbal back-and-forth interaction between two individuals, whether baby and parent or two adults. Think of it this way – if the two individuals are just communicating with short bursts and then disengage from one another, they only read each other's emotional signals for a few seconds at a time. It's like a sampling of the emotional world that they are part of. On the other hand, if they are involved in what we call a continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction where there is shared emotional expressiveness and responses and then a further response and then a further response to that, so there is a continuing emotional dialog that goes on for 10 minutes or so, or 15 minutes, what we call a continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction, there is a continuous sampling of the emotional and social, and for that matter, the intellectual reality of one's world, particularly one's interpersonal world.**


**So the first goal is to foster what we call the continuous flow. And even to do this, when there are strong emotions or strong feelings, there is a tendency, for example, to disengage; to pull away when the feelings are strong. So if the feelings are intense - there is intense anger and intense excitement - you'll see sometimes some children or some adults turn away, lose eye contact with one another, or shift gears toward something more solitary because the emotion is too intense. What that does is, it undermines that individual's ability to communicate in this non verbal or**



pre verbal way around the strong feelings such as anger or disgust or embarrassment. And so the ability to express through one's own facial expressions and read the facial expressions of others around this emotion or feeling doesn't get as well developed. The individual may use basically more basic mechanisms that are not as socially adaptive. They may use withdrawal, shutdown, or sort of fight-or-flight reactions where they go into impulsive action or they flee. All of these are global responses – fight-or-flight, shutdown, avoidance, or withdrawal – where we see adults that can't cope with a situation use. So we shouldn't be too shocked when two adults feel angry that they fight and sometimes hit each other or that they just avoid one another and withdraw from the relationship. That is because they can't get into this continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction where they express and read each other's signals. This is even before they get into a verbal discussion. Or it can occur during the verbal discussion. Then again, for full understanding, they have to understand the non verbal elements of this. One can think of many, many examples to know where this occurs.

So the first goal of a healing relationship in a growth-producing relationship is to have a continuous flow of back-and-forth communication. Often when it is between two adults it involves words, but where the non verbal elements continue, and they include the full range of feelings. In other words, there is no break when the feelings get intense, or when you get into feelings that are more difficult for the person. So the first goal we want to underline is the continuous flow – long dialogues.


The second principal is that the individual promoting the healthy relationship – the growth producing relationship – needs to make an attempt to read all the emotional signals. You see this most clearly between a caregiver and a baby where the caregiver doesn't like anger or doesn't like too much excitement and you'll see the caregiver avert their eyes or turn away as though to discourage expressions of anger. So when the baby's voice turns angry in terms of tone and becomes shrill, or the baby becomes too excited and starts moving his arms and legs in a more frantic way because of pleasurable excitement, but is getting overloaded, the adult turns away or shuts down and tries to do something else and you lose the continuous flow. So the second principle is, and we embedded it in the first one but it deserved being underlined, is keep the continuous flow going across the full range of human emotions and across the full intensities in a stable manner. Constantly be expanding because as the baby gets older, he or she is capable of expanding these. And two adults in a relationship or an older child and adult in a relationship, one will see if one establishes the trust, empathy,



and security we talked about last time together with this ability to read and respond to emotional signals, there is a constant broadening of this capacity and we want to constantly broaden this capacity. This is very important to continue seeing it grow. So the second principle is broaden the emotional expressiveness of the individual and your ability to read and respond to everything the individual, in a sense, communicates. So broaden, and read and respond to the full range of emotional expressions. We want to see the two partners in the relationship broaden and read and respond to an ever widening range of emotional signals including even the most difficult emotions such as anger or sadness; even withdrawing in some of these global responses is an emotional response. So read and respond to that. How to do this will be embedded in our third principle.


Our third principle is, in addition to broadening, help your partner – infant, child, or adult – differentiate. In other words, by differentiating we mean separate one affect or emotional state from another. By reading and responding in a clear way with different expressions of your own, by responding differently to anger versus love versus annoyance versus curiosity versus assertiveness. By having different emotional responses oneself to each of these - different tone of voice, different facial expressions, different body postures - the individual to receiving that feedback is sensing that they are communicating something different to you. So you are helping them differentiate or separate. In other words, the communication system is becoming more subtle. So here what we underline is differentiate in your response pattern one emotion from another. Also, help make the communication become more subtle. This is the difference between a subtle nuance emotional communicator and a global one. Now we all appreciate that this is an important part of mental health but it is also an important part of an intellectual understanding of one's world which occurs through understanding the world about oneself, which largely gets communicated through the emotions of others. Whether a street corner is safe or dangerous gets communicated to a toddler through the parent's facial expressions. So emotional expressivity and intellectual understanding of the world, what's big or little or what is a lot of or less, has a lot to do with the emotional context within which one learns these conceptual differences.

The next parameter we look at, in looking at the non verbal elements of communication, is the ability of the partners, and again the partner who can do this better should take the lead, the ability of the partners to not only differentiate or make




healthy communication systems become more subtle, but to empathize with each and every emotion. So the other individual – the baby, the child, the other adult – feels understood. They are empathized with. It’s a big difference when a toddler is looking sad with the parent who empathetically just through tone of voice, not through the words, says with a supportive tone of voice, “Oh, my little sweetheart is feeling so sad. We can’t find that toy. Oh, I wish we could.” Now the toddler doesn’t understand the words yet but understands the emotional tone. When talking to a good friend or a spouse or in therapy when the therapist conveys empathy and an emotional tone for one’s own state of feeling, it’s very reassuring. It provides the fertile soil for growth because one feels understood – a key element in growth. So that being empathized with when one is feeling angry and the ability of the other partner to say in a different tone of voice, “Boy I can see how enraged you are! It sounds like you are fit to do blah, blah, blah” or whatever. Now again here, there is a different emotional tone – there is respect for the anger. There is acceptance for the anger because it is not being acted out. No one is being hit. It is only being empathized with. Here is the paradox: the more you empathize with the anger, the less likely it is that the individual will use action because they feel understood; they are encouraged to communicate it first through gestures and then through words. So that is the paradox. Empathy leads to higher forms of communication, not the all-or-nothing type action mode. So the underline for this third principle is empathize with all of the emotions of the individual.

The fourth principle is to not only empathize but counterbalance, or what we technically call encounter-regulate as needed. By counterbalancing or regulating, if the individual is agitated, they require soothing. If they are too laid back and withdrawing, they require higher energy to pull them in. If they are sad, they need the empathy for their sadness, but they also may gradually need to get more activated and become a doer, something in their environment that will lift their mood. If they are too disorganized and all over the place, they may need to be first empathized with, “Oh there are so many frightening things” – you join them in their frenetic pace, but slowly help them slow down by slowing down your pace. So this counterbalancing helps them regulate. It helps them get back to a comfortable, secure, middle zone where they are secure and regulated and not disregulated. So we are always counterbalancing or counter regulating with the other individual. That starts with empathy, but then leaves when the other individual’s emotions are extreme and to counterbalance and counter regulate so there is more security and more regulation.



The last principle we will talk about is helping the individual to integrate or unify or bring together disparate or different feelings. Normally in development, a toddler experiences love and hate, and it is almost two different realms of experience, and it's almost two different people – the loving mommy and the mommy I hate are almost two different people for 12-13 month olds. By 18 months, the healthy toddler is sensing it's the same person with different feelings. But even adults have that feeling in relationships when they hate you, they despise you, they want nothing to do with you, and they love you and you're all good. But we all know how problematic these polarized extreme views of relationships can be – all good and all bad rather than the more subtle picture of relationships. So here we want to help the individual unify or bring together different emotional states. So we want to unify and integrate different emotional states. We do this in a relationship by helping the individual get through the communication on the extreme emotion that they have. Let's say they are angry. Stay with it. Get into a continuous flow. Help them differentiate that. Help them expand it, empathize, counterbalance and counter regulate. Over time, as you stay with it in the continuous flow, you will begin seeing other feelings emerge – warmth, cooperation, and some shared pleasure.

Now by experiencing that within one relationship communication pattern, as opposed to breaking it off and resuming it later, by continuing that, even if it takes half an hour or an hour until you get through to the other side, helps the individual unify these different emotional states as part of one pattern. Then they have the sense of self, a “me” that can be both angry and loving. Or “you” that can be both angry and loving. They have a realistic view of the world where they have unified these themes, but it takes all the other elements that I just mentioned over a period of time to help them do this when their feelings are intense. So whether one lives in a polarized world where each emotion is different and even the same person can seem different to you depending on how you feel, to a deeper understanding or more mature understanding where relationships have many different feeling tones to them, depends on hanging in there through the continuous flow with the empathy, with the counter balance or counter regulation, so you can unify the different feeling states. Then you have a more integrated person and individual which helps promote growth of a more realistic view of the physical world as well as the emotional world. It helps intellectual and emotional growth.



So these are the principles of non verbal or pre verbal communication. These are critical for emotional growth, and these are the critical elements of healing relationships. Natural, healing relationships have all of these. If you watch people who are great therapists or people say that it is great to be with such-and-such, you'll see that they seem to have all of these qualities.

Next time we will go into these qualities again with some examples. I wanted to lay them out for you today and they are important to stay on for one more time before we get to the verbal level of healing relationships.

Thank you for joining us.